



Moving Biography

Call for Applications

International Summer School in Beirut, 1-8 June 2022

Deadline: 30 November 2021

The Orient-Institut Beirut (OIB) in collaboration with the American University of Beirut (AUB) and the Global (De)Centre (GDC) invites doctoral and postdoctoral researchers to apply for an international Summer School, entitled **Moving Biography**, that will take place in Beirut/Lebanon from 1 to 8 June 2022.

Our Summer School will explore the various etymologies and connotations that the term “biography” carries in different languages and their various complexities. The English term “biography” comes from the Greek words “bios” (life) and “graphia” (writing). As such, the word expresses a tension between conceptions of life as a narrative (everyone has a biography), and the actual practice of writing about particular lives. The genre of biography socializes us into expectations for our own lives. In contrast, the Arabic term “sīra” conceives of biography as a journey. Deriving from the verb “sāra” (to travel), it has been used, in particular, to refer to “al-sīra al-nabawiyya” (the prophetic biography), the life journey of the Prophet Muhammad. Al-sīra al-nabawiyya constitutes a key source of Islamic studies, next to the Qur’ān and the “ḥadīth” (tradition). Whose stories get written and what they include profoundly shapes how we understand the world and whose lives matter within it. Biographies tend to conform to notions of nation, ethnicity, religion, or class, despite the opportunity, articulated in the Arabic “sīra”, for following lives across boundaries. Probing the sometimes messy contradictions between real-life stories and conceptions of self, between personal and communal identities, **Moving Biography** brings together different perspectives from a range of disciplines (anthropology, art history, cultural studies, gender studies, literary studies, history, political studies, and sociology) to question disciplinary assumptions and decenter the genre.

Moving Biography will focus on three main themes: (1) questions of data (2) the act of creation, and (3) the importance of the social and historical context of biographies.

- 1) We will use the topic of biography as a broad, generative umbrella under which to explore cultural and intellectual inequality. The destinations towards which lives move and their means of travel reveal not only the unequalness of infrastructures of circulation but also the radical inequalities characterizing the landscapes within which lives get lived. How do fiction and non-fiction merge in the writing of lives? How do biographies deal with uncertainties and gaps in the life stories/journeys that are recorded? These questions are all the more urgent when archival research is restricted, be it by war, other social and political conditions, or the very form of the archive itself. Biography forces us to rethink what counts as relevant data. Does an author’s fiction count as data? How do we conceive of autobiographical writing in works of fiction? Would records of quaint past-time activities or other ephemera

count for a politician or a prophet? Observing the compliance of biography with certain scholarly boxes encourages new methodologies including considerations of ownership, archival management, and social infrastructure.

- 2) Biography can shed an important light on creation. Two models dominate: creation as an isolated, personal act, or a connected, interactive, ongoing one that may or may not involve others. These lead, in turn, to two tactics: to embed the individual in the cultural/historical context in which he or she lived, or to tell the story of an intellectual, literary, or artistic movement or genre. Our interdisciplinary, comparative perspective suggests that creation is never purely individual. Methodologically, we explore how the circulation of ideas affected important thinkers, and wonder at how such networks have not been studied systematically for individuals who live(d) at the social margins. We also include the things an individual makes—the transient, ephemeral acts of imagination—as part of the biography of a person or community, even if no single stylistic motive or outcome unifies them.
- 3) We will use the topic of biography to rethink disciplines and social institutions. How are biographies conceived in different spatial and temporal settings and in different academic disciplines? Biography offers a method for rethinking personhood/social being. What constitutes “a life” cross-culturally in and through time? How are sets of biographies related to “generational” contingencies and concerns? As C. Wright Mills argued, one cannot separate a biography from history and context. What notions of history and time does biography foreground? How do past, present, and future converge in real-life stories? In what ways are social persons or the idea of biographical founders essential to the endurance and effervescence of academic disciplines? An in-depth discussion about these questions will prompt greater reflexivity in each of our disciplines.

In order to explore the above, we invite the participation of 20 PhD students and postdoctoral researchers in the humanities and social sciences engaged in research relating to biography/sira in the Middle East and in other regions, in particular in the global south, to join us in Beirut for a one-week Summer School in June 2022. The school will be preceded by a preparatory phase kicked off by a series of keynote lectures and the launch of an online platform, in which the selected participants can upload summaries of their ongoing projects, expand on their research questions, share literature and start an informal exchange in the run up to the Summer School.

The one-week school will convene an interdisciplinary group of students and faculty who will each bring their own disciplinary background and assumptions to the conversation. It will be organized around a combination of plenary talks by invited scholars, working sessions by the Summer School organizers about the theoretical issues at stake, and workshops where participants will present their ongoing research in small groups to get feedback and critique. Three field visits to institutions and initiatives in Lebanon that are implicated in the forming of biographies and one plenary discussion with practitioners from the field will form an integral part of the Summer School. We believe it is especially important to hold the Summer School in Beirut, to highlight the importance of international scholarly exchange at a time of crisis and to understand the challenges one faces when thinking about biography and the fragility of data.

Confirmed speakers include Marilyn Booth (University of Oxford), Kirsten Buick (University of New Mexico), Wilhelm Hemecker (University of Vienna), Tarif Khalidi (American University of Beirut), Jean Said Makdisi (writer and scholar), Lina Saneh Majdalani (independent artist), Sherene Seikaly (University of California, Santa Barbara), Daniel Schönplug (Institute for Advanced Study Berlin) and Salim Tamari (Birzeit University).

Travel to/from Beirut and accommodation will be covered. The program is aimed at researchers in the humanities and social sciences from the region and abroad who will present their ongoing projects in relation to the topic of biography. The researchers' work should be clearly relevant to the themes of the Summer School and use original source material. The working language will be English. The application should be in English and consist of

- a CV
- a 3 to 5-page outline of the project the applicant is currently working on
- the names and contact details of two potential referees (no letters of recommendation required)

to be sent by Email in one PDF document no later than 30 November 2021 to movingbiography@orient-institut.org.

The Summer School is funded by the Volkswagen Foundation and organised by Peggy Levitt, Wellesley College/Harvard University
Nadia von Maltzahn, Orient-Institut Beirut (OIB)
Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, American University of Beirut (AUB)
Kirsten Scheid, American University of Beirut (AUB).

It is a partnership between the Orient-Institut Beirut (OIB), the American University in Beirut (AUB) and the Global (De)Centre (GDC).

The Orient-Institut Beirut (OIB)

The Orient-Institut Beirut (OIB) is an academically independent German research institute and part of the Max Weber Foundation. It is mainly funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. It conducts interdisciplinary research on the Arab world and the region of West Asia and North Africa at large. Its research community comprises long-term research associates from Germany and short-term visiting fellows from all over the world, who represent the major disciplines of the humanities and social sciences, including Islamic and Arab studies, history and anthropology of the Middle East, as well as sociology and political sciences. The OIB aims to foster academic relations across the MENA region and increasingly conducts its research in transregional perspectives. See <https://www.orient-institut.org/about/>.

The American University in Beirut (AUB)

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has around 800 instructional faculty and a student body of around 8,000 students. The University encourages freedom of thought and expression and seeks to graduate men and women committed to creative and critical thinking, life-long learning, personal integrity, civic responsibility, and leadership. See <https://www.aub.edu.lb/AboutUs/Pages/default.aspx>.

The Global (De)Centre (GDC)

The Global (De)Centre (GDC) is a platform bringing together a growing network of interdisciplinary scholars, creative practitioners and managers, and activists from across the world who are committed to challenging intellectual and cultural inequality. The GDC seeks to deconstruct and reconstruct by looking closely at how the methods and categories we have traditionally used to create knowledge bring to light certain "truths" while obscuring others. We are also committed to charting a constructive way forward—to create new ways of producing and disseminating knowledge and new social interventions—that unsettle longstanding cultural and intellectual hierarchies and bring a wider range of actors and epistemologies into conversation with one another (reconstruction). All four Summer School organizers are members of the GDC. See <http://globaldecetre.world/gdc/about-gdc>.