



MAKING SPACE FOR THE OTHER

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Spazio Pubblico/Spazio dell'intimo Il Cimitero come Eterotopia?

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ABSTRACT

La necropoli vivente

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"Il mio contributo ha analizzato lo spazio urbano e simbolico del Cimitero islamico monumentale del Cairo, noto anche con il nome di *Città dei Morti* (al-Qarafa), esplorandone le dimensioni storiche, artistico-architettoniche, sociali e letterarie. Fin dalle sue origini nel VII secolo, al-Qarafa si configura come un luogo di sepoltura monumentale, attraversato e frequentato anche per lunghi periodi da pellegrini, sufi, studiosi. Sin dalle prime testimonianze, il luogo risulta essere abitato da funzionari e guardiani addetti alla sua manutenzione, ma anche da quanti cercavano vicinanza con i santi e le persone pie ivi sepolte.

I racconti dei viaggiatori medievali, come Ibn Jubayr (XII secolo) e Ibn Battuta (XIV secolo) ne attestano la ricchezza architettonica e spirituale, mentre testimonianze successive, fino all'epoca mamelucca, descrivono la sua multifunzionalità. L'area comprende infatti mausolei, *ribāt*, *zāwiya* e *madrassa* finanziati tramite fondazioni pie (*awqāf*).

A partire dagli anni '70, con l'aumento della pressione demografica e delle crisi abitative, al-Qarafa è divenuta anche luogo di residenza informale, arrivando a ospitare fino a mezzo milione di abitanti, tra cui molti "abusivi" delle tombe. Al-Qarafa ha assunto le dimensioni di una città nella città, ospitando al proprio interno anche nuclei abitativi forniti di servizi e infrastrutture di base.

La necropoli, luogo di paradossi e stratificazioni, ha ispirato numerosi autori della letteratura egiziana arabofona, da Muwaylihi, autore di una importante neomaqama di inizio Novecento, a Mahfuz (Premio Nobel per la letteratura nel 1988), fino alla poetessa e romanziera contemporanea Iman Mersal. Nell'analisi letteraria condotta sui testi di questi autori ho analizzato la costante riconfigurazione delle coordinate spazio-temporali resa possibile da questa precisa area abitata, capace di contenere e riflettere tensioni tra sacro e profano, memoria e marginalità, morte e sopravvivenza urbana".





A Living Necropolis

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My conference presentation examined the urban and symbolic landscape of Cairo's monumental Islamic cemetery, commonly known as the *City of the Dead* (*al-Qarafa*), with particular attention to its historical, architectural, social, and literary dimensions. Since its establishment in the seventh century, *al-Qarafa* has functioned not only as a monumental burial ground but also as a space frequented over the centuries by pilgrims, Sufi practitioners, and scholars. Early historical sources indicate that the area was inhabited by officials and custodians responsible for its upkeep, as well as by individuals seeking proximity to the saints and pious figures interred there.

Medieval travel accounts, including those of Ibn Jubayr (twelfth century) and Ibn Battuta (fourteenth century), attest to the site's architectural grandeur and spiritual significance, while later sources, extending into the Mamluk period, emphasize its multifunctional character. The area encompassed mausoleums, *ribāṭs*, *zāwiyas*, and madrasas, many of which were sustained through charitable endowments (*awqāf*).

From the 1970s onward, increasing demographic pressures and recurrent housing shortages transformed *al-Qarafa* into a site of informal habitation. At its peak, the area accommodated up to half a million residents, including many individuals who settled within or around tomb structures without formal authorization. In this process, *al-Qarafa* evolved into a veritable "city within the city," incorporating residential communities provided with basic services and infrastructure.

As a space characterized by paradox, hybridity, and historical stratification, the necropolis has served as a powerful source of inspiration for numerous authors of modern Egyptian Arabic literature, ranging from Muwaylihi, author of a seminal neo-*maqāma* at the turn of the twentieth century, to Mahfuz (Nobel Prize in Literature, 1988), and the contemporary poet and novelist Iman Mersal. Through a literary analysis of selected works by these authors, I investigated the continual reconfiguration of spatial and temporal frameworks enabled by this uniquely inhabited funerary landscape. The City of the Dead emerges as a liminal space capable of embodying and refracting enduring tensions between the sacred and the profane, memory and marginality, and death and forms of urban survival.

Maria Elena Paniconi is Associate Professor of Arabic Language and Literature at Department of Humanities of University of Macerata. Her research focuses on modern and contemporary Arabic fiction, Bildungsnarratives in Arabic contexts, literary translation, Arab women's writing, and the emergence and transformation of literary genres in the modern Arab world.

She served on the executive board of SeSaMO (Italian Society for Middle Eastern Studies) (2014–2016) and has held visiting fellowships at IMES, University of Edinburgh (2012), the Institut für Orientalistik, University of Vienna (2016), the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University (2018), the Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, Stockholm University (2023), and the Sheikh Hassan Abbas Sharbatly Department of Arab and Islamic Civilizations (2025). She serves on scientific committees for major publication series and has held several administrative roles, including Department Delegate for Internationalization, Chair of Student Affairs, and Coordinator of Arabic Language Programs. She is currently Coordinator of CIRA and a WP2 team member within ERUA2. She is the author and editor of several volumes, including *Modernità Arabe* (2013), *Adīb* (2017), *Nahda Narratives* (2019), *Bildungsroman and the Arab Novel* (2023), and *The Migrant in Arab Literature* (2023).

