Challenging Power in the Arab World

Arts, Culture and Media under Duress

**The Monographs
of ResetDOC**

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ResetDOC

The Monographs of Reset DOC is an editorial series published by Reset Dialogues on Civilizations, an international association committed to promoting dialogue, intercultural understanding, the rule of law and human rights in various contexts, through the creation and dissemination of the highest quality research in human sciences. Reset DOC does so by bringing together, in conferences and seminars, networks of highly esteemed academics and promising young scholars from a wide variety of backgrounds, disciplines, institutions, nationalities, cultures, and religions.

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in the Arab World

Edited by
Federica Zoja

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Introduction

Federica Zoja

What you are about to read is a varied monograph, rich in contributions and research pieces united by a common thread, that of human rights (acquired or desired), of social and political commitment, of the aspiration to justice, and a longed-for alignment with other cultures. The volume *Challenging Power in the Arab World* gathers the speeches and reflections of some of the speakers at the 2021 Carthage Seminars, held online on 30 June and 1 July 2021.

Moving on the path of political and cultural pluralism in the Arab world, taken twenty years ago by Reset Dialogues on Civilizations, the guests of the two-day event, organised together with Beit el-Hikma – Tunisian Academy of Sciences, Letters and Arts, explored trends in the arts, media and cinema of Arab-Muslim countries, under the shared conceptual umbrella of "Current Trends in the Arts, Culture and Media Under Duress."

The book opens with a piece by Peter Limbrick, a University of California lecturer and expert in Arab cinema (*New Networks for Arab Film and Video*). His is a journey through the mechanisms of Middle Eastern film production and distribution. Through circumstantial examples, Limbrick argues that the changes that have taken place over the last two decades suggest that the cinematic landscape in the MENA region is increasingly opening up to independent alternatives to commercial or para-state networks. Mirroring post-colo-

nial societies and political systems in search of a new national identity, the Arab film industries – primarily those of Egypt, Syria and Morocco – have long been fellow travellers with their respective regimes. In many cases, productions celebrated at international film festivals have not even been distributed at home because they are 'too Western'. Since the beginning of the 2000s, the overwhelming entrance of Gulf funding into the sector has radically altered the scenario, both in terms of the themes addressed and the cultural and production models. Limbrick explores this complexity, shedding light on less well-known corners of Middle Eastern cinema.

Freedom and constraint represent the Ariadne's thread in the talk by Atef Alshaer, professor at the University of Westminster who participated in the Reset DOC Seminars with *The Poetry of Mahmoud Darwish and Adonis, between Freedom and Duress*. In the second half of the 20th century, two poets above all stood out in the Arab world: Adonis and Mahmoud Darwish. Alshaer highlights the differences and similarities between the two authors, who were crucial in modernising Arab poetic tradition. The search for a national and individual identity permeates the work of both authors, internationally recognised for their writings but never awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Alshaer re-proposes the relevance of Darwish and Adonis at a time when political and cultural identity are still central themes in the variegated panorama of Arab-Middle Eastern artistic production.

Social and political activism has found an ideal forum for free expression in the digital arena. Randa Aboubakr, from Cairo University, discusses this with a wealth of examples and details in her talk on *The Digital Sphere as a Site of Social Activism*. The phenomenon of the web and social media as a privileged space for political dissent, which was pervasive during the Arab uprisings of 2011, actually has its roots in the very early 2000s. Aboubakr reconstructs the history of Egyp-

tian opposition movements that flourished in the last decade of Hosni Mubarak's regime and the spread of the Internet through society. This twin track was abruptly slowed just two years after the collapse of Pharaoh Mubarak's regime – as the dictator was known by his subjects – but never completely interrupted. Today, in Egypt and elsewhere, the web is the realm in which totalitarianism fights the most bitterly against freedom of information and expression. Cairo and other regimes resurrected after the Arab revolutions exercise strict control over the cyber highways. By its nature, however, the net always provides a wide enough mesh to allow free thinking and ideas to slip through. The Egyptian professor's contribution is rich in statistics on web penetration in Egypt and North Africa, reflecting the ups and downs of political fortunes and vicissitudes.

The article by Shady Hamadi, an Italian writer and academic with a Syrian father, investigates the role of the Arab Diaspora in Italy in the literary sphere, placing literature in a key position for understanding Italian society today and guessing what it might become tomorrow. The author takes an original look at the work of Alessandro Spina, *nom de plume* of Basili Shafik Khouzam, a Libyan writer of Syrian origin. Following in the footsteps of Youssef Wakkas and Amara Lakhous, and along the feminist paths of Rania Ibrahim and Sumaya Abdel Qader – the former with a secular approach to literature, the latter focusing on the nexus between society and religion – Hamadi describes an Italy far from the spotlight. A niche that is dynamic and in full evolution.

What better means of expression than blogs – especially under repressive regimes – to attack the most rigid political and social systems? Teresa Pepe, a lecturer at the University of Oslo and an expert in fiction and Arabic literature, has plumbed the output of the Egyptian blogosphere, walking the fine line between reality and fiction. Her paper *The Writer's Mirror and Veil. Egyptian Autofiction from Print to Digital* is a

synthesis of a long research study of 40 Egyptian web diaries she conducted between 2005 and 2011. A period that today, with hindsight, we can say was decisive for the growth of the revolt that led to the demise of Hosni Mubarak's regime.

And then there is Tunisia, a social and political reality that always deserves special attention. All the more so now that the democratic momentum has come to an abrupt halt and parliament has been functionally frozen for almost a year. The entire second part of the book is devoted to *Cultural and Political Ferment in Tunisia*.

Zyed Krichen, leading political writer for the Tunisian daily *al-Maghreb*, accurately traces the democratic transition from year-zero 2011, that of the ousting of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. In his article, which mirrors his talk at the Carthage Seminars, Krichen plots a course through the risks that a young democracy like Tunisia's can face along the way: the temptation of identity nationalism, Islamism, the inconclusive modernism of an elite remote from the country's true soul. The historical reconstruction of what happened in the small Arab republic from the Jasmine Revolution to 2021 is an invaluable tool for understanding the present.

Omar Fassatoui, researcher at Sciences Po in Aix en Provence and Aix Marseille, addresses the intertwining of fundamental rights and freedoms, their penetration into culture, the relationship between freedom of conscience and expression and the Islamic faith. Fassatoui focuses on the Tunisian constitutional charter, which he traces back to its foundations, and unravels its ambiguities. There is no shortage of examples of restrictions and limitations to the full realisation of fundamental rights in the Tunisian social and political context, not only before the popular uprisings of 2010-2011, but also afterwards: the constitutional text amended after the Revolution presents numerous critical issues. Despite this, the Tunisian Constitution, and its effective application, represents an exception in the Arab world. A black

swan, so to speak, whose prospects will improve if the institutions succeed in providing a Constitutional Court to oversee the democratic transition.

Reporter Abdel Aziz Hali looks at alternative media, independent from the political and economic mainstream. The examples he gives in his detailed survey of the Tunisian scene are of news platforms that practice investigative journalism, either as daily newspapers or digital periodicals, directed by associations or cooperatives of journalists. Opening the survey is Nawaat, a collective set up in April 2004 as a forum for citizens who are swimming against the tide, thirsting for freedom of expression. Then there is Inkyfada, an independent, non-profit communication group. At its origin is a team of investigative reporters, IT developers and graphic designers, experts in data collection and contextualisation. Hali's exploration of the content, business plans and goals of non-partisan Tunisian news ends with an analysis of al-Qatiba, a platform run by the Taklam Association, legally recognised by the presidency in 2019.

The section on Tunisia closes with the work of Moez Mrabet, playwright and academic at the Beit el-Hikma in Tunis. His paper entitled *Tunisian Theatre from Dictatorship to Democracy* reconstructs the history of Tunisian theatre from its conception – the result of an "act of resistance to the French occupier" – to the present day, with a special focus on the last three decades. The scholar describes two political milestones that were decisive for their creative, economic and organisational impact on drama production: the end of the Bourguiba era in 1987 and the revolution of 2011, which also put an end to the Ben Ali regime. Historical watersheds that foreshadowed huge cultural changes.

The monograph closes with the writings of Nouh Anajjar and Amina Karoui, two young academics who attended the 2021 Carthage Summer School, the high-level training programme which precedes and completes the yearly Semi-

nars, offering to a few dozen selected students an invaluable learning opportunity.

Their articles, respectively entitled *Arab Anglophone Diasporic Writers as Cultural Mediators* and *The 2011 Radical Imagination Through the Panopticon of Hip Hop: the Promise of a Better Democracy in Tunisia*, were judged to be the best papers, in terms of original content, coherence with the themes of the mini-master's on Political and Cultural Pluralism, and formal detail, among all those submitted at the end of the course.

Part I

Seeking Space for Pluralism
and Creativity

New Networks for Arab Film and Video

Peter Limbrick

The past two decades have seen significant realignments in the way that cinema from the Arabic-speaking world has been produced, distributed, and exhibited with the Middle East and globally. While it is impossible to generalize across all types of production, we can observe some patterns and perhaps a few reasons for optimism despite the many political, social, cultural, and epidemiological challenges of the past years. In particular, turning our attention from commercial feature film production, distribution, and exhibition to include the terrain of independent and alternative networks will show that the Arab film and video landscape has shifted in profound ways, for better and for worse.

As cinema developed across the region – first in Egypt and then in other countries – its consolidation as an industry and art form coincided in large part with the emergence of independent postcolonial states. Consequently, film production was sustained very differently depending on national borders and politics. In Egypt, for example, production oscillated between the private sector, exemplified by Talaat Harb's Studio Misr, and a public sector which was mobilized when the Egyptian studios were nationalized in 1963. Later, in 1971, film production was privatized again but (as is typical across the region) cinema remained under tight state control with respect to content and expression. In Syria, the National Film Orga-

nization, which was constituted by the Ba'ath party in 1963, controlled all elements of film production, distribution, and exhibition in the state. Morocco's Centre Cinématographique Marocain likewise exercised control over cinema production there, gradually developing a system of partial funding, while Moroccan exhibition of films was generally left to private commercial interests. Other countries in the region have seen a mixture of these approaches to public and private production, distribution, and exhibition.[1]

Given the challenges that filmmakers experienced in sustaining productions under these complex circumstances, many turned by necessity to co-production, assembling funds from diverse sources including those outside of their countries of origin. These funding possibilities often followed postcolonial axes, so that filmmakers in the Maghreb and Lebanon often turned to French sources for funding while those in Palestine sought out other European sources including television networks. These transnational funding scenarios remain the norm but they have often prompted questions about the degree to which a film's cultural authenticity might be compromised or its address "Westernized" as a result of undue influence. Compounding the complexity and implications of co-production arrangements are questions about distribution and exhibition, for even as co-productions allowed Arab films to exist, many films were seldom or never exhibited in their home countries due both to censorship and to the reticence of distributors (often more interested in Hollywood or other productions) to program local films in local cinemas. Even as some films were lauded in overseas festivals, they were often separated from audiences at home.

The 2000s saw some of the established axes of production funding shifting due to the emergence of festivals and funding schemes in the Arabian Gulf. The Dubai International Film Festival (DIFF), the Sanad/Abu Dhabi Film Fund and the Doha-Tribeca Film Festival with its funding arm, the Doha Film Institute, all emerged as key players, extending financing to filmmakers across the Arab world. To some extent, these possibilities could be celebrated as a decentering of Europe in the funding landscape, potentially allowing for a less compromised form of expression. But just as we would be mistaken to automatically assume that every Arab film co-funded by Europe was irredeemably compromised, we would be naïve to think that these new Arab funds were entirely pure. Kay Dickinson has shown how the Gulf funding and festival scenario was one that inserted Arab cinemas into long networks of seafaring, trading, and global capital as it organized cinema production and exhibition via the logic of shipping and freight logistics. On the one hand, Gulf funding in the 2000s contributed to the further "de-orbiting" of Maghrebi cinema from the "francosphere," as Higbee, Martin, and Bamad have argued.[2] But Dickinson's insightful invocation, in 2015, of the ever-changing dynamics of supply chains was prescient: the Sanad/Abu Dhabi Film Fund ended in 2016 after the Media Zone Authority reorganized the entities responsible for supporting film and media production in the emirate. Similarly, DIFF and its Enjaaz fund stopped abruptly in 2018 with little explanation; the CEO of the Dubai Film and TV Commission, Jamal al-Sharif, was quoted in local business media as saying "Technology is moving, content is changing, so we had to move on." The Doha – Film Institute remains active.

1   For more extensive discussions, see Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity*, 1997, revised edition (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2016) and Kay Dickinson, *Arab Cinema Travels: Transnational Syria, Palestine, Dubai and Beyond* (London: BFI, 2016).

2   Will Higbee, Florence Martin, and Jamal Bahmad, *Moroccan Cinema Uncut: Decentred Voices, Transnational Perspectives* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 69-80.

As the landscape has shifted within the United Arab Emirates, however, new initiatives have continued to emerge in the region. In 2018 the Saudi minister of culture Prince Badr bin Farhan al-Saud established the Red Sea Film Foundation, described on its website as "an independent, non-profit organization created to support the film industry in Saudi Arabia in the production, distribution and education of cinema." Within the umbrella organization is a film festival, an archives project, and a development fund which in 2020-21 is supporting 14 films from across the region. The development fund comprises $14 million USD and will fund at least 100 projects in production or post-production, including feature films and episodic works from Arab and African directors and shorts, documentaries, and animation work from Saudi filmmakers.

We can see these Gulf and Saudi funding mechanisms within the terms that Laura Marks has theorized: as "top-down" or hylomorphic structures that tend to dictate the terms by which work might be supported and that in turn shape culture in certain ways.[3] As Marks's monumental work *Hanan al-Cinema* argues throughout, experimental, non-narrative, or politically oppositional work can often fall out of such structures which tend to focus on feature-length and narrative work. Moreover, some filmmakers and artists have wished to develop active alternatives to such larger, state-sponsored mechanisms for reasons that are at times political as well as artistic. Marks shows that experimental artists, non-narrative and documentary filmmakers, curators, activists, and researchers have instead built structures that are more horizontal, attempting new ways of nurturing, funding, and disseminating work. Marks gives the example of Beirut DC (the acronym standing for "Development and Cinema"), an initiative formed in 1999 by artists and activists in Lebanon

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[3]   Laura U. Marks, *Hanan Al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2015), 25-31.

who wished to support alternative and experimental work and escape the usual avenues of funding in Lebanon. In the period after the 1990 Taif accord, many Lebanese film or videomakers were supported by organizations with links to the state and to the political actors that have dominated Lebanon's recent past. For example, the television station Future TV, which sponsored some Lebanese video production, operated as the media arm of Rafik Hariri's Future Movement political party. Beirut DC sought to provide ways to support film and video production and distribution in ways that circumvented these political actors and that did not rely on the foreign NGOs that were also part of Lebanon's political landscape. Sponsoring production and exhibition of work through an annual film festival, Ayam Beirut Al Cinema'iya, Beirut DC has become an important part of the Lebanese scene.

As its scope has diversified, so has Beirut DC's list of funders, which now includes organizations like the Ford Foundation, British Council, Institut Français, and Sundance Institute. Another long-running organization with a similarly mixed funding model is Ashkal Alwan, a cultural platform in Beirut founded by curator Christine Tohme, which has been instrumental in supporting Lebanese artists and generating cultural dialogues that draw regional and international collaborators. Ashkal Alwan continues to foster important interventions in the artistic and cultural life of the region through its Home Works forums on cultural practices, its Home Workspace study programs, and other residencies. AFAC (the Arab Fund for Art and Culture) has successfully raised more than $47 million in its 14-year existence and has granted funds of $37 million to more than 1700 artists. Established in 2007 in Beirut by a group of cultural activists with the aim of supporting writers, artists, researchers, and arts organizations based in the Arab countries, AFAC's purview has expanded to encompass film, photography, the visual arts, and music. Its donor

funds, like those of Beirut DC and Ashkal Alwan, come from a mixture of sources: in the case of AFAC, large philanthropic organizations like the Ford Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, and the Prince Klaus Fund for Culture and Development; companies (Spotify, HSBC bank); and smaller entities like galleries and even individuals. In addition to its usual mission of supporting artists, it has developed a capacity to pivot in response to crises: its 2020 annual report details its speedy implementation of a Lebanon Solidarity Fund in the wake of the port explosion of August 2020, and a new partnership, the AFAC-Netflix Hardship Fund, to assist artists and film and television workers negatively affected by Lebanon's economic and political collapse. All three organizations remain deeply committed to independent and experimental work of all kinds and are good examples of turning multifaceted sources of support into rigorously conceived and independent platforms and projects; as Marks points out, many of the curators and arts advocates attached to these programs recognize there is no such thing as "pure" money but still remain steadfast about not compromising to funder requests when their principles require it.[4]

If these organizations have made new kinds of networks of funding and production possible, what about distribution and exhibition? Here again, turning away from major distribution and exhibition channels allows us to see the diverse initiatives that have taken shape in recent years that allow new voices in Arab film and video to emerge. Theatrical exhibition is fragile and has been especially endangered during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Metropolis Cinema in Beirut, long a center for independent programming of Lebanese and Arab films, was forced to close its space in the Sofil cinema in 2020; it continues to operate as an association with dynamic programming across

⁴ Marks, *Hanan Al-Cinema*, 28-29.

other sites. The Cinémathèque de Tanger in Morocco was established in 2006 by two artists, Yto Barrada and Bouchra Khalili, who acquired and renovated the Cinema Rif in the center of Tangier and began to program international arthouse films but also smaller programs of independent and experimental work from the region. They are (as is Metropolis) affiliated with the Network of Arab Arthouse Screens (NAAS) which provides support and fundraising assistance for other similarly small theatrical venues in eleven counties across the Arab region.

Supplementing precious venues like these is the increasing role of streaming. In 2018, its 25th anniversary, Ashkal Alwan launched a free, open-access streaming platform, aashra, which offers a rotating program of works from its archive. The COVID-19 pandemic has only accelerated this trend to open-access and subscription programming. Beirut DC launched a streaming platform, Aflamuna, for which a changing roster of curators create thematic programming for subscribers. And an even newer venture, Shasha, emerged in 2020 as a project of the Habibi Collective, an all-women collective devoted to various forms of programming and exhibition of work from South-West Asia and North Africa (SWANA). Shasha's programming at the time of writing (and in past programs, too) includes a wide selection of queer films and videos from the region and its programs always focus on work produced by female-identified film and videomakers. In this sense, while the dearth of theatrical venues is nothing short of tragic, streaming has partially opened other possibilities that remained difficult for in-person venues for political reasons. Similarly, Aflamuna programmed a festival of queer work in May 2021 curated by the new, queer film organization Cinema al-Fouad (whose name is taken from the title of a 1994 film by Mohammed Soueid that followed the life of a Syrian trans woman living in Beirut). Other online programs have emerged from diasporic centers like Mizna and ArteEast, among many others.

Finally, we can note the overlap between some such venues of exhibition and distribution and the ongoing issues of archiving in the region. Here, my examples will be Moroccan[5]. In addition to its theatrical role, the Cinémathèque de Tanger serves another function: that of an archive. As its founders have explained, in the absence of an official state archive that attends to the full diversity of experimental film and video and cinema, the Cinémathèque de Tanger has become a repository for many kinds of film, video, and photography work that is otherwise at risk. An archive like the Cinémathèque de Tanger's exists outside of official state circuits and yet serves a critical function, even if funding and space issues mean that it is, itself, vulnerable at the same time. Individual and collective collaborative efforts play a role, too. For example, as the sole surviving family member faced with the responsibility of holding her family's archives, which include decades of unpublished and unseen work, artist Touda Bouanani has collaborated with other writers, filmmakers, and curators to preserve and recirculate the work of her late parents, Ahmed Bouanani and Naïma Saoudi Bouanani, and her sister, Batoul Bouanani. This work is now conducted through a collection of collaborators as the Archives Bouanani. Moroccan Filmmaker Ali Essafi exemplifies the ways in which such tasks of preserving memory might be practiced by filmmakers, also: his film on Ahmed Bouanani, *Crossing the Seventh Gate* (2017) itself serves a curatorial function in highlighting Bouanani's seldom-seen work, and Essafi's longer film *Before the Dying of the Light* (2020) collects the untold history of Mostafa Derkaoui's film *About Some Meaningless Events* (1974) while retracing the repressive political context that surrounded Derkaoui, Bouanani, and other artists and intellectuals during Morocco's "years of lead."

[5] For other examples from Lebanon and elsewhere, see Marks, *Hanan Al-Cinema*, 57-58.

Based on many years of research, Essafi's film preserves and illuminates histories, documents, and stories that had previously fallen out of the narratives of Moroccan cinema. The film and the collaboration that undergird it are exemplary of the role of new and innovative networks for thinking about historical, independent, and experimental film and video work across the Arab region.

The Poetry of Mahmoud Darwish and Adonis, Between Freedom and Duress

Atef Alshaer

It is no accident that the twentieth century witnessed enormous transformations in literary forms and genres, transformations which touched and affected so many literary traditions and languages. The twentieth century from its beginning to its end ushered in new schools of thought as well as new literary forms. The Arabic literary tradition is a vast one that echoes and represents these transformations, which are deeply rooted and linked to socio-political changes and upheavals. Marx's position regarding the rootedness of culture and literature by extension in material conditions and economic organisation is pertinent. The nation-state is a major reference point in this regard. It is a twentieth century phenomenon to speak about a particular poet or writer in general belonging to one nation or another, Egyptian, Lebanese, Iraqi or Palestinian. Poets and artists from the classical age which includes the pre-Islamic, Islamic and the Islamic Empires that were forged later, identified themselves as Muslims first, Arabs or Persians second. The reference to birthplace or background was often a biographical note, not so laden with specific political connotations, except in the pre-Islamic period, when poets tended to speak for their tribes. The nation-state as a political category in the Arab world has therefore brought with it literary themes, affiliations and obligations, in addition to new geographical connections that did not exist before. Yet the Arab world, currently divided

into twenty-two nation-states, as it is, has always maintained an underlying commonality and resonance of language and culture, which is ordinarily shared among all Arabs, a community united in language and literary heritage *par excellence*. This made the categorisation of literature along national lines, such as Egyptian, Lebanese, complicated, if not superficial. In addition, the Arab countries have experienced similar social and political conditions, which at an imaginary level at least, rendered them one unit facing and conversing with a, mostly western, 'other'.

It is little wonder that when the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, born in 1941, read his poem, *Sajil ana 'Arabi*, (Put it on record, I am an Arab), the poem was well-received, and gradually became a nationalist hymn not only to Palestine under the strict military rules of the Israeli occupation, but also to an entire Arab world looking to reclaim what appeared like a shattered and lost identity. This is particularly true after the 1967 war when Israel defeated Egypt, the centre of pan-Arab nations, Syria and occupied the rest of historic Palestine; and the spiritual godfather of Arabism and Arab nationalism President Jamal 'Abd el-Nassir gradually faded from the political landscape. The poem evoked familiar Arab tropes and symbolism regarding attachment to land in its pastoral sense, pride in ancestors and love for one's country and people in all their naturalness and simplicity. The poem was an identity call in the most direct and urgent sense, responding but also rising above the political crisis and the crushing sentiment of defeat that prevailed over the Arab world. As the Moroccan critic 'Abd il-Ilah Balqiz described it, "I do not exaggerate when I say that one poem, like 'Put it on record, I am an Arab' was enough to take away the shame from millions of Arabs, teaching them about those who lost their homeland and were forced to carry an identity card that distorts their identity, and the precious origins whence they have come." Meanwhile, if this poem was an intimate evocation of Arab identity and

historical authenticity which seemed lost or at least compromised after the defeat of 1967, there was another revolution to be had, a revolution aimed at the sensibility and aesthetics of the Arab world in general.

There had been serious calls for political, cultural, literary aesthetic changes and reforms since the 19th century, led and practised by the likes of the Lebanese visionary writer Khalil Gibran, the Tunisian poet Abu al-Qassim al-Shabbi and the Iraqi poet Badir Shakir al-Sayyab, who is credited for creating the most iconic poem in Arabic literary modernity, *The Song of Rain*. But while those poets triggered serious debates and challenged the hegemony of the fifteen-century old metered poem, they did not, systematically at least, end the neoclassical poetic practice, which was still rooted in tradition with its reiterative resonance and effect. Perhaps ironically, the 1967 defeat set in motion a questioning sentiment, charged with biting critical attitudes towards not only the political structures of the Arab world, but also the social, sexual and existential, questioning its very basis, and radically calling for a new politics as well as poetics. This call was maintained in a nuanced but consistent manner by the Syrian poet 'Ali Ahmad Said Esber, who was born in the village of Qassabin in the district of Latakia in Northern Syria in 1930 – better known as Adonis.

It is indeed with these two figures, Darwish and Adonis that we see the crystallisation of Arab political and social conditions pressing themselves on their literary works to the extent that those two visionary individuals had to define and redefine poetry and enact radical changes to its creation, performance and use. What made those two individuals important and popular? The answer to this question cannot be easy, but there is little doubt, if any, regarding their exceptional talent, observed and encouraged at an early age. In the case of Darwish, the standard characterisation of his work by many scholars and informed observers refer to three literary

stages. These are in return embedded in the dramatic political events in Palestine as well as elsewhere in the Arab world. In addition, and this can be said for Adonis as well, the poetry in question was influenced by western literary developments and influences, most clearly by the poetry of T.S. Eliot, Lorca, Mallarmé, Celan and Valéry.

In the first instance, Darwish's poetry derives its potency from the political realities of Palestine, from the tragedy of 1948 when the Palestinians lost their homeland to Israel, and the latter's harsh treatment of, and radical changes to, the taxonomy and toponymy of Palestine, from the names of villages, to the replacement of natural vistas with capitalist constructions and designs. At this stage, Darwish is firmly invoking the Palestinians rootedness in their land, their historic rights as well as their knowledge of its flora and fauna. His intimate, lyrical, sincere and simple language made his poetry accessible to people. The second stage concerns his exile from Moscow, to Cairo, Beirut, Tunisia and Paris and his wandering existence between Ramallah and Amman. In all these stages, Darwish changed his poetry aesthetically, endlessly experimenting but unwaveringly loyal to beauty and lyricism as constituents of poetic composition and ingenuity. While Palestine appeared less in his third phase of poetic creation, it never faded, but became part of the human condition. Here, there is nothing inherently special about the Palestinians or any people for that matter, but there are worldly historical resonances to their land and their ongoing suffering, resistance, and steadfastness. This later aspect translates into an almost global interest in their story, whether this be positive or negative. In the third phase, Darwish is at one with the world. 'The late style' to use Edward Said's expression in reference to writers active in advanced age, confirms what Fady Joudah called "the sovereignty of the song" to characterise Darwish's poetry at this stage. Boundaries, whether they be political, religious

or aesthetic collapse, and the subject of the poetry becomes human beings in the most ordinary sense, stripped of the layers of identity that more often than not imprison them rather than liberate them. A few lines from one of Darwish's last poems, aptly titled, "I do not want this to end", suffice to show this:

I don't want this poem to ever end
I don't want a clear target for it
I don't want it to be the map of an exile or a country
I don't want this poem to end
with a happy ending, or with death
I want it to be as it desires to be:
Someone else's poem, my opponent's poem, my equal's
poem...
I want it to be the prayer of my brother and my enemy.
As if the one addressed in it is me the absent speaker.
As if the echo is my body, as if I am
You, or others, as if I am my other.

This should not mean that Darwish gives up on the historical sense of poetry, particularly as the Palestinians have not attained their freedom yet. If anything, the colonial project of Israel deepens and becomes ever uglier. Yet, Darwish develops aesthetic techniques so that his poetry acquires universal and humanistic resonances to overcome the persistent and mundane oppression of politics in Palestine and elsewhere. In other words, poetry liberates itself from the grittiness of politics through the medium of free transcendence and aesthetic comfort. It gains its sovereignty without yielding or forgetting the political pressures harassing its evolution. This kind of literary attitude, I call post-resistance, in the sense that it has matured to be within resistance, but not about it as such. It is not strictly ensconced in the daily politics of resistance or its grand narratives, although the thirst for freedom remains paramount.

A few lines from one of Darwish's last poems, *At a train station that disappeared from the map*, can potentially serve to illustrate the proposal at hand:

I see my place, all of it, around me
I see myself in the place with all my parts and names
I see the palm trees correcting the errors in my classical Arabic
I see the habits of almond blossoms training my song for a sudden joy
I see my trace and follow it
I see my shadow and I pick it up from the valley
with the tweezers of a bereaved Canaanite woman
I see the invisible gravity of the full and complete beauty
that flows in the eternity of the hills. I do not see my sniper.

Meanwhile Adonis, who settled in Beirut from 1958, escaping military enlistment in Syria, became an authoritative literary cultural figure, and particularly after he left for Paris in 1980, escaping the increasingly ferocious Lebanese civil war. Earlier, he established the poetry magazine *majallat al-Sh'ir* with his compatriot Youssef al-Khal,. The publication served as a new manifesto for Arabic poetry, and Adonis worked tirelessly towards promoting his new poetry, based on a transcendental and metaphysical understating of art – poetry as the brainchild of language imbued with revivalist linguistic energy brought forth and instinctively upheld by the poet. Poetry is a spiritual force that the poet brings forth through his/her intimate feeling and play or communion with language, rather than anything to do with external objects and contexts which language ordinarily represents. Poetry also has no immediate cultural reference per se. It is what it desires to be in the moment of its ascendant creation. His collection, *Mihyiar al-Dimashqi* (The Songs of Mihyar, the Damascene), is an exquisite example of rebellion against any set norms, whether they be religious, linguistic or cultural. Adonis is the extreme rebel in this collec-

tion. His revolutionary attitudes are evident in his poetry as well as prose, and these have come to be widely shared within the context of the Arab uprisings, though the revolutions have not turned out as Adonis envisioned in terms of fundamental change that touches the entirety of the Arab thought and practice (praxis). As I have written elsewhere, in the words of the French existentialist Albert Camus, Adonis fits the description of 'the metaphysical rebel' who is:

> certainly not an atheist, as one might think him, but inevitably he is a blasphemer…human rebellion ends in metaphysical revolution. It progresses from appearances to facts, from dilettantism to revolutionary commitment. When the throne of God is overthrown, the rebel realizes that it is now his own responsibility to create the justice, order, and unity that he sought in vain within his own condition and, in this way, to justify the fall of God. Then begins the desperate effort to create, at the price of sin if necessary, the dominion of man.

It is instructive to return to Adonis's poems to illustrate the points thus explained. Adonis writes in *Mihyiar al-Dimashqi:*

From a dialogue
Neither God nor the devil do I choose,
Each is a wall
Each closes my eyes for me –
Can I exchange one wall for another
And my confusion is the confusion of an enlightened one
The confusion of one who knows all things…

The language of sin
I burn my heritage; I proclaim my land is virgin,
And there are no graves in my youth
I walk over God and the devil
My way is more distant than the ways
Of God and the devil –
I pass through my book

Through the procession of the dazzling storm
Through the procession of the green storm
I shout, there is no heaven, there is no falling after me
And I erase the language of sin...

While Adonis calls for a revolution in the ontology (the structure of thought) of Arab life, his revolution seems to be outside history; it is a philosophical revolution, not an immediate political one, as grounded in people's struggles and sense of their day-to-day life and current moment in history. Adonis wants a new Arab subject, unencumbered by the weight of history and political conditions and structures that mark their lives. Here, Adonis's view and practice of poetry is riddled with paradoxes, in the sense that his poetry is rich with historical illusions and de facto political attitudes, but meanwhile he calls for fresh poetic creations that transcend the trappings of history and politics. The paradox lies in the fact that his poetry is inflected with political views, albeit philosophical ones; yet his cultural commentaries veer towards dismissing politics, or any form of immediate human commitments from poetry. As far as the Arab uprisings – dubbed the Arab Spring – are concerned, Adonis has been dismissive of them. He emphasises their ideological agenda, ignoring, and underestimating the focus on the principal aims of dignity and freedom that they ultimately represent, and that politics is rarely ever so transformative as to produce a new human subject – a slippery concept at the best of times – without an evolutionary process of one kind or another. To this end, Adonis's contradictions are irreconcilable, placing him in the category of poets and intellectuals who can be described as elitist, notwithstanding the peculiar nature of his important, albeit provocative, contributions.

Thus, unlike Darwish, whose poetry represents profound political realities and dilemmas that ultimately speak of the universality of intense human conditions, crafted with

endearing simplicity, Adonis' poetry carries philosophical and metaphysical connotations, making his poetics inaccessible to lay readers. However, as his compatriot, the great Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani, declared, Adonis realised that a poet in the modern age also has to be attentive to public relations. He had to promote his work, defend it and push his agenda, as it were. Adonis did this with fervent orthodoxy, presenting and defending poetry as an exalted kingdom unto its own above and beyond political and cultural considerations. He exploited the fragility of the Arab world, as one colonised and humiliated by external imperial powers of various kinds, as well as internal weaknesses and fissures revolving around the inability of the Arab world to systematically adopt modern political practices, including democracy and the rule of law, opting instead for irresolvable religious references and interpretations and often ending in authoritarianism. If Adonis' poetry courted controversy and provocation, his cultural commentaries and talks won him enemies and admirers in equal measure. He undertook a PhD and wrote several books, highly eloquent and learned, critiquing Arab culture and life in general in absolute terms, always calling for new beginnings that reconsider the Arab past and interpret it in enlightened ways. As Edward Said wrote of him, "he has almost single-handedly been challenging the persistence of what he regards as the ossified, tradition-bound Arab-Islamic heritage, stuck not only in the past but in a rigid and authoritarian rereading of the past" (Said, 1994, 379). In his PhD thesis, *al-Thabit walmutahawwil fi al-Thaqafah al-'Arabiyya* (The Fixed and the Changing in Arab Culture) Adonis argued that "the history of Arabic poetry has been that of the conservative vision of literature and society (*al-thabit*), quelling poetic experimentation and philosophical and religious ideas (*al-mutahawil*)".

In conclusion, we have before us two major Arab literary figures, who won numerous prizes but their works, to their

chagrin, were not translated for many years or studied by other traditions. Both have been embraced and popularised, and lately by the media, as iconic individuals representing and echoing different aspirations and orientations to an Arab world yearning for emancipation from colonial subservience, despotic rulers and rampant patriarchal norms. Both figures have connected the Arab world to their past and at the same time liberated it from it in admirably humanist and critical fashion that can serve as guiding torches for the future.

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The Digital Sphere as
a Site of Social Activism
Randa Aboubakr

This paper was inspired by numerous discussions with colleagues from Egypt, the Arab region and internationally about the relevance of the digital sphere to issues of social and political participation and activism, and the role it plays there. The digital sphere was (with varying degrees) present and visible in the uprisings some parts of the Arab region witnessed a decade ago, especially in the mobilization for, and coordination of, events, as well as reporting and commenting on them as they were unfolding and long afterwards. Studies show that that was not a sudden emergence of the role of the digital medium throughout the region, but was preceded by more than a decade of flourishing and expansion in digital media and the uses and contents these media have been exhibiting.

The digital realm in Egypt in the 21ˢᵗ century

In Egypt for example, the early years of the twenty-first century witnessed wide social and political unrest, which were expectedly coupled with the extensive dissection and heavy policing of public space, surveillance of the media, and restrictions on public assembly and free speech continuing during a 30-year state of emergency under Mubarak. The first decade of the 21ˢᵗ century, however, coincided with an ailing Mubarak's last

years in power, and saw a relative weakening of the regime's grip over forms of opposition. This also meant that there was relative tolerance of popular expressions of discontent, as can be reflected in the emergence of non-social movements such as *Kifaya* (Enough – established in 2004), and *Sitta Abril* (April 6 – established in 2008). This relative loosening of the grip of the regime over public space allowed for a significant degree of democratization of that space, with these nascent movements, alongside frequent smaller occasional protests in the form of demonstrations and sit-ins, exhibiting more visibility. This was also coupled with the proliferation of participatory cultural and artistic practices in public space, seen in the emergence of street theatre, graffiti, music groups, and stand-up comedy shows. These forms of social, political, cultural, and artistic participation also benefited from, and were allied with, the expansion of the use of digital media Egypt was witnessing at the same time.

In 2004, Ahmad Nazif (Egyptian Prime Minister between 2004-2011) formed a cabinet embracing widespread policies of improving Egypt's Internet infrastructure, promoting communication technologies, and backing vocational training designed to cater for that. This was specifically designed to boost consumer and service business in which the ruling elites, including most of the members of Nazif's cabinet, let alone Nazif himself, were investing. The following years witnessed concerted efforts to make information and communication technologies available to a wider public through the promotion of sales of affordable computers and laptops at schools and universities. As a result, the number of Internet users in the country rose significantly during the years leading up to 2011. With the advent of January 2011, the number of Internet users in Egypt reached 23.51 million, with 32.76% of Egyptian households having access to the Internet in some way, and around 1.5 million DSL subscribers.

Thus, when the January uprising broke out, a young generation of Internet 'wizards' which had been in the making throughout the preceding years was ready to take over the digital space almost completely during that time, and prove that it was much more advanced in that respect than an aging authoritarian regime[1]. This had a huge impact on how the uprising was coordinated, screened, reported, and backed. Conversely, the uprising can be seen to have steered digital media onto a new pathway. Coupled with advances in communication technologies, this wave of unprecedented citizen participatory involvement in what could loosely be termed politics gave rise to numerous creative uses of digital and social media, and had the power to turn them into vehicles for social and political activism.

Recent clampdown

The years following the military takeover of 2013, however, witnessed unprecedented restrictions imposed on public space, citizen assembly, and freedom of speech. Though the digital space consequently fell under heavy restrictions, it has been able to better maneuver around them than the case with material space. Despite clampdowns, freedom of assembly is still more robust in the digital realm, with large sections of people (in terms of digital group members) able to convene and discuss matters. Initiatives and non-social movements that used online/offline mechanisms of activism in the past, are now noticeably veering more strongly towards online forms of operation. Likewise, artistic and cultural production such as stand-up comedy,

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[1] Howard, Philip N. et al. 2011. "Opening Closed Regimes" in *Project of Information Technology and Political Islam* (PITPI). University of Washington, Department of Communication, September.

a genre that had been thriving in Egypt for only a few years prior to 2011, has now largely shifted from performances in physical space before a live audience to the digital realm, in the form of 'sit-down' comedies, while independent digital journalism continues to be more visible than before.

The digital realm, however, continues to be the site of restrictions and clampdowns. The Egyptian Association of Freedom of Thought and Expression <u>reported</u> in 2018 that 500 digital news and other sites were blocked in Egypt between 2014 and 2018, among which was the independent news portal *Mada Masr*, banned in 2017. Between 2018 and 2020, cartoonist and sit-down comedian Mohamed Andeel voluntarily repeatedly suspended the production of episodes of his satirical and highly popular video clips, *Akhkh Kbir*, which he had been writing for *Mada Masr* since 2017, and Andeel himself left the country in 2018. Some not strictly political content has also been subject to severe measures. Lately, two video bloggers who produced social and music content on the video-sharing social networking application TikTok, Hanin Hossam and Mawadda al-Adham, received long prison sentences for charges related to 'violating Egyptian family values' and 'facilitating human trafficking'.

Two relevant considerations

Despite these restrictions, the digital realm is still a relatively freer arena than material space for hosting a variety of participatory practices reflecting ordinary citizens' involvement in matters of their everyday lives in places like Egypt, and that is what I am arguing for here. Before I do that, I would like to highlight two points in relation to this current debate. One is the importance of context. Even though the Internet is a global space, an assessment of its role in issues of activism is by necessity context-specific. For example, in contexts where

there is easier access to reliable objective data, the Internet as a source of alternative information about events might not be as crucial as it is in contexts where access to information is heavily restricted, and reliable information largely absent. Likewise, in contexts where the expression and exchange of opinion is encouraged or at least tolerated, the role of the digital realm as an alternative of activism on the ground might be weaker. The second point I wish to highlight is perhaps the most obvious, namely that an assessment of the degree of freedom enjoyed in the digital realm is not tantamount to an assessment of its role in effecting tangible socio-political change, nor does it mean that the digital realm is more instrumental than, or an exclusive alternative to, activism on the ground.

Who can join in?

Despite numerous arguments raising suspicions around its potential to effect real change, some observers, including myself, still see the digital realm in contexts like the Egyptian one as a relatively freer space with potential for significant and impactful action. Because it allows for a variety of participatory practices carried out without direct institutional or capitalist sponsorship, some digital user-created content provides a space for a wide spectrum of voices to appear. Technically, what is required is to have a smartphone or computer and an Internet connection. The latter two can also be rented or used in an Internet café. This in principle enables one to have a voice and let others, whether few or many, hear it.

Digital user-created content in this case can be seen as an instance of popular cultural production (in the Gramscian sense – a sphere of action for counter-hegemonic discourse). Digital user-created content, however, does not have to be linked to ideological or partisan agendas, but is a wider arena

for the cultural production developed by ordinary people as they go about their daily lives.[2] The use of the Internet by ordinary individuals to voice their marginal views and stances (even if they are not strictly political) creates cumulative anti-hegemonic discourses which compete with hegemonic ones for the status of commonsense, and hence legitimacy. The digital realm thus becomes an arena where the masses and the power block enter into contestations over legitimacy, and where the power block has a disadvantage due to the increasing numbers of Internet users and the fact that (especially in the Arab region) they have technical skills superior to those of the usually outdated autocratic regimes.

Reach and dissemination

The digital medium allows this cultural production in Egypt to spread widely and form affective communities where users' subjectivities find a place to connect with those of others[3]. We have examples in the popularity and traction of pages such as *Kollena Khaled Said* (We Are All Khalid Said), which attracted half a million users during its first six months of operation in 2010 (between June and December 2010), while Bassem Yousef's *ElBernameg*, which he and a small team of content creators independently produced and aired on Bassem's YouTube channel between April and November 2011, was viewed by 30 million viewers a week during its first season according to a BBC report.

Because the digital medium allows to read/write culture and for anonymous creation, it enhances the participatory nature of this user-created production. Besides commenting and sharing, this digital material can be added to, transformed, or re-mixed to produce new material.

The chances for maneuvering around censorship can become more creative in the digital realm. For instance, though the *Mada Masr* site was blocked in Egypt in 2017, overviews and summaries of most of the content produced can still be accessible through its Facebook page and other social media channels. Likewise, *Mosirrin*, an independent media collective formed during the *Tahrir* sit-ins in 2011 with the aim of documenting state violence and building the capacity of ordinary people to document events through media training, voluntarily shut down their Cairo office and gradually abandoned their website in 2014. However, the collective launched its *858 Archives of Resistance* in January 2018 with 858 hours of video coverage of events related to the 2011 uprising since its inception. The portal is listed under Creative Commons and is being enhanced regularly.

Knowledge production

The digital realm also allows for the emergence of new sites of involvement enabled by this new technology. This makes digital platforms crucial sites for knowledge production. The affective collaborative narratives produced through hashtag activism, for instance, are created in liminal spaces (such as Twitter) which blur the lines between producer and user, thereby enhancing affective solidarity[4] and hence knowledge transfer. This has been repeatedly demonstrated with causes

[2]   Aboubakr, Randa. 2020. "Citizen Media and Popular Culture" in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Citizen Media*, edited by Mona Baker, Bolette Blaagaard, Henry Jones and Luis Peres-Gonzalez.

[3]   Mona Baker and Bolette Blaagaard. 2016. "Reconceptualizing Citizen Media: A Preliminary Charting of a Complex Domain" in *Citizen Media and Public Spaces: Diverse Expressions of Citizenship and Dissent*, edited by Mona Baker and Bolette B. Blaagaard, 1–22. New York: Routledge.

[4]   Papacharissi, Zizi. 2015. *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology and Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

that unite dispersed publics, as in widely circulating hashtags related to national and pan-Arab issues such as #save_sheikh_jarrah which ranked 2ⁿᵈ in reach globally in May 2021, and #الولاية_ حقي which also actively trended in March 2021 in Egypt.

Translation as one of the traditionally under-represented tools of activist intervention has also been significantly enabled by the digital medium. Like other cultural practices, translation represents a site of struggle over meaning and over interpretations of reality, which has prompted global networks of translators to ideologically intervene in contentious settings[5], with the new discourses and discursive practices produced through interventionist translation contribute to the creation of new knowledge and new commonsense. During the years immediately following the 2011 uprising, the work of informal translators came to the fore as instrumental in producing coverage of the development of the situation in Egypt to a wider audience. Loose networks of volunteer translators worked on translating footage of the events and other documentary material into several languages and posted them on YouTube and other social media platforms.

Global solidarities

Hashtag activism testifies to the potential of the digital realm for building and enhancing global solidarity. This can be seen internationally in the popularity and wide traction of hashtags related to human rights and women's rights issues, such as the

[5]　Boéri, Julie. 2008. "A Narrative Account of Babels vs. Naumann Controversy: Competing Perspectives on Activism and Conference Interpreting" in *The Translator* 14 (1): 21-50; and González, Luis Pérez. 2010. "'Ad-hocracies' of Translation Activism in the Blogosphere: A Genealogical Case Study" in *Text and Context*, edited by Mona Baker, Maeve Olohan and María Calzada Pérez, 259-287. Manchester: St Jerome Publishing.

#me_too hashtag which appeared in 2017 in the USA, but had various international variations in several parts of the world, including Egypt. In the same way, activist translation highlights how the digital realm can be a space for building international solidarity networks. For instance, *Mosirrin* produced French subtitles for a series of documentaries about radical international labor movements. This French subtitling specifically targeted Tunisian audiences at the Carthage International Film festival in 2012. Meanwhile, in 2014, a documentary on the recovery movement at the Argentinian Zanon Factory was collectively subtitled into Arabic to screen at the site of workers' strikes in two factories in Suez, Egypt (Ifco Oil and Ceramic Cleopatra)[6].

No utopia – Conclusion

The preceding arguments and examples about the relative freedom and potential of the digital realm can of course be contested. For instance, despite the relative freedom of the digital realm, various nodes of power, be they political, social, religious, economic or otherwise, can and do use it to spread their own ideologies and agendas. And these mechanisms do not necessarily feature in the forceful silencing of dissident voices or even the creation and dissemination of counter-propaganda. They can easily be seen as mechanisms in the spread of disinformation and misinformation. Another argument raising suspicion about the role of the Internet says that no real change, whether social or political, can be achieved through the Internet or social media alone.

[6]　Selim, Samah. 2017. "Text and Context: Translating in a State of Emergency" in *Translating Dissent: Voices from and with the Egyptian Revolution*, edited by Mona Baker, 77-89. London: Routledge.

While these are valid concerns, I do not find them detractive of the potential of digital activism. If the Internet is available to both sides of the struggle in an old-fashioned authoritarian context, the zeal and dedication of (mostly youthful) activists usually tips the balance in favor of the latter. And if activism 'on the ground' is vital for some kinds of social and political transformation, the long-term work done by digital media, in the sense of deconstructing dominant discourses and creating new knowledge, it is equally indispensable to any change on the ground. The fact that the digital realm is usually available to a wider range of persons living under autocratic rule than organized political action means that the former can work to engage with power in novel and unobtrusive ways, and hence be equally relevant to real, albeit gradual, change.

An extremely valid argument against the potential and impact of the digital realm invokes the issue of inclusion and exclusion. Recent statistics on the growth and penetration rates of digital platforms among Egyptian users, for instance, indicate that, despite the high growth rate, almost half of the population remains without access to the Internet. In societies with high illiteracy and poverty rates, the digital divide persists, impacting the reach and dissemination of the knowledge that might be created in the digital sphere. Despite continuous improvements in digital communication infrastructure, the digital divide remains influenced by class-related factors, since access to the Internet and literacy is largely determined by class. This makes the digital realm itself a hierarchized medium, where equal participation is shaped by class-affiliations (Baker and Blaagaard 2016, 5; Fenton 2012, 155) and knowledge not as democratized as one would hope. The issue of the reach of this kind of digital material is complicated further in the case of material produced in English, which features in some of the instances discussed, such as independent journalism. This is also a class issue and highlights the claim that networked

communities are not essentially based on democratic access, but only bring together those who already have similar convictions[7]. This state of affairs already impacts the reach of the new discourses evolving in the digital realm. To reflect on this valid concern, one has to remember that activism on the ground, too, is not open to everyone, and though it is not strongly shaped by class affiliations, it also involves issues of access, while being confronted with power on the ground.

While these hazards are real and cannot be overlooked, I hope some of the concrete examples cited in this article will testify to the potential of the digital realm to overcome some of them and continue to act as an extension of territoriality for activist interventions, inspiring and allowing for creative modes of citizen involvement and the creation of new knowledge. This does not have to be an alternative to working on the ground; it's a parallel realm with the potential of effecting slow, albeit cumulative, change.

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[7]   Fenton, Natalie. 2012. "The Internet and Radical Politics" in *Misunderstanding the Internet*, edited by James Curran, Natalie Fenton and Des Freedman, 149-176. New York: Routledge; and Calhoun, Craig. 1998. "Community without Propinquity Revisited: Communications Technology and the Transformation of the Urban Public Sphere" in *Sociological Inquiry* 68 (3): 373–397.

The Arab Diaspora in Italy, Between Stereotypes and Literature

Shady Hamadi

A personal introduction

What follows is a summary of a speech[1] I gave during the conference "The Carthage Seminars", organised by Reset Dialogues on Civilizations, Henry Luce Foundation and Beit al Hikma. While not exhaustive, in that it does not touch all the knotty questions of the issue, it is nevertheless meant as a contribution to the cultural debate in and about Italy.

At the centre of this short paper are a few writers from the Arab diaspora in Italy, who I divide into two groups: those who themselves immigrated to Italy and the children of Arab immigrants. This is not a casual distinction but – as I will try to demonstrate in a moment – an essential one because both groups offer an original and separate vision of living in this country.

On a personal note, this is a subject close to my heart, being myself the son of a Syrian immigrant and an Italian woman. This mix has led me to the question: where do I come from?

After the outbreak of the Syrian spring, which later turned into civil war, I tried to understand how two identities could coexist without clashing. At the beginning of this journey, I started by looking far and wide for an answer. To my rescue came Amin Maalouf, a well-known Lebanese writer, who many

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[1] "The Arab Diaspora in Italy, between Stereotypes and Literature", 2 July 2021

years ago wrote a book entitled *Identity* – a brief essay describing his personal journey in search of his origins. I was surprised to read in the conclusions of the book that identity is not a monolith, but the result of various intersections: we are the result of the encounters of many people.

Today's society is changing even faster than in the past. Change frightens us. What does the future have in store for us? we wonder.

From this question, and perhaps from a more parochial viewpoint, comes the desire to highlight the work of authors from the Arab diaspora, because this might help us understand each other and give us an idea of the country we will become. It is probably superfluous to reiterate that Italy is the gateway to Europe. Hundreds of thousands of people have left their homelands, crossing the sea in the hope of reaching the boot and from there moving towards Northern Europe. Sweden and Norway are just a couple of the final destinations. These people, who have lost everything, think that here, in democratic and modern Europe, they will find a safe place in which to start their lives again.

These exiled refugees come to us, knocking on our doors asking to be part of a society that protects them. The situation brings to mind Tayb Salih's novel, *Season of Migration to the North*. Thought by Edward Said to be one of the best Arab novels ever written, the story follows the return of the central character to his village. All the contradictions of a conservative society come to the fore when the protagonist arrives and are represented by the figure of Mustafa Saeed, a man belonging to the generation that grew up under colonial influence.

At this point we have to ask ourselves: what is the legacy that Europe has left to both men, to the protagonist and to Saeed? Perhaps it is the feeling of being somewhat exotic, uncommon. We might call it a feeling of disorientation. Both men, returning to their native village, felt disorientation, but

this time because of their own people who looked at them as Arabs with a European mentality. This contrast is very important because it helps emphasise the reality of those who were born in Europe of Arab parents and, as in the novel, find themselves to be fish out of water. Are they foreigners both in Europe and in the Middle East? If so, where do they think they belong?

This group of people, on the one hand spend their lives trying to support the cause of their parents' country of origin in the West, while not feeling fully recognised. On the other hand, in the countries whose customs and traditions they embrace, they are not recognised as full citizens. On a personal level, I have forgotten how many times I was called 'Shady the Italian' when I was in Syria, and 'Shady the Syrian' when I was in Italy.

In the end, you do not belong anywhere. You always feel lost, as Edward Said wrote in *Out of Place*. Exile, as Said's writings make clear, often serves as an identity in itself. An identity that is almost always created by real borders. This is why colonialism, and analysis of that period, is of vital importance in trying to draw conclusions and reflect on current events.

Unfortunately for Italy the word colonialism has no meaning. Not because the country does not have a colonial past, but because no attempt has ever been made to deconstruct it, or try to understand its mistakes.

There are some pointers, however, some authors who have tried to shed some light on this past and who belong to the first segment that I will analyse here: that of Arab writers in Italy.

Alessandro Spina's Libya

Alessandro Spina, pen name of Basili Shafik Khouzam, was born in Benghazi in 1927, into a Syrian family from Aleppo. When he was twelve, Italy annexed Libya and at the outbreak of World War II, Spina's father sent his son to Italy, where he remained

until 1954. The young Spina spent most of his early years in Milan. It was here that he graduated, with a thesis on Alberto Moravia, and began writing his first autobiographical stories full of Italian officers, Libyan rebels and Ottoman bureaucrats.

One breathes the atmosphere of a country completely different from the one we know today, an international hub of migrant smuggling.

This now-forgotten author represents a milestone in the search for the reasons behind Italian colonialism and its effects on subjugated societies. In this sense Spina is perhaps the greatest Arab-Italian writer to have created a literary world around Libya. But, despite this great merit, his absence in any dialogue about Italy's colonial past is explained by the following words: "Darling, this is Alessandro Spina, who is trying to make Italians feel guilty about their colonial past," by Italian poet Vittorio Sereni, introducing the author to his wife.

In his most important volume, *I confini dell'ombra* (The Confines of the Shadow)[2] Spina completely reconstructs the Italian colonial experience in Libya, analysing how the political situation had changed the country, and how it changed even more dramatically later, following the discovery of oil. This second element, that of black gold, is very reminiscent of *Cities of Salt* by Abdelrahman Munif, who also tried to revive those customs and communities that had disappeared with the advent of modernity linked to the exploitation of oil fields.

In his 1971 story, *Il giovane Maronita* (The Young Maronite), Spina tells us about the war that Giolitti began in 1911. We are at a crucial moment, roughly a thousand years after the last crusade. The Italians are once again crossing the Mediterranean to conquer another country. They find themselves facing stiff and, perhaps, unexpected armed resistance in the form of the Libyan rebels. This experience is described in *Il visitatore*

notturno (The Night Visitor) which retraces the twenty years of resistance, leading to the volumes *Entrata a Babilonia* (Entrance to Babylon), which takes us to the years of Libyan independence, and *Le notti del Cairo* (Cairo Nights), where the Senussite monarchy clashes with the rising spectre of pan-Arabism.

Despite this volume of writings and the fact that he was a pioneer among Arab intellectuals in Italy, as well as being acclaimed by many poets (we recall his correspondence with Cristiana Campo) and writers (Moravia backed him, though warning that he would not succeed in stimulating a colonial awareness in Italians), he is completely forgotten today. It is emblematic that, eight years after his death, most of his books are out of print. But even more so, that no Arab publisher has ever translated his work, despite the fact that Spina was an outstanding spectator of Libyan events.

In this area, though, there are signs of improvement. Al Mutawassit, a publishing house founded in Milan by a Palestinian poet, aims to publish Italian literature in Arabic and, more importantly, seems to want to promote Arab writers in Italy, which is the case with Yousef Wakkas and Amara Lakhous.

Countries seen from Italy – The case of Yousef Wakkas

Yousef Wakkas has lived in Italy for decades and has written several books, all in Italian. He has recently become a columnist for the pan-Arab daily *al Araby al Jadid* and has translated several books from Italian into Arabic.

His career began in the 1990s, when he published his first collection of short stories, *Terra Mobile*[3]. "Immigrant, prisoner, human being," writes Wakkas, "born in Syria, are all conditions that get mixed up in prison." He continues, "I tried to draw a

portrait of the immigrant in Europe: a bit defeated maybe, but he has not given up completely." After analysing his experience in prison, Wakkas returned to Syria once free and only recently returned to Italy. With his latest work, *On the road to Berlin*[4], which traces the adventures of several Syrians trying to escape from their country to Europe, he has tried to give meaning to the Syrian tragedy. It is an important work, because it tries to create a different historical narrative from the one promulgated by the Syrian government. And this is these writers' central aim: to give a different version of history, and a voice to the unheard.

The Italy of Arab writers, Amara Lakhous and Rome

A graduate of La Sapienza University in Rome, Amara Lakhous has successfully described the Italian capital from the perspective of immigrants and their coexistence with ordinary people. His most famous work, *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore in Piazza Vittorio*[5] (Clash of Civilizations Over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio) is emblematic. In a block of flats in a Rome suburb, different cultures mingle inside a single building. Differences of culture, religion and ways of life lead the novel's protagonists to collide headlong. All the stereotypes that we find in today's society are present. Sandro Dandini, one of the main characters, is a Roman who hates Neapolitans and who finds himself opposed by Benedetta Esposito, who in turn hates no particular group... but everyone. It is a fresco that is very reminiscent of Italy in the 1990s, when the clash between the north and south was heated and fuelled by various parties. A clash which, following the massive arrival of immigrants, brought southerners and northerners together against the

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4 Cosmo Iannone, 2017
5 EO, 2006

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foreigner. There have been many consequences. Among them is the Italianisation of Arabic names. To describe this phenomenon, Lakhous uses the character of Ahmed Salmi, who, in the novel, begins to call himself Amedeo. He speaks Italian better than the Italians and knows Rome better than the Romans. All the characters, faced with an unexpected event, will have to come to terms with their fears and prejudices.

But if Italy is portrayed in one way from the immigrant's point of view, what will it be like when it is narrated by the children of immigrants? Will their perception change from that of their parents? It is a question that touches a number of areas, from civil rights when applying for citizenship, to sexual or religious freedoms.

Two paths to feminism, Abdel Qader and Ibrahim

Rania Ibrahim, an Italian-Egyptian writer, is very good at breaking sexual taboos. In her book *Islam in love*[6] we see all the contradictions in the relationship between a Muslim woman from an Arab family and an Englishman with conservative parents. Convert to Islam or stay as is? This is surely one of the biggest questions for the generation born in Italy with religious families behind them. This request for conversion should certainly not be a problem. It only becomes one because of the identity bond in which origins and beliefs are mixed in the Middle Eastern diaspora.

In this sense, Sumaya Abdel Qader, the daughter of a Jordanian-Palestinian couple, clearly represents that religious bond just mentioned. *Quello che abbiamo in testa* (What we have in our heads)[7], her latest novel, is the story of Horra – trans-

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6 Jouvance, 2017
7 Mondadori, 2019

lated in Italian as *Libera* (Free) – who lives a very mundane life until something disturbs the peace. That is when the invasive questions about her religion and the veil in particular begin. "Wearing the veil," Sumaya writes, "is a huge sign of emancipation for women. Nowadays it is something revolutionary, a feminist act." This consideration explains very clearly how the diaspora generation risks becoming detached from their parents' homelands and how, on the other hand, the religious connection is very strong. Being Jordanian or Palestinian is no longer relevant; even the language, Arabic, is not used for anything other than the Koran.

In their work, Ibrahim and Qader take a close look at Islamic feminism in its many forms. For one, Rania, the veil is unimportant to be a good Muslim. Feminism, seen in this way, means freedom from constraints and, especially, compromise. At the other extreme, for Qader being free means being able to choose to wear the veil. This is an important issue for the author, as, together with her husband, she headed an association that brought together young Muslim girls and boys in Italy.

This topic, in particular the relationship between women and religion, is much discussed within the cultural elite. Is a woman freed by wearing or not wearing a veil? Are we sure that where there is no compulsion, the choice always remains free? Surely these writers can help us better understand the social dynamics that are transforming the whole country, including ourselves.

The Writer's Mirror and Veil.
Egyptian Autofiction from Print to Digital
Teresa Pepe

Since 2005, blogging has become a significant trend among Egyptian young people. Of the many blog entries published online everyday, some stand out for their innovative literary features and original content. So far, a number of bloggers have not only enjoyed huge popularity within the online community, but have also attracted the attention of independent and mainstream publishing houses, and have eventually made their way to Egyptian literary circles. For others, the blog has functioned as a springboard to enter the field of cinema and journalism. There are still a number of bloggers, instead, who continue to be active only in the online sphere, under the veil of anonymity. Despite that fact, blogs seem to attract critical attention mainly when turned into a commodifiable form, such as books, anthologies or magazines.

10 years on from their first publication, these online texts still raise important questions such as: how can a blog be turned into a work of literature. In other words: what is it that makes these blogs so compelling to read? And what do these texts contribute to Egyptian literary production, and in particular to Egyptian autobiographical production? This article is an attempt at a response to some of these questions, building on my research of a sample of 40 Egyptian blogs written between 2005 and 2011. The literary analysis of the blogs is illuminated by the testimonies offered by the blog authors, whom I have met after the events of the January 25th revolution.

In 2008, the success provoked by the best-selling book-blogs published by Dar al-Shuruq written by three Egyptian women bloggers [*ʿĀyzah ʾatgawwiz (*I Want To Get Married) by Ġādah ʿAbd al-ʿAl, *ʾĀruzz bil-laban li-šaḫṣayn* (Rice Pudding For Two) by Riḥāb Bāssam, and *ʾAmmā ḫāḏihī fa-raqṣatī ʾanā* (This Is My Own Dance) by *Ġādah Muḥammad Maḥmūd]*, provoked a debate in Egypt concerning the literary nature of blogs. While some critics hailed them as 'new literature', adopting terms such as *mudawwanat adabiyyah* and *adab al-mudawwanah*, others warned that blogs could only taint the value of literature. Terms such as *adab al-shabab*, or *adab al-klinix* etc. were used in a denigrating sense, arguing for the disposable nature of these publications, as well as their informal use of language and the frivolous nature of their content. Others used categories such as *yawmiyyat, khawatir*, or *qissas qasirah* to try and connect the blogs to existing genres in printed Arabic literature.

In my view, the concept of 'autofiction' may help us to grasp the literary pleasure of reading blogs, and therefore their artistic value. The term was coined in the 1970s by the French critic and writer Serge Dubrouvksy to define his novel *Fils* (1977). It later expanded to cover a new global literary trend, first adopted by authors such as Michel Houellebecq, Jonathan Safran Foer, and the 2014 Nobel Laureate Patrick Modiano, consisting in novels written in the first person (or third person) in which the main character carries the same name as the author. Such works are based therefore on a double pact with the reader: they can be read either as autobiographies or novels. In these autofictional novels, identity construction is characterized by two main tendencies. On the one hand there is a marked quest for truth, which consists, not in factual accuracy, but in the exploration and exposure of the writer's true emotions. On the other hand, a striking recurring theme is the subjects' tendency to project themselves onto their own life, in the future, i.e. their propensity to imagine.

This double tendency to disclose and imagine the self has found fertile ground to develop on the Internet. The American scholar Viviane Serfaty, in her study of American blogs (2004), argues that the computer functions both as a "veil" and a "mirror". As a veil, it offers protection from the gaze of others, allowing the blogger to reveal intimate thoughts, feelings and emotions. Meanwhile, the screen is also a mirror, a symbolic space where dreams and fantasies can be projected. The blog becomes a means of reaching beyond the confines of quotidian life, beyond the people with whom one has daily contacts, to show or emphasize only certain parts of his/her body or to imagine oneself in different body shapes.

Thus, the main pleasure of blog reading, and the literary quality of some blogs, lies, besides the usual element of literariness, in the indiscernible mix of fiction and non-fiction in the narration. It is this uncertainty and confusion that encourages the reader to take an active role in the narration to ask whether the person behind the screen corresponds to the real author. In the following, I provide some examples drawn from the Egyptian blogosphere, shedding light on how bloggers create the autofictional pact and how readers react to it in the comment section.

Egyptian autofictional blogs

Blogs are usually read as sincere, authentic narratives of the self. Indeed, the blogger Al-Bar Ashraf, who recently disappeared at a very young age, had defined the Egyptian blogging community as "a group of people put together by the need to confess"[1] (29 January 2007). However, while exploring their inner self, autofictional bloggers, fictionalize their identity in

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[1]   Frankly, writing about those moments that I lived through – as a blogger – in the midst of a generation that is united by the Internet and blogs, (I believe that) everyone has contributed to the survival of the ideas of "opening" and "speech".

many creative ways, in order to confuse the reader's expectations and involve them in an active game of interpretations.

One way of fictionalizing the self on the blog is by adopting pseudonyms. Fictional names can be used not only for personal security, as often believed, but also to highlight imagined aspects of one's personality. For example, upon starting his blog *Wassa' Khayalak*, the writer Ahmed Naje, adopted the name Iblis. His devious approach is confirmed in his writing, as he often breaks taboos and does not hesitate to challenge religious and political authorities. It is also performed in his relationship to readers and in his use of language, which involves use of swear words and vulgar expressions. Over time, the blogger abandoned his nickname and included the blog on his personal website. However, his provocative personality persists, tempting readers to 'enlarge their imagination' and dragging them into a world inhabited by spaceships, whales, and where he sits aside Johnny Cash, Trotzky, and Egyptian cinema like Samia Gamal, Layla Murad and Said Abu Bakr. Naje uses the blog to challenge the status of the realistic novel in Arabic literature, for its ideological and didactic endeavour. Inspired by the Argentinian author Julio Cortàzar, and in particular by his novel *Hopscotch*, he creates an episodic, expandable literary text that requires the active participation of the reader in navigating among the ephemeral, scattered fragments of the author's identity and making sense of the combination of links, video and images. In such texts, it is impossible to discern where reality ends and fiction begins. To one of the readers who inquires about the nature of text and its relationship to novelistic writing, Iblis replies:

دى اولا مش رواية يا عم ابو جهل ولا قصة قصيرة, دى اسمها تدوينة
ودا فن تانى خالص لسه بيتشكل. التدوينة هى نص ذاتي في المقام الاول يعنى انا هنا بكتب هلوساتي
الشخصية

First of all, this is not a novel, uncle Abu Jahl (Jahl=ignorance) is not a story, it's a post. It's a veritable art form that is still in evolution.
The post is mainly an 'auto-narrative', which means that I am here with my personal hallucinations (8 September 2007).

Bloggers also fictionalize their identity by resorting to visual elements, by experimenting with banners, profile pictures and combining writing with audio and visual elements. In her blog *Tanatif Maat*, Mona Seif depicts herself as a modern Maat, the ancient Egyptian goddess of Balance and Truth. In her blogging, Mona speaks out about her own feelings and frustrations, and connect with a community of peers that shares her desire to change the current political situation. As a goddess of truth, Maat does not hesitate to describe her personal experiences of sexual harassment and police brutality. As she writes:

لازم نكسر جدار الصمت اللى حطيناه, و نحكى عن اللى بيحصلنا فعلا, عن ازاى بنشيل هم كل
يوم نمشيه في الشارع, أو نركب مواصلة عامة.
جايز لما الناس يشوفوا بعينينا قبح اللى بيحصلنا, يبقى ما فيش قدامهم حل غير انهم يصدقوا.

We need to break the wall of silence that we have imposed upon ourselves and talk about what is really happening, of how we can internalize it everyday as we walk down the street or go about in public. It is permissible for people to see with their own eyes the ugliness of what is happening, there is no solution before them except that they believe.

Curiously, her brother Alaa Abdel Fattah writes on her blog, not knowing that Maat is his sister: "I hail you for your courage." Maat replies: "You can't imagine how your comment encourages me" (10/10/2006).

At the same time, the blog allows her to take refuge in an imagined world, as a means of escaping the cruel surrounding reality. She warns the reader:

كالعادة باسرق جزأ من الوقت ، اهرب فيه من الدنيا اللى حوالية ، و اسيب نفسى لدنيا تانية باصنعها فى خيالى

كل مرة حدوتة شكل باعيشها ، فيها اقدر اعمل اى حاجة كان لايمكن افكر اعملها فى الحقيقة عالمى الخاص ، دنيا صغيرة ملكى انا لوحدى ، تناتيف صغيرة نسجها خيالى و فيهم بنت كان المفروض تبقى انا ، لو كان عندى الشجاعة الكافية

As usual, I subtract a part of time, I escape from the world that surrounds me and keep for myself another world that I create in my imagination. Every time I do this, I can do anything that I can't do in the framework of reality. My world, a small universe belonging only to myself, is the result of small interwoven strands of my imagination. Amongst them there is a girl that should be me if I had had enough courage.

Mona imagines herself as a free, passionate woman, and she depicts herself (both with words and drawings) with loose, curly hair, as a marker of femininity and rebelliousness. In other entries, she takes refuge in childhood, an imagined condition of dream and innocence, "as a reaction to the fear that eats into her", as she writes after her brother's imprisonment in 2007. Her writing complicates the distinction between personal and political. The scars that Mona carries on her body are personal, but at the same time they hint at a more general malaise that affects the entire society. There is no personal solution for it, if not denouncing, speaking out and imagining a better world through words and colours.

Unlike Mona Seif and Ahmed Naje, other bloggers sign the blog entries with their real names, but they warn the reader that what they read does not concern the author's life. We find several examples of this in the blog *Wanamaly*, written by al-Baraa Ashraf. For instance, the blog post "My father loves my Mother", tells a love story between a member of the Muslim Brotherhood and a young intellectual woman who changes her life to accommodate her husband's moral standards. al-Baraa warns the readers that this is a *qissa ghayr haqiqiyah*. Despite that, some readers do attribute it to his own life, criticizing him

for discrediting his family in a public space. Others point out that the story is not realistic: how can it be possible that a small child does not recognize his mother if she is wearing a *niqab*. In other entries, Al-Baraa introduces the character Muṭāwiʿ and announces: "Those who know Muṭāwiʿ in person are prohibited from reading this", as Muṭāwiʿ might be the author himself. It seems that the fictional status of these entries is predicated as a means of protecting the author's social respectability. In fact, his blog is continuously attacked and monitored by readers who judge him according to very conservative moral standards. By fictionalizing his identity, therefore, al-Baraa is able to disclose intimate events of his life, express his feelings and ironize about his heavy, corpulent body, a theme that finds his expression in the cover and title of the book based on the blog, *Al-Badin*.

In other cases, bloggers exploit the hybrid autofictional nature of the blog to involve the reader in an active game that they define as *ishtighala*. It consists in telling a fictional story but disguising it as a piece of sincere confession, to make fun of the reader's voyeurism. An example of this can be found in the blog written by Nael elToukhy, in his homonymous blog *Nael elToukhy*. On the banner of the blog we find a picture of Pinocchio, which suggests that the blog might be a pure lie. In his blog post *Li-hāḏihī al-ʾasbāb ṭallaqtu Laylà* (28/12/2007), the author asks his readers' advice on how to deal with his disobedient wife Layla, who refuses to honour her marital obligations and complains about being beaten by her husband. Some readers sympathize with his sorrow and opinions, others call him "a psychopath" and suggest he visit a doctor. Others still understand the game and continue to play along. Actually, we can see that this post is an ironically sarcastic account of masculinity in Egyptian society, irony which is also directed at the readers' voyeurism. The author is playing on the fact that many readers will take this story at face value and attribute it to his personal life – and this is precisely what happens. Similar examples of

this game can be found in the blog *Wassa' Khayalak* and in the blog *Spring* by Mohammad Rabie, which is a clear sign that the *ishtighala* went viral in the Egyptian blogosphere.

Over the years, some bloggers have ended up disclosing their real identity, especially after having reached a certain notoriety in the cultural field, but they continue playing the autofictional game. Other bloggers prefer to keep their identity secret, for security reasons. This is the case of Emraa Mithlya, who in her blog *Yawimyyat Emraa Methlya* writes literary pieces telling of her experience as a lesbian in Egyptian society. Her style is based on an original mix of Modern Standard Arabic, Egyptian vernacular, English and slang words, and includes misspellings and syntactical mistakes. It is deterritorialized language (to use an expression from Deleuze and Guattari's "Notes on a Minor Literature", 1983) that sheds light on the marginalized position of the author in Egyptian society, and the political, collective nature of her life-writing.

Overall, we can say that these blogs should be seen as interactive autofictional narratives, narrating the self by blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality, and by scattering pieces of the blogger's identity among links, multimedia elements and reader's comments. Bloggers use the hybrid, ephemeral, episodic and multimedia nature of the blog to expose their own life stories, and push the boundaries of what can be publicly exposed in Egyptian society. Autofictional blogs must thus be read as the literary expression of a marginalized youth that is adopting a new means of self-expression and a subversive language to reshape their identities and connect with each other in order to voice their dissent towards political, cultural and religious authorities.

The examples described so far show that blogs should be read as new narratives of the self, as the authors experiment with a new medium to write and distribute their life stories. As a genre, autobiography has deep roots in Arabic culture.

Early traces of it can already be found back in the 9th century, but the genre reached its high point in Egypt in the first decades of the 21th century and in the writing of the 1990s generation. In the light of those earlier literary autobiographies, how do blogs innovate the practice of writing the self in Arabic literature?

First of all, it is important to notice that hybridity has been a key feature of Arabic autobiographical writing since the genre began to flourish at the end of the 19th century. Self-accounts have been embedded in travelogues, essays, novels and autobiographies proper. One might think for example of the major work *al-Saq ʿala Saq fi ma hwa al-Faryaq* by the Lebanese writer Ahmed Faris Shidyaq, published in 1855. In this work Shidyaq introduces the character Faryaq (an obvious amalgamation of Fariq and Shidyaq) who functions as his own alter ego. The narration alternates between first and third person and in some passages Shidyaq addresses Faryaq directly. Here, the autobiographical account is interspersed with social and literary criticism, philological and poetical digressions. In the text, it is impossible to discern when Shidyaq is discussing his own life or indulging in pure imagination. But apart from Shidyaq's work, which remains an enigma in terms of literary classification, we can see that writing the self in Arabic literature has often resulted in a hybrid between novel and autobiography. In the novel *Zaynab*, by Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal, Hamid, the main character, shares many traits with the author. However, the writer presents it as a novel and publishes it under the pseudonym *miṣrī fallāḥ*, not only because the novel was not considered a respectable genre at that time, but also because he could not dare attribute love feelings and emotions to his own life. Likewise, in the foreword to his novel *Ibrahīm al-Kātib*, Ibrahim Al-Mazini, underlines the fictional character of his novel, and lists the features of his hero that are exactly the opposite of his own. However, readers would know at once that Ibrahim is no-one other than the author himself. Even

Taha Hussein's novelized autobiography in three volumes, *al Ayyam* (1929, 1939, 1973), was first presented by the author as a novel, and narrated in the third person. Only in 1973, on the publication of the third volume, does the author admit that it is an autobiography. In general, we could say that the main tendency in the first half of the twentieth century was that autobiographies were presented as such, if they were to narrate a successful life story. Taha Hussein eventually presented *Al-Ayyam* as an autobiography because it tells about a young boy from the countryside who strives against poverty and blindness, and manages to affirm himself in society as an intellectual. More private issues, such as love or personal failures, were more likely to be narrated through fiction. This recourse to the fictional shelter can be seen as a clear antecedent of the narrative strategies (pseudonyms, self-conscious narrator, etc.) used by bloggers in autofictional blogs. The blog, like the novel before it, is a means of exploring liminal subjectivities and disclosing and validating them in the public sphere. However, the blog, with its autofictional, double pact, further blurs the borders between autobiography and novel. It allows a game of "now you see me; now you don't", a game of doubting, which has the potential to reveal and discuss certain issues that would not be considered legitimate in the public realm.

A new boom in autobiographical writing is seen in the literary works produced by the 1990s generation of Egyptian writers. Sumayyah Ramaḍān' 'Awrāq al-Narjis' *Leaves of Narcissus* (2001), Mayy al-Tilmisānī's *Dunyāzād* (1997). Nūrā 'Amīn's *Qamīṣ wardī fāriġ* (1997) and Muṣṭafa D̲ikrī's *Hurā' Maṭāhah Qūṭiyyah* (1997) can be read as fictionalized autobiographies, in which life is narrated in the form of fragments, by breaching the chronological order, and blurring the distinction between fiction and reality. This mode of life writing has certainly paved the way for Egyptian autofictional blogs. These writers also foreshadowed the bloggers in resorting to private publishing to gain access to

the cultural stage and escape the state's control, paving the way for bloggers' self publications on the Internet. The Internet, however, affords much more freedom than private publishing, in terms of access, content and aesthetics.

In the first place, blogging has created openings for players who are completely unknown in literary circles. Bloggers do not write their lives because they are famous, they become famous by writing their lives.

Secondly, the blog also allows a larger freedom in terms of stylistic choices. The fact that the texts are self-published and unedited by a linguistic authority allows bloggers to experiment with youth language, language mistakes, misspellings, vernacular expressions, and English words. By appearing in print, blogs have blurred the divide between *fus-ha* and the *ammiya* in printed literature. Nowadays, many authors are introducing vernacular expressions in their novels, not just in the dialogues but also in the narrative. In addition, bloggers write about themselves with pictures, icons, music videos and links. It is usually just a copy and paste of several elements they found online, but the copying makes for new meanings and new subjectivities.

Finally, the main novelty introduced by autofictional blogs is that they have turned life writing into a collective endeavour. Where the authors of the 1990s lamented the absence of readers, autofictional digital authors have left the ivory tower and the dark recesses of the soul in which writers had locked themselves, and invite their readers to participate in the creation of the text. They are not alone in their striptease, but are backed (and often criticized) by a community of readers and writers. Readers participate by offering feedback on the bloggers' writing, adding their own life accounts, and suggesting new directions for plot development.

In conclusion, we might say that by circumventing the print media, which necessarily entail the reviews of censors and literary 'purists', bloggers have been able to add new meaning and

aesthetics to Arabic (autobiographical) literature. By rejecting the novelistic mode which is, for them, the manifestation of a decaying nation, they look to the Internet to create new modes of expressions, a new writing language and new subjectivities that better reflect the reality they live in. They mix the literary and the political in new and interesting ways.

In order to promote innovation and the flourishing of new forms of writing therefore, it is crucial to give recognition to these liminal forms, to encourage them to experiment with the new medium and its attendant new genres. It is important that we find theories and identify patterns that help us to understand their social and aesthetic significance, as I have tried to do in this brief piece.

Part II

Cultural and Political
Ferment in Tunisia

Tunisia: Intellectual Issues
of the Democratic Transition
Zyed Krichen

The democratic transition, following the revolutionary move-
ment that took place ten years ago, has always asked itself about
its intellectual, even ideological, nature in the broadest sense of
the word. Is it the result of a revolution, that wanted to make a
clean break with the past, or is it the completion of the Tunisian
reformist movement that was embodied by the nation-state?

The identitarian temptation

A revolution without leadership and without a clearly defined
ideology could only result in a multitude of temptations. Polit-
ical Islamism, totally absent from the demonstrations that led
to the escape of Ben Ali, the Tunisian president deposed on 14
January 2011, showed itself, from the first weeks of the demo-
cratic transition, to be the best structured political and ideo-
logical force. It was therefore best suited to fill the ideological
vacuum of the "revolution of dignity".

    The Islamist version of "Let's sweep away the past"
presented itself as a radical break with Modernity, which was
seen as too Occidental, too Francophone, and too anti-religion.
The sweeping victory of the Ennahdha movement in the elec-
tions for the Constituent National Assembly that took place
on 23 October 2011, with 37% of the vote and 89 members

of parliament out of 217, was seen as a popular mandate to Islamize the institutions and society.

Uninhibited Islamism

The new Islamist regime wanted to establish its ideological dominance by a twin dialectic: Islamize the institutions beginning with the constitution and Islamize the public domain, impose wearing the Hijab in public services, praying in the streets, intimidating "seculars" and especially non *Hijab* wearers, spreading the good word with dedicated parades.

At the institutional level Ennahdha formed an alliance with accommodating secular parties while it looked to establish a holy alliance in the public space with the most radical Islamist movements of the land (Jihadis and Salafists). This triumphant and uninhibited Islamism lasted for a year. Its symbolic and physical violence eventually caused the elites and a large part of public opinion to turn against it.

The modernist response

2012 and 2013 saw the spectacle of a fierce struggle for ideological hegemony. The Islamists quickly realized that their reactionary project couldn't triumph. Even their political allies were fundamentally against the Islamization of the institutions with the introduction of Sharia law to the constitutional corpus. Political Islam revealed itself quite rapidly to be unable to win the battle of ideas. The violence of its radical branches alienated it from entire segments of conservative Tunisia. Ennahdha was forced to make successive concessions while the surge of Jihadi terrorism ended up ruining its relative popularity.

Political Islam lost the battle of ideas at the start of 2013, which was marked by the assassination of one of the charismatic leaders of the Tunisian left, Chokri Belaïd, on February 6. The anti-Islamist front was broad and massive. It went from the extreme left to the Socialist Destourian Party, including those who defined themselves as followers of Bourguiba (the founder of modern Tunisia), or even of the previous regime (the dictatorship of Ben Ali). This front also included the powerful trade union (General Tunisian Labour Union), entrepreneurs, feminists, civil society activists, and the majority of institutions and intermediate structures. This wide front could only win by dismantling the Islamists' power and their electoral legitimacy.

Bourguiba's posthumous victory

Such a base however could never establish its ideological hegemony without the establishment of a common political and intellectual platform that was mobilizing and popular. An image of a modern, progressive and tolerant Tunisia was therefore invoked to counter Islamist obscurantism, one of social advancement, women's liberation, openness to the world, and moderate social values. In a word, Bourguiba's Tunisia, the quasi-ontological foe of political Islam, but a Bourguibism shorn of its authoritarian excesses and its personality cult. A sort of democratic Bourguibism that positively acknowledges the revolution, a doctrine that all democratic and leftist forces could identify with.

The movement also had to find a charismatic leader who could incarnate this ideological reconfiguration. He should be able to appeal to the Bourguibist heritage without being one of Ben Ali's men.

Such a providential figure was indeed found. Béji Caïd Essebsi, an old-timer, was called up onto stage in March 2011

to lead the transitional government leading to the Constituent Assembly elections in October 2011. An apologist for the 21st century, Béji Caïd Essebsi founded a party in 2012 called Nida Tounes (The appeal of Tunisia), which contained four trends of the ideological and political reconfiguration: Destourians, democrats, trade unionists and independents. This man and this party won the presidential and legislative elections that took place in the fall of 2014. Still, was the Islamists era really over?

From ideological bipolarity to a flabby consensus

The victory of the modernist camp, even if it was clear, was not decisive. We tend to attribute that to the proportional nature of the voting system at the regional level, with the addition of rule by the largest remaining factions, or to the nature of the political system established by the 2014 constitution, which forbade the concentration of executive power in the hands of a president elected by popular suffrage. Actually, the victory of the modernist camp was relative: 37% versus 27%, and 86 versus 69 members of parliament in the legislative elections. In the presidential election, Béji Caïd Essebsi won in the second round with 56% of the votes versus 44% for the outgoing interim president Moncef Marzouki, the Islamists' unofficial candidate backed by radical revolutionary movements. The country was divided and the political and ideological defeat was only relative.

Being the political veteran he was, the newly elected president reckoned that a majority not including the Islamists, even symbolically, wouldn't stand a chance.

This forced cohabitation between the two seemingly irreconcilable enemies only two years before, turned into a flabby consensus, which was principally justified by the need to share power and its benefits, whether symbolic or material.

The great struggle for equality and individual freedoms

The fundamental divide in values was without doubt the issue of equality of the sexes and individual freedoms. This struggle had never been so intense or so frontal, either in Tunisia or in the Arab world. Authoritarianism, even with modernist overtones, would never permit a free and substantive debate on big societal issues.

The collapse of authoritarianism finally enabled this salutary debate. In the beginning, the Islamists thought they had already won the game without needing to fight. Wasn't Occidentalized modernism the avatar of the fallen authoritarianism? They reiterated the dialectic of formal freedoms /real freedoms with the claim that most of the former were blasphemous, and therefore incompatible with our Arab-Muslim identity.

Various Islamist groups frequently used violence in the first two years of the revolution to impose a new moral order on society.

A minority but efficient struggle

At that time there were few defenders of individual freedoms. Only some intellectuals, activists, feminists, and human rights advocates were dedicated to the cause. For the majority of modernist forces, this particular struggle was not the priority. They thought that the weaknesses of Islamism were elsewhere, and insisted that this struggle could risk alienating them from the majority of the intellectually conservative population. However, two issues became central in the public debate and then written in the stone of the constitution: equality of the sexes and freedom of conscience.

The Islamists tried to resist, but on those particular issues they rapidly found themselves isolated. After having conceded on Sharia, they ended up accepting, with political calculation, freedom of conscience (Article 6 of the Constitution) and

equality between men and women (Article 21). As long as the formulations were vague and general, the Islamists conceded. However, once the texts were fleshed out in detail (inheritance equality, the right to control over one's body, depenalization of homosexuality), the Islamists became fervent and combative again, all the more so since their main opponents avoided being dragged into these areas of the political ring.

Inheritance equality and the return of the identitarian struggle

The consensus government led by Nida and Ennahdha was unable to repair the country economically. To be fair, three big terrorist attacks in 2015 destroyed tourism, a vital sector in the economy. Politically, the president's party quickly cracked and shattered into pieces due to the excessive ambitions of Béji Caïd Essebsi's son, who dreamed of democratically "inheriting" power.

At the instigation of Caïd Essebsi, parliament withdrew its confidence in July 2016 from Prime Minister Habib Essid, though he was reinstated again by Caïd Essebsi a year and a half ago.

In the twilight of this career, the president wanted to achieve a double victory: propose a young forty-year-old, Youssef Chahed, as successor to the dismissed Habib Essid to head the government, and announce a great reform implementing equality of the sexes and individual freedoms in law. This would be in the form of a code of individual freedoms.

The idea was not acted upon immediately however. In the meantime, the young Prime Minister became a dissident in his own party and joined forces with the Islamist movement to keep his job and prepare a plan to win the presidency in the elections of 2019.

On 13 August 2017, the old fox threw a stone into the pond: in accordance with Article 21 of the Constitution he decided to introduce inheritance equality and amend all discriminatory

laws or those that were detrimental to individual freedoms. To achieve this, the president appointed a commission (Commission for Individual Freedoms and Equality, COLIBE), led by a feminist activist, *Maître* Bochra Bel Haj Hmida. He asked her to present a report in six months. The commission worked tirelessly to track down any form of discrimination and violation of individual freedoms in our legal arsenal. The final tome was presented to the head of state on 8 June 2018. The massive report contained dozens of propositions, but only the one concerning inheritance equality grabbed the attention of the president and public opinion alike.

The return of identitarian hate

Once the content of the report was disclosed to the public, or even earlier, a smear campaign began against the commission and its president. The president of the republic however was relatively unscathed.

We witnessed an unprecedented wave of hate. *Maître* Bochra Bel Haj Hmida was called all sorts of names. Islamists, politicians and preachers alike, led the dance and denounced with vigour this "offence" to the Law of God. COLIBE had few supporters. Certainly, some political parties, associations, artists and intellectuals defended the commission, but public opinion turned its back on COLIBE and the inheritance equality bill languishes still in the drawers of parliament.

The surge of populism and the new threats on freedoms

The year 2018 certainly represents an important turning point in the emotional state of public opinion. Rejection of the 'system' was more than evident. What the system actually meant differed

depending on one's political persuasion. The only point of agreement was the rejection of the flabby consensus that brought no benefit to the country. For some, the system was precisely this hiatus following a disastrous revolution, and one we should definitely put an end to. For others, it was the dictatorship of the parties in power and the opposition alike. In reality, people were sick of the general mismanagement and incompetence of the political class, besides the rampant corruption infecting the state's machinery.

The presidential and legislative elections that took place in the fall of 2019 were marked by a clear rise of the populists, nearly all of them conservative or even retrograde. The Islamist movement, despite its clear decline (less than 20% of the vote and nearly one million lost votes between 2011 and 2019), managed to remain one of the biggest political parties in parliament.

This general surge in populism might still put an end to the democratic transition. The atmosphere is ripe this July of 2021 for all kinds of authoritarian abuses, even though this particular chapter of History is not yet written and Democracy has not lost all of its support.

After a decade of Islamist dominance (more or less), president Kais Saied (elected in 2019) achieved what the French would call a *coup d'éclat*. Could this feat put a definitive end to this dominance by freezing all parliament activity and dismissing the Prime Minister under a broad and arbitrary interpretation of Article 80 of the Constitution regarding the risk of an "imminent danger"? Democracy and human rights certainly do not come out stronger from this power grab.

Our democratic transition was unable to flower into a true democracy characterized by the rule of law. The future is uncertain but the die has still not been cast.

Acculturation of Rights and Freedoms in the Post-Revolutionary Tunisia

Omar Fassatoui

Introduction

Often seen as a western concept, human rights, as defined by international standards are frequently seen as incompatible with Muslim societies. The argument of their extraneity is advanced by human rights critics in several Muslim world countries. It is clear that many of the reservations made on international human rights conventions come from the fifty-seven states belonging to the organization of the Islamic conference which invoke cultural reasons – often linked to religion – for not accepting international texts in their entirety. We can cite here the example of the international convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW), signed by several Muslim countries who have all entered reservations on one or more articles for a possible incompatibility with Sharia which in most of these countries represents the primary source of law.

Tunisia – although a member of the aforementioned organization – is an exception in this respect due to its particular relationship to religion. Since its independence, the country has indeed had its own vision of the relationship between religion and the state implemented by the first president Habib Bourguiba. This vision consisted of a series of policies (on education, health, work) and legislative measures that shaped the country and possibly

contributed to the democratic transition it has been going through since 2011. It is useful to recall here that the code of personal statute (CSP) adopted by Tunisia in 1957, even before its first constitution, made it possible to establish the bases of equality between men and women by breaking away from Muslim religious law. This code was the first brick in the edifice of Bourguiba's reforms including the abolition of religious jurisdictions and their replacement by a single civil jurisdiction, the prohibition of polygamy, the establishment of judicial divorce, among others. Despite the reforms, the regime maintained a constitutional ambiguity as to the existence or not of a state religion in Tunisia. Bourguiba's evolution did not, however, go beyond certain limits which were to be the subject of several demands by society decades later during Tunisia's democratic transition post-2011. This demand was particularly visible during the process of drafting the new constitution (2011-2014). Marked by the return of the parties of political Islam to the national scene – formerly reserved for the single party – the constituent process has been marked by several negotiations between modernists and conservatives on the understanding of how to transpose human rights into the constitution. The most telling example of these negotiations remains the proposal of the Islamist party Ennahdha to introduce the notion of "complementarity" instead of equality for Tunisian women citizens.

The negotiations resulted in a consensual constitution giving Tunisian citizens certain human rights which they enjoy today and which are an exception in the MENA region and in the Muslim world. An examination of the Tunisian constitution reveals certain acculturations in the recognition of some rights and freedoms suggesting that they could not be experienced in Tunisia as elsewhere in the world. These acculturations would be the result of a work of reconciliation between all the forces which participated in the constituent process. This paper aims to demonstrate this through several examples while trying to show the possible consequences on rights and freedoms in Tunisia.

Freedom of consciousness and religion

Freedom of religion and conscience is guaranteed by the Tunisian constitution in Article 6 which states that: *"The State protects religion, guarantees freedom of belief, conscience and the exercise of worship. It ensures the neutrality of mosques and places of worship against partisan exploitation. The state is committed to spreading the values of moderation and tolerance and to protecting the sacred and preventing it from being undermined. It also pledges to prohibit and prevent accusations of apostasy, as well as incitement to hatred and violence, and to curb them"*.

This constitutional guarantee confirms Tunisia's international commitments in this area, in particular Article 18 of the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, ratified in 1969 and responding to the demands of Tunisian civil society which called on the constitution to recognize the religious diversity of Tunisia. Several religious groups have indeed had more visibility in a context of democratic openness.

Analysis of this constitutional guarantee raises several reservations as to the real enjoyment by Tunisian citizens of freedom of conscience. The first observation is at the level of the wording of the article, where it is a question of protecting "*religion*" and the "*sacred*" and not freedom of religion and conscience. These are two unclear concepts. Their vagueness is likely to have several readings especially when one puts Article 6 in relation to the other articles of the constitution connected with religion. Assuming that the constitution is a whole that can only be read in its entirety, the guarantee of religious freedom in Tunisia might be limited by other provisions:

_ The preamble speaks of Tunisia's *"Arab and Islamic identity"* as well as its *"cultural and civilizational affiliation to the Arab and Islamic Ummah"*;
_ Article 1 discusses the existence or not of a state religion

in Tunisia in vague terms (The Article itself was a subject of controversy under the old constitution of 1959 from which it is copied);

_ Article 39 on education states that "*the State shall also ensure that the younger generations are rooted in their Arab and Islamic identity*";

_ Article 74 reserves the candidacy for the presidency to Muslim candidates only.

The preamble and the other articles mentioned above confirm – despite the guarantee of religious freedom – the supremacy of the Muslim religion. In addition to the constitution which takes up this idea in Article 49, several Tunisian codes and laws confirm this construction, such as the code of personal status or the code of obligations and contracts which apply rules from Muslim law to all citizens in matters of personal (inheritance, marital duties, parental rights, divorce) and contractual rights (certain contracts are prohibited for Muslims). This supremacy is also found in Tunisian jurisprudence which has repeatedly invoked "Muslim public order" to justify certain practices such as limitations on religious freedom, in particular for Tunisian Muslims who are converts to Christianity, as well as freedoms such as artistic freedom, associative freedom or freedom of expression as we shall see later.

The question of religious freedom in Tunisia also makes it clear that it is understood by the state as being limited to the three monotheisms historically present in the country – Islam, Christianity and Judaism – and governed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs which was set up at independence. Although a positive sign for religious freedom can be seen with Atheism, Tunisia was the only country in the region where an NGO working on the rights of non-religious persons was officially registered under the name of the association of Tunisian free thinkers *(association des libres penseurs tunisiens)*. The Bahai

of Tunisia remain an example of an unofficially recognized religious group whose most significant demand is for a cemetery unaffiliated with other religions, a demand that remains unanswered to this day.

Freedom of expression

Guaranteed by Article 31 of the constitution, freedom of expression is one of the most notable achievements of Tunisian citizens after 2011. Freedom of expression was non-existent at the time of the Ben Ali regime and the will of constitutional assembly leaned towards a broad guarantee expressed in the plural, including freedom of thought, expression, information and publishing. This guarantee also suffers from certain limitations which reveal that this freedom is understood differently in Tunisia than in other countries. It should be said that the first of these concerns the limits imposed on religious freedom. An indicator is the number of cases that have been the subject of debate in Tunisian public opinion and of judicial treatment for some since 2011, beginning with the attack on an artists' exhibition by a group of Salafists in 2012. The most recent example was the famous Corona Surah affair in 2020, where the blogger author of the parody was sentenced to six months in prison. We can also see violations of this freedom for political or security reasons. The latter have been the subject of several criticisms, including a full report by Amnesty International in 2020 criticizing all limitations and in particular the infra-constitutional legal framework which dates from the old regime and which still allows the authorities to take action against those who exercise this freedom to criticize the government or ruling regime.

Most Tunisian laws governing freedom of expression have not been harmonized with Tunisia's 2014 constitution or international commitments and continue to form the basis of

lawsuits against bloggers and other activists. The use of the penal code, which dates from the colonial era, also constitutes a danger for freedom of expression, especially for any criticism of state agents. The title of Chapter 4 of the penal code contains the qualification *"attacks against public authorities"*, allowing the Tunisian justice system to condemn several people who have exercised their rights, as would be normal in other countries where this freedom is protected.

We should also be concerned about the fact that certain laws adopted under the new constitution provide for serious penalties including death, for terrorism and money laundering, such as Law no. 2015-26 of August 7, 2015.

Tunisian civil society has always been concerned about the limits imposed by the authorities and continues to draw the attention of public opinion to the impact of these restrictions on Tunisia's democratic transition. It was pointed out to the human rights committee during the periodic review of Tunisia in 2020. In its concluding observations on Tunisia, the UN committee felt that the country should:

"a) Speed up the process of revising the Penal Code, the Code of Military Justice and the Telecommunications Code to bring them into conformity with Articles 18 and 19 of the Covenant;

b) Refrain from intimidating, harassing, arresting, detaining and prosecuting for vaguely defined offences journalists and human rights defenders exercising their right to freedom of expression;

c) Ensure that all violations committed against human rights defenders are investigated fully and impartially as soon as possible, that those responsible are brought to justice and sentenced commensurate with the gravity of their acts, and that the victims obtain redress".

Freedom of association

Covered by Article 35 of the 2014 constitution, freedom of association provides another good example of the restrictions imposed in Tunisia in the name of public order or morality and of the Tunisian authorities' particular vision of rights and liberties.

Though a large number of associations were allowed to organize, in particular thanks to the promulgation of Decree-Law No. 2011-88 of September 24, 2011, several cases of limited associative freedom have since been reported. These limitations are noteworthy because they only affect certain groups, especially among Tunisian citizens. Special mention should be made of the associations defending the rights of religious minorities, LGBT people and indigenous people.

_ Religious minorities: the most telling example is that of the Bahai Association of Tunisia, which was never authorized. The state service responsible for registering associations has repeatedly called for the removal of the word Bahai from the official name, citing a ban on associations on religious grounds. However, several associations with the word Islam and Islamic in their official name have been authorized by the same service. Although the administrative court ruled in favour of the Bahai Association, the government appealed and the case is still ongoing.

_ LGBT: the appeal of the Shams association was an interesting case since the government service – having authorized the association – decided to withdraw its permit citing a misunderstanding of the expression "sexual minorities" which the association had used in its statute during registration. No associations defending the rights of LGBT people in Tunisia have explicit mention of the acronym in their official name.

_ Indigenous people: Amazigh associations have also encountered the same difficulties faced by other groups. Words in the Amazigh language are always rejected in the official

names of associations. Although the state does now allow the use of Amazigh names for persons, after being banned for decades following independence (only Arabic names were permitted at the civil registry until 2020), the use of Amazigh names in the official titles of NGOs is refused.

For faith-based organisations like the Bahai organisation, the legal argument put forward by the service is that of Article 4 of Decree-Law No. 2011-88 of September 24, 2011, which states that: "*the association is prohibited... from relying in its statutes, press releases, programs or activities on incitement to violence, hatred, intolerance and discrimination based on religion, sex or region*". However use of the Amazigh language is not legally restricted as the same law accepts the use of foreign languages in addition to Arabic. The government seems to reject only Amazigh words and the alphabet, raising doubts about possible limitations on the civil, political and cultural rights of Amazighs.

These restrictions targeting Amazighs in Tunisia have been the subject of several concerns and recommendations addressed to the Tunisian state by the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). The human rights body said it was "*...concerned about the damaging delays in the registration of some associations and certain obstacles to the formation of organizations raising sensitive political questions.*"

Conclusion

Although subject to restrictions, the guarantee of human rights and freedoms in Tunisia remains an exception in the region. This is sometimes seen as the only success story to follow the Arab Spring uprisings that triggered a democratic transition. Such restrictions on individual freedoms can be viewed as an acculturation of rights in a particular country with respect

to international standards. The restrictions discussed in this paper allow us to see how a process of democratic transition is constructed, in particular by analyzing the disputed rights and freedoms themselves. This process is still underway in Tunisia a decade after the 2011 uprising.

The justiciability of rights and freedoms also shows us how a culture of human rights is constructed in a given context beyond the simple textual guarantee, court decisions allowing rights to be ratified and given practical meaning. Tunisian courts – especially regional – continue to protect the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the constitution. Recourse to the justice system might also be more important with the establishment of a constitutional court in Tunisia and possibly serve as a regional example of change in neighbouring countries. It is also interesting to see how the state and civil society in Tunisia seem to have different visions of rights and freedoms and how the law is trying to cope with expectations. The role of the constitutional court in clarifying the definitions of the rights and freedoms granted by the 2014 constitution will be a huge task.

The Alternative Media in Tunisia: Nawaat, Inkyfada & Al Qatiba

Abdel Aziz Hali

Between buzz and media serving political or even commercial agendas, investigative journalism is resisting through some rare alternative media: mainly newspapers or electronic magazines run by associations.

I. Nawaat: the doyen of cyber-dissidence in Tunisia and the first alternative media in the Maghreb

1.Early Years

This is the case of Nawaat: an independent collective platform founded in April 5, 2004 by Tunisian activists (Sami Ben Gharbia, Sufian Guerfali and Riadh Guerfali, with Malek Khadhraoui joining the organization in 2006[1,2]) as a forum for Tunisian citizens and diaspora to be able to express themselves free of censorship[4] from the government of Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali[5] and blocked in Tunisia by the Ben Ali regime until 13 January 2011.

The goal of Nawaat's founders was to provide a public platform for Tunisian dissident voices and debate.[3] Since its launch, the site has posted thousands of print and visual media items focused on human rights, freedom of the press, politics, and culture in Tunisia, primarily through the French and Arabic languages, but also frequently with English language contributions.

The Ben Ali government established the Tunisian Internet Agency (ATI) in 1996 to monitor all Internet communications within the borders of Tunisia[6]. Owing to Nawaat's frequent challenges to the Tunisian government's restrictions on Internet communications, it became the target of ATI censors shortly after its inception[2].

The OpenNet Initiative survey of 2006-2007 indicated that the Tunisian government was blocking Nawaat and several other dissident sites[7]. ATI would block users' attempts to access Nawaat with Smartfilter software manufactured by the US company Secure Computing, displaying a standard 404 "File Not Found" error message on their web browsers[2].

Some of Nawaat's earliest contributions focused on election fraud and other forms of disenfranchisement during the re-election of Ben Ali in 2004, which the incumbent won with 94.49% of the popular vote[8].

In addition, Nawaat aggregated a variety of commentaries exploring the role of Islam in government and contemporary relations between Arab nations and the Western world. Nawaat also featured contributions from human rights advocates from the Arab world as well as Iran and other nations with large Muslim populations.

The site's staff often wrote opinion pieces castigating Arab governments with harsh censorship laws or promoting anti-censorship initiatives. The editors also called regularly for the release of imprisoned free-speech advocates including Alaa Abd El-Fattah and Abdel Monem Mahmoud.

2. The Tunisian uprising (Sidi Bouzid Riots) and TuniLeaks (collaboration with Wikileaks & Julian Assange)

Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian street vendor, set himself on fire on December 17, 2010, resulting in his eventual death on January 4, 2011. This event catalyzed a series of street protests starting in the town of Sidi Bouzid that developed into the Tuni-

sian Revolution. Nawaat provided commentary which contextualized the situation and posted numerous articles about the unfolding events, which many Tunisians were able to access via mirror sites and other conduits[9, 10].

Nawaat covered the spread of protests until Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali fled the country with his family, posting news stories from international news sources, Arab journalists, and Tunisians inside the country and abroad. The site kept the focus on the underlying causes of the revolution as well, including restrictions on personal freedoms, imprisonment of opposition members, and economic stagnation.

TuniLeaks was launched on November 28 on Nawaat.org, one hour after the whistleblowing site Wikileaks released the cables on Tunisia. The first release contained 17 cables issued from the US Embassy in Tunisia, and the majority of them revealed exchanges between the embassy and the US State Department. Those revelations dealt mainly with the neglect of human rights in Tunisia and the restrictions on freedom of expression. The Tunisian government rapidly blocked access to TuniLeaks, first blocking

https://web.archive.org/web/20150221084506/https://tunileaks.appspot.com/ (without the https), then on the next day blocking Google App Engine's IP Address (209.85.229.141) in order to block TuniLeaks under https as well. Additionally, the electronic version of Al Akhbar, a Lebanese newspaper, was also censored in Tunisia for containing some cables released by TuniLeaks[11].

3. The Tunisian Revolution & post-revolution activities

One of Nawaat's innovative contributions during the revolution was identifying and translating videos and personal accounts of potential media interest that were published on Facebook and other social networking sites. By the time of Ben Ali's ouster, Facebook was one of the few sites not blocked by

the government where protesters could post accounts of the revolution. The Tunisian dialect in the sites' videos made them unintelligible to many native speakers of Arabic, and Nawaat staff's translation efforts resulted in many videos of protests and Tunisian security service crackdowns being broadcast on Al-Jazeera and other international news outlets. Nawaat and its affiliates utilized the Posterous blogging platform to distribute material to the international press. Al-Jazeera had been banned from the country by the Ben Ali government and the videos provided by Nawaat were one of the most reliable sources of valuable video footage during the revolution.[10] Nawaat also utilized its extensive network of Internet activists to assist with mobilization of protesters through social media. Sami Ben Gharbia noted that one of the goals of Nawaat was to bridge the gap between collective action through social media and more traditional protest movement tactics.

On the day of Ben Ali's flight from Tunisia, most sites previously blocked by ATI were available to Tunisian Internet users. ATI, still a functioning agency after the revolution, ceased censorship of opposition sites but in the following months began blocking sites deemed to be pornographic or inciting violence. At the direction of a military tribunal, five Facebook sites criticizing the army were blocked by ATI in May 2011.[6] Nawaat has continued to monitor the activities of ATI, which is still staffed by most of the same employees from the Ben Ali era. In addition, Nawaat has focused efforts on training activists in Internet technology, assisting NGOs with similar missions, monitoring elections, and continuing to publish content on human rights and social issues.[12] Nawaat staff created the first Tunisian Hackerspace, a space where collaborative Internet technology projects can be discussed among members of the Arab Internet activist community along with worldwide partners. Hackerspace initiatives have included promotion of Arabic language Wikimedia proliferation.[13]

4. From collective blog to associative media

Nawaat professionalized its activity in the post-revolutionary decade and built up a team of specialized journalists, before launching, in 2020, its quarterly print magazine and Innawaation, its incubator for creative media projects. The site receives an average of 87,244 page views per day.[16]

On March 27, 2014, Nawaat.org[14] launched an anonymous whistleblowing initiative in order to support transparency and spot corruption. The initiative is based on the GlobaLeaks platform and the Tor technology and is accessible in Arabic and French. In collaboration with GlobaLeaks, the Nawaat team created a special page that deploys a number of open source applications and techniques which protect those leaking confidential documents and files. This software even protects whistleblowers from the Nawaat team itself, which thanks to these techniques are not able to identify those who leak information through their email addresses, IP addresses, names or their geographic locations. To provide them with further protection, the Nawaat team always, and before the publication of any leaked confidential document, deletes all metadata which might increase the possibility of identifying the electronic source of documents in its different formats: audio, video clips, photos or texts.[15]

Today, Nawaat focuses on many topics from angles rarely covered by the mainstream media, including online. These topics include democracy, transparency, good governance, justice, freedoms and fundamental rights. Nawaat produces news, in-depth analysis and investigations in a variety of formats.

With nearly a thousand authors and a team of professional journalists and bloggers, the platform draws its content from direct contact on the ground and through contributions from activists, whistleblowers and citizens involved in public affairs, especially when the latter suffer dysfunctions. Nawaat is very attentive to the protection of privacy, the defense of freedom

of expression, OpenData and the right of access to information
and public documents.

"Renowned for its investigative and libertarian approach,
our media is distinguished by its boldness, independence,
innovation and differential treatment of news. Nawaat's edito-
rial line is guided by a set of values: social justice, environ-
mental rights, the right of access to culture, the fight against
corruption, and more generally, human rights and individual
freedoms.", says Sami Ben Gharbia.

5. Business model and awards

While 80% of the media is financed by donors, mainly NGOs
(The European Endowment for Democracy (EED), Interna-
tional Media Support (IMS), Open Society Foundation (OSF),
The National Endowment for Democracy (NED), Rosa Luxem-
burg Stiftung (RLS), Google. News Initiative (GNI), Heinrich-
Böll-Stiftung (HBS), etc.), the remaining 20% is self-funded
(subscriptions to the quarterly magazine, productions within
the framework of advocacy or awareness-raising campaigns
through the *Etterkina* – the Corner – section run by the young
YouTuber Louay Cherni).
The platform received numerous awards:
_ The Reporters Without Borders Netizen Prize[17] (This annual
award is sponsored by Google.)
_ The Electronic Frontier Foundation 2011 Pioneer Award[19]
_ The Digital Power Index 2012[20]
_ The best interactive website prize for 2015 from the National
Union of Tunisian Journalists (SNJT)
_ The Arab eContent Award in the e-Inclusion & Participation
category (Declined by Nawaat in protest against Bahrain's Internet
filtering practices, arrest of bloggers and human rights activists, and
blocking of websites and blogs that criticize the Bahraini govern-
ment and ruling family[21])

II. Inkyfada: investigation, contextualization and data visualization

1. Who are they?

Inkyfada is an independent, nonprofit media group founded
in 2014 by a team of journalists (former Nawaat contributors
and journalists, including editor-in-chief Malek Khadhraoui),
developers, and graphic designers with the goal of boosting
public interest through innovative journalistic content.[22]

With a particular focus on investigation, contextualization,
and data visualization, Inkyfada produces content that helps
a diverse readership understand and engage in the politics
that impacts their lives. Constructed with ongoing collabora-
tion between journalists, developers, and graphic designers,
Inkyfada's publications offer readers accessible and enriching
content.[22]

Inkyfada fully assumes its role as a counter-power against
all injustices that flow from the corruption and impunity of the
powers that be. In a media landscape inundated with incom-
plete and biased narratives, Inkyfada strives to set the standard
for high-quality and justice-oriented reporting. An advocate
of inclusive storytelling, Inkyfada was the first media group in
Tunisia to write exclusively with gender-sensitive language on
its French-language platform.[22]

Whether through processing thousands of data points or
recounting an individual story, revealing a scandal or breaking
down a complex subject, Inkyfada uses all of the media and
technology tools at its disposal to share information in a forward-
thinking, understandable, and empowering way.[22]

"Inkyfada publishes in both French and Arabic, and will
soon launch English articles. But the mainstay of the audience
is Francophone", says Khadhraoui.

2. Their work

Departing from traditional methods, Inkyfada's process for creating journalistic content is founded on ongoing collaboration across the editorial, research and development, and design teams.[22]

Committed to unearthing information concealed from the general public, the Inkyfada team places new findings against the backdrops that matter and presents them in easy-to-consume and often interactive visual or audio forms.[22]

Inkyfada's audience can choose from long-form exposés, explanatory articles, illustrated narratives, interactive maps, audio and video documentaries, photo essays, podcasts, and more.[22]

According to Google Analytics, Inkyfada's readers are mostly people between the age of 25 and 45, with a higher level of education and concentrated in Tunisia's three biggest cities: Tunis, Sousse, and Sfax. Around 65% to 70% of readers are based in Tunisia and 15% to 20% are based in France.[23]

With the support of the InkyLab research and development team, Inkyfada continues to design new avenues for a diverse readership to engage with contextualized, reliable, and impactful information.[22]

3. Panama Papers, Paradise Papers & SwissLeaks: partnership with the ICIJ

Inkyfada's financial independence proved particularly important when it joined the international Panama Papers investigation into offshore financing, in collaboration with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), recalls Monia Ben Hamadi, managing editor of Inkyfada. Their investigation into the Tunisians implicated in the affair contrasted with other reporting in the country. "For example, the media published information on [Tunisian politician] Mohsen Marzouk and other political figures, but they did not

do the same for the businessmen implicated in this investigation since they finance the media," says Monia Ben Hamadi.[23]

Inkyfada's journalists also worked on the files concerning Tunisians involved in the Paradise Papers & SwissLeaks scandals.

Inkyfada has broken major stories in the years since. Its 2016 investigation into tax evasion among the liberal professions, such as medicine and law, influenced a parliamentary debate on a new finance law. In 2018, as part of the Implant Files – a global investigation into medical devices coordinated by the ICIJ – Inkyfada highlighted the faulty breast implant operations being performed on medical tourists to Tunisia, and the lack of transparency about the risks of the procedure.[23]

4. Podcasts

The podcasts are in the Tunisian spoken dialect of Arabic, which they hope will be more accessible to both those who read French and Arabic, bringing their Tunisian audience together. They plan to translate some Arabic-only articles into the Tunisian dialect for their podcast series Inkystories, as part of a project to transform existing articles into audio format. "This was a great way to solve the language question. We have different layers of the public with the same product," said Khadhraoui. Their first podcast episode since the launch of Inkystories focused on #EnaZeda – which means #MeToo in the Tunisian dialect – documenting Tunisians' personal stories of sexual harassment. The country has been engaged in a national debate about sexual harassment since a politician was pictured apparently masturbating outside a school in October 2019 (he denied the allegations). This is not the team's first foray into audio: in 2017, they produced an audio documentary about a sit-in by unemployed youth near a gas pipeline and oil fields in the middle of the desert.[23]

This year, on the ninth anniversary of the revolution, Inkyfada produced a series on the events of January 14, 2011 from

the perspective of the various people affected. As part of its COVID-19 coverage, Inkyfada's latest podcast explores the strange collective experience of being alone by zooming in on one person's quarantine, after he attended a party in which one guest was later confirmed as the fourth coronavirus case in the country.[23]

5. Business model
Inkyfada is exclusively funded by its parent organization, Al Khatt. Al Khatt is a nonprofit organization that generates more than half of its revenue through professional activities such as workshops, educational programs for media groups, website and software development, etc.[22]

Al Khatt does not pursue ads-based funding, nor does it receive funding from sources that seek to influence its editorial independence. Al Khatt aims to support the human capital and technology tools required for high quality, independent production through a sustainable and increasingly economically self-sufficient growth model.[22]

The organization tries to maintain its financial independence by reducing its reliance on donors and diversifying sources of income. In 2019, Inkyfada's parent organization Al Khatt earned an impressive 65% of its annual budget of 1.5 million Tunisian dinars (around $524,000) from services sold to other media and NGOs, such as website development, graphic design, and journalism training. The remaining 35% was core funding from donors such as the Open Society Foundations and International Media Support. They do not feature advertising or offer commercial sponsorship.[23]

Incidentally, Inkyfada is using Inku.be: a publishing platform that enables journalists to independently integrate multimedia content onto their online platforms. The Inku.be tool was co-designed by Inkyfada's editorial staff and R & D department (InkyLab) and is built to accommodate diverse – and ever-evolving – types of journalistic content. Inku.be has become an integral component of Inkyfada's business model and has been adopted by online editors around the world. InkyLab builds community tools that facilitate the spread of innovative journalistic content.[22]

III. Al-Qatiba: A promising platform

1. Who are they?
Al-Qatiba is a digital platform run by the Taklam Association for Freedom of Expression and Creativity, which was granted a license to operate by the Presidency of the Tunisian Government in the summer of 2019.

Officially, the site has been in operation since late September 2020. It is supervised by an independent editorial board of the association's board of directors.

"Our motto is 'serious and independent' journalism. We work on an approach based on quality journalism as a media concept and perception. We specialize more in investigative journalism, but we also work on explanatory journalism, data journalism, interactive journalism, and the production of short documentaries in particular. We address the audience in North Africa as a whole and not only in Tunisia. The goal is to exploit the margin of freedom available in Tunisia in order to reach neighboring countries where freedom of the press (Egypt – Libya – Algeria – Morocco) is under threat. We seek to renew and develop press contents according to modern technical and technological capabilities in order to reach the largest possible number of followers", states Mohamed Yousfi, executive editor of Al-Qatiba.

2. Their work and goals

The first version of the site was launched in Arabic, and in a second phase there will be a French and an English version in order to communicate with the audience on the other side of the Mediterranean and in the world as a whole.

"In less than a year since its establishment and launch, we have succeeded in attracting more than 3 million visitors, most of whom are from Tunisia in the first place and secondarily from North Africa and the rest of the world. We recently won second prize in the Samir Kassir competition in Beirut in the investigative journalism category with an investigation on the exploitation of minors and sex tourism in Morocco", says Yousfi.

The basic idea of Al-Qatiba is to create an integrated journalism that combines journalistic work with academic research (social, anthropological, economic, historical, legal, medical, etc.) and creative artistic disciplines such as cinema, electronic drawing, digital development, etc. That is why the team consists of professional journalists, young researchers and technologists who are creative in their fields.

"We consider ourselves a new expression of committed and purposeful associative journalism that does not have profit goals and that seeks to preserve the maximum margin of freedom and independence in the face of the traditional press subject to advertising, financial and political pressures and the owners of institutions, especially businessmen", adds Al-Qatiba's executive editor. "Our guiding light in this effort are the principles of human rights, combating corruption, tracking transnational organized crime, defending economic rights, social justice (water, health, education, etc.) and environmental rights, etc.".

3. Business model

Their funding sources are currently primarily derived from international organizations interested in this type of alternative journalism.

"We reject projects funded by foreign embassies and only deal with international organizations known for their integrity and credibility on a global scale. We also reject any funding that is arbitrarily directed towards specific issues or specific agendas. It is the editorial board that determines the topics and files that we work on in the context of independence and respect for professional ethics", says Yousfi. "Our goal in the future is to reduce this type of international funding by focusing on creating our own resources from audiovisual production such as documentaries and major video investigations, as well as training courses supervised by our own experts, including journalists and technicians, and preparing studies that concern the media and that are able to provide important resources for the institution in the future through partnerships with non-governmental organizations and associations, with which we intersect in goals and directions. There are many entities with which we intersect today in the Arab region and worldwide, including Mediapart in France, Orient XXI, etc. We have extensive partnerships with international and regional organizations concerned with investigative journalism. That is why we participate from time to time in many major international cross-border investigations. Our goal in the medium and long term is to be the leading platform in North Africa specialized in quality journalism", he concludes.

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Tunisian Theater from Dictatorship to Democracy
Moez Mrabet

Born as an act of resistance to the French occupier, Tunisian theatre has in fact remained, since its inception at the dawn of the twentieth century, closely linked to the political and social changes that Tunisia has experienced, placing the dialectic relationship of aesthetics and politics at the heart of its dynamic evolution.

The last three decades were marked, in this respect, by two significant events in the history of the country: the end of the Bourguiba era, father of the nation who made the theatre a locomotive of Tunisian culture, deposed by Ben Ali in 1987, to make way for an authoritarian regime that imposed itself for nearly 23 years; and then the Tunisian revolution known as the "Jasmine Revolution" which engaged Tunisia after 2011 in a process of democratic transition, as disturbing as confusing.

With this contribution, I will attempt to interrogate the influence of politics on the evolution of the Tunisian theatre, in terms of aesthetics, themes, practices and the legal framework, and highlight the ins and outs of this journey from resistance to protest to find, finally, the path of freedom.

For a better understanding of the dialectical relationship between the political and social context and the evolution of Tunisian theatre through recent decades, an idea of the origins and history of this specific theatrical experience in the Arab world might be helpful.

On May 26th 1909, *Théâtre Rossini* saw Tunisian actors for the very first time, as members of the Egyptian troupe *Al Jawk Al Masri* playing *La sincère fraternité* (Sincere Fraternity). This event, considered to mark the birth of Tunisian theatre, started a national theatre movement which would lay the foundations for a contemporary theatre rooted in its social and political milieu and times.

Paradoxically, even though it was a Western-style practice that was being adopted, the interest of Tunisians in theatre expressed their desire to use it as a tool to preserve and defend their own identity.

Although Egyptian and other eastern influences on the development of this theatre are well-established, the rich dramatic experiments carried out by the French and Italian communities throughout the 19th century remained unknown to Tunisian society. The founding in 1911 of *Al Adeb*, the first Tunisian theatre association, and a second association known as *Al Chahama Al Arabia* in 1912, confirmed this 'Eastern' influence and consolidated the project of modernising Tunisian society through the theatre.

The desire was to tie theatre to local culture to open a path towards modernising society. Moreover, the declared aim of the Tunisian avant-garde was to develop and anchor an opposition movement to colonial power, and this was expressed in the themes and aesthetic of this emerging theatre. Theatre at the time served as a lever for the nationalist elite which helped them prepare the terrain for the fight for independence.

In fact, the founding act of Tunisian theatre undeniably rests on a spirit of opposition which would prove to be both constructive and fertile, and which would come to be one of its characteristic traits. However, once independence was achieved in 1956, new challenges emerged and a different kind of theatre began to appear on the horizon.

Driven by a desire to turn the theatre into a stimulating force for post-independence development, the massive involve-

ment of the state in the support for this art form would prove to be a double-edged sword. Although it allowed significant development of what were still fragile and disoriented theatrical practices, it nevertheless opened the way for the sector to be used as an instrument by those in power.

In November 1975, looking for a way to escape this takeover by the state and to put an end to the downward spiral of 'official' theatre, a group of young artists, newly-graduated from European theatre training or just out of theatre school, founded the New Theatre.

A major act in the history of Tunisian theatre, the appearance of the first private troupe in Tunisia was, at root, the symptom of a crisis which was as much aesthetic as it was organisational.

The artistic success of the New Theatre encouraged other young people to follow its example. In the 1980-90s, a number of projects were launched that were equally original and creative. Mention should be made of the Triangular Theatre, an experiment initiated by Habib Chebil, Phou Theatre, founded by Moncef Sayem and Raja ben Ammar, Ezzedine Gannoun, Fethi Akkeri's Organic Theatre, and the founding of *El Teatro* in 1987, the first private theatre space in Tunisia, by Taoufik Jebali and Zeyneb Farhat.

As opposed to official theatre, which was crushed by the weight of administration and missing a clear and convincing artistic concept, private theatre appeared to be a serious alternative.

The phenomenon of private theatre increased in importance and for a while was considered a source of artistic and aesthetic innovation. But not all the problems were resolved. Other worries pushed their way onto stage and steered Tunisian theatre towards an uncertain future.

The need for structure and better organisation began to be felt in the 1980s. Several measures were taken to ensure the viability of Tunisian theatre and a greater visibility for the art form. The issue of training was, in this respect, one of the most

important concerns. The School of Arabic Theatre gave way to a Centre for Dramatic Art in the 1970s, which was finally transformed into the Higher Institute of Dramatic Art in 1982.

Tunisian theatre's avant-garde in the years 1970-80 benefited from supportive cultural policies and from a social and artistic climate favourable to change. Over the following thirty years, it made an effort to preserve its dominant position. The dynamic that characterized the experiences of this generation remained confined to a small circle of people. A genuine tradition – the gathering and passing on of knowledge – never really emerged. At the end of the 1980s, a gap opened up between that generation and the generation that studied at the Centre for Dramatic Art. This continued through the following generations, who were mainly trained at the Higher Institute of Dramatic Art.

Where the Bourguiba era, which ended at around the same time, had, despite everything, allowed a certain flourishing of theatrical practice in Tunisia, that of Ben Ali, who succeeded him in 1987, would be marked by a desire to marginalize it, and with it the entire cultural sector, and to use it to consolidate the bases of an authoritarian and police regime that would prevail during the following 23 years.

Soft and paternalistic under Bourguiba, under Ben Ali censorship became the means to repress, muzzle and banish any hint of opposition. Whether direct or indirect, it worked for years to plunge the sector into disorder and marginality, reinforced by the encouragement of clientelism and commercial practices. The theatre became complacent, caressing the dictatorship and the regime and conveying the image of a culture of pomp.

As for that part of the Tunisian civil society which continued to struggle against the tide of the regime, a certain fringe of the theatrical scene refused to back down in the face of numerous and recurring attempts at intimidation and resurgence by the system and continued to work to free itself from the yoke of the dictatorship. This theatre of protest invented new ways of circumventing censorship, both in terms of aesthetics and content, and affirmed a critical view of the social and political, and aspirations for freedom that no effort was spared to repress.

The legislative framework governing the theatrical sector was in this respect a tool of choice to closely control theatrical production, rewarding some and punishing others among the practitioners according to their degree of obedience. The year 1989 saw the appearance of a decree fixing the composition and the attributions of the commission granting subsidies to the production, and controlling its equipment and functioning, as well as the profits of the professional production and diffusion structures. A second decree dictated the conditions of granting and withdrawal of professional licenses for the practice of the dramatic arts, while a third decree laid down the conditions for obtaining and losing ministry of cultural affairs permission to set up new structures for the production and diffusion of the dramatic arts.

A fourth decree targeted the reorganization of the CNOT (National Commission for Theatrical Guidance), created at the time of Bourguiba, but now attending behind-closed-doors previews of new theatrical creations to be performed before the public, where works had to be presented in their final form in terms of text, staging and acting. Other decrees followed but the goal remained the same: to tighten the state's grip on the theatre and keep the whole sector under control.

In the public sector, the Tunisian National Theatre under the direction of Mohamed Driss from 1988 to 2011, though it refused to give way to the new generations, was distinguished by its originality and the richness of its repertoire. However, the importance of the creation of regional centres of dramatic art, which replaced the local troupes in the mid-1990s, cannot be underestimated. In spite of the absence of a statute regulating their activities and a glaring lack of means, these centres

succeeded in stimulating theatre production, encouraging talents throughout the country, and developing a loyal public.

Just as present and influential, the private sector also distinguished itself over the years of dictatorship by founding countless free groups with a proliferation of productions. Today there are no fewer than two hundred such creative structures. They cover the whole country and encompass young people's theatre, artistically-demanding works as well as commercial theatre.

As protest theatre was allowed to develop and strengthen, these years marked the ability of Tunisian theatre to regenerate and continue to this day to awaken consciousness and bolster the art of transgression. The police violence against a number of theatre women and men on the eve of January 14, 2011 (fall of the Ben Ali regime), as well as the confrontation of March 25, 2012 between those who came to celebrate International Theatre Day in Avenue Habib Bourguiba in the centre of Tunis and the hundreds of Salafists who attacked them under the complicit gaze of the police under the Islamist Ennahda party who had just swept to power, are just a couple of examples of the struggle that fringe theatre has tried to wage in the wake of the Tunisian revolution.

Viewed with alarm by a large part of the Tunisian theatre scene, boosted by the events that shook the political and social life of the country, and intoxicated by the sudden winds of freedom and democracy, the rise of Ennahda to power was widely perceived within artistic and cultural circles, and the theatre in particular, as a threat to this newly acquired freedom of expression. There were three main reasons for this apprehension.

First of all, historical. As can be seen from its recent foothold in Tunisian society – barely one hundred years old – the theatre is still perceived as a Western import, foreign to Arab-Muslim culture. The success of Tunisian theatre in establishing its own identity and imposing itself as an expression of the avant-garde at that time, seems to have given way to a more

mixed picture today where we perceive cracks and weaknesses and a risk of regression that was unsuspected until now.

The second reason is dogmatic. Today we are seeing an insidious and pernicious resurgence in Tunisian society of a bogus interpretation of religious texts which presents art and creativity as a perversion and an offence to God, the all-powerful and only creator. Many worry about this phenomenon, not without reason. We have already witnessed several threats as well as direct or indirect violence against the artists and spaces of the theatre and drama teachers in the national education system. In particular, we recall the physical assault in El Kef on Rjab Magri, a performer and teacher of theatre, by a group of Salafists; the threats and harassment suffered by Jalila Ben Yahia at Gabes high school, criticized by a group of parents for the simple fact that she taught drama; or the attempts by religious fanatics to evacuate The Circle, a theatre space developed by Abdel Ghani Ben Tara, and turn it into a place of worship.

The third reason is political. Nothing in the pronouncements of Ennahda's officials and supporters indicate a real desire to promote art or defend cultural creation. They are already well versed in opportunistic doublespeak and a new kind of falsely reassuring language. Still less do the actions of other Islamist movements inspire confidence. Whether declared allies of Ennahda or not, they are clearly hostile to any form of artistic, cultural or even intellectual expression. More than the other arts, the theatre, by its very nature, given the liveliness of its practice in Tunisia and the commitment of its practitioners to the fight for freedom and citizenship, appears in the eyes of the new regime as a minefield in which it will be necessary to tread carefully.

There are several signs of the new government's approach. The first is a suspicious interest in one of the great names of Tunisian theatre, Fadhel Jaïbi, which was manifested through an interview published in the first issue of the newspaper Al

Fajar when it reappeared after the revolution. Announced by a prominent box on the front page, the interview is disappointingly superficial. The journalist spoke for nearly two hours with F. Jaibi, but retained only a few general ideas, sacrificing – one might say, censoring – the essence of the words of the playwright known for his outspokenness, his sense of repartee and his critical opinions. Like the former regime, Ennahda obviously sought to use the name and reputation of Jaïbi to enhance its image and dress up its shop window locally and internationally.

One other significant example is the organization by the party's cultural service of performances of the "Last of the Beni Sarraj", a production by Hsan Mouadden. The show was presented in various major Tunisian cities under Ennahda's leadership, at a time when the party was seeking with all its strength to thwart a campaign recalling the terrorist acts committed by some of its members in the 1980s, a strategy recognized by Hamadi Jebali, Secretary General of the party, at a meeting held after the return of Rached Ghannouch from his London exile. As with Rap, which was very effective in giving the party a voice among the young, this use of theatre helped to confer a more progressive image, and served to put the dark areas of its past behind it. But unlike the Rap which succeeded in giving a boost to Ghannouchi's communication campaign, the theatrical performances passed practically unnoticed and only managed to provoke a feeling of indignation among many theatre performers who saw it as a cynical act of opportunism on the part of the organizers, promoting an apparent rapprochement while seeking to banish the culture of propaganda institutionalized under Ben Ali.

Another example that comes to mind is the tribute paid to Halima Daoued, a grand dame of the theatre, known for her commitment to the literary Arabic language. It took place at Ennahda party headquarters in the aftermath of the elections of October 23, 2014 and attracted the attention of many observers. Besides the artist that Ennahda sought to celebrate, it was clear that the election winners were hoping to consecrate such 'politically correct' stylistic and artistic choices.

As on many other sensitive issues, with the theatre Ennahda has adopted a thus far flawless strategy of "sparing the goat and the cabbage." The party wants to promote a sort of *Halal* theatre that defends the values it would like to advocate and the ideology it would like to see dominate. This "have your cake and eat it" approach wishes to exploit the theatre's progressive and avant-garde image to get people to swallow backward-looking and potentially retrograde ideas. It is strangely the same situation that prevailed in Medieval Europe, when the Catholic Church was the main instigator of theatrical art.

Focused at the start of the revolution on the question of freedoms (of conscience, thought, expression), Tunisian theatre's struggle is now centred on the laws and regulations governing the sector and more broadly on the status of the artist. An endeavour that has undergone numerous adjustments is still struggling to see the light of day due to the political instability that has marked the last decade of the country's history.

The changes and developments in Tunisian theatre have not kept pace with the development of infrastructure and laws which might respond to the new reality and new needs. On top of this, there is a lack of spaces for rehearsal and productions and technical shortcomings and problems in setting up the *Maisons de la culture*, where most theatre activities take place. The archaic nature of the current legislation does not help here either. Equally problematic are the difficulties that new generations come up against in getting their work on, and the absence of any real tradition in areas such as dramatic writing or stage design. But the hope persists that the current crisis in the theatre might hold the keys to its own salvation. Can Tunisian theatre, at a time of democracy, and in the face of threats to freedom of conscience, expression and creativity, once again prove itself to be revolutionary?

Appendix

Best Papers by Carthage 2021
Young Scholars

The 2011 Radical Imagination
Through the Panopticon of Hip-Hop:
The Promise of a Better Democracy in Tunisia
Amina Karoui

The question of imagination is laid bare in the Tunisian model, particularly in a culture where radical imagination pushing the political envelope can be embodied in hip hop culture and rap music. Visionary and critical, the hip hop scene emerges both as a space of musical nurture and unconditional disclosure of socio-political realities. This is where radical imagination seeks to dismantle, restructure, decipher and encode the national duress.

Rap The Kasbah: Between Hope and Reality

Tunisian hip hop and rap musicians have been able to capture it all with sensitivity and sharpness towards the status quo. With each social or political episode, the genre roots itself deeper in youth culture. The way music speaks to a society is a political act and an exercise of imaginative enterprise to visualize and perform as radically as possible. In the musical instances below, the socio-political themes indicted are as follows: rallying against the regime and state institutions (e.g. the police, the parliament), successive electoral success of Islamit Party Ennahdha, the multiple interests of political parties, the gradual deterioration of economy and the marginalization of civil society, particularly in popular neighborhoods; those who actually caused and realized the revolution.

Re-imagining reality: radicalism and defiance

In recasting the troubles of Tunisian society, hip hop succeeded in imagining a different set of art within. To demonstrate this wavering between international influences and local music and culture, a small number of musicians is considered: performers from Erkez Hip Hop and Bab el Beat Projects. The choice of the projects more than solo artists rests exactly in the values of collectivism and sharing that the collaborations among the musicians bring about.

Erkez Hip Hop

Erkez Hip Hop, a production by Tunisian artists' collective DEBO, gathered artists from different styles. "Erkez" is to set a firm foot, here, the culture. The musical blend resonates perfectly in local terms speaking to a young audience who listen to each one of the genres: rap as a means of resistance, mezwed as a traditional music and oriental tunes being brought up and exposed to it. The background preludes and ends with mezwed folk tunes invoking improvisations on Tunisian Maqams (Isbaain, Mhayer Iraq), then come the rapping sessions performing in beats and poetry, modeling as such a hip hop style with a Tunisian traditional dash. Peculiar in the musical patchwork is the performance in local dialect. The words are political and resistant; depicting in clarity the social conditions:

Tigga Black'na sings in *Hwita* (Little Fish)*:*
Koolni Neklek, Ennidam Hkom
Ena wayek classés ml Abed lmkantra….
Génération jdida kolha mkhaddra wala mwaddra bl ghadra
Hne yzid lahdid wl akaker lkoll fl hwem metwafra

Fighting each other, the system has ruled
Me and you are classified as smugglers…
A whole new generation is drugged or drowned in betrayal
Here there's more bodybuilding and all the drugs in the hoods are provided

The portrayal of the myriad of poor neighborhoods is clear-cut. The word drugs is double-edged. The trend of muscle building among youth is accompanied not only with proteins and complementary pills but with drug abuse. Whereas laws and legislations on the selling and the use of drugs are implemented with coerciveness, the availability of drugs in poor neighborhoods raises a suspicious question on the aim of the system in turning its back on its distribution on the one hand, and on the sudden execution of the laws on the other hand. Also, the fact that they are all into sports and drugs strategically keeps them out of being conscious cognitively, and more substantially in terms of political consciousness.

Tiga Black'na perform *Khamsa Li laagou bl Jorra* (The Five who Chased after Him):
Wel maktoub likteb reet el khayen khayef yejri ydheb mn biid yseb
Ey naam yseb
Ghalta lwarka laab, msh bessehel
Ey naam yseb
La khyr felly yakraw lktobb
La khyr felly hokmoona wel dhalem gleb

And fate had it, you saw the traitor scared and escaping from far away, cursing,
Yes, true he curses
He played the wrong card
Not so easy for him, the fire in his heart is burning more and more

Yes true he curses
There's no good neither from those who read books
Neither from those who ruled us and the unjust has fled

By the same token, the chorus reiterates a Tunisian folk song that begins with:

Khamsa Li laagou bl Jorra
Melk lmoot yreji
W lahgou moola laarka lmorra
L Mash'hoor el Dallagi

The five who ran after him
The angel of death is awaiting
And they caught the leader of the bitter battle
The renown Dallagi

The opposition between the first stanza performed and the chorus is extremely ironic. In imagining a political traitor running away after a hard fall, there's a clear attack on the elite (who read books) and implicitly on the Nahdha majority (reading the Quran) who failed at providing justice. By contrast, the song evokes a Southern folk tune and poem about Tunisian Hero Mohamed Daghbegi during French colonization. He bravely resisted the French in his hometown before fleeing to Libya, getting caught and sentenced to death. The battle between him and the colonizer had been hard and violent; for, between heroism in effect and self-proclaimed heroism is a great disparity. Lyrically, the political in this disparity lies in the ironic stance and in reprimanding the politicians' betrayal of the civil society's hopes. The two escapes- one imagined and one historical- is a conscious and scathing take on the current politics in urgent need for change.

Bab el Beat

Bab el Beat is a project initiated by journalist and producer Thameur Mekki. It relies on sampling Tunisian music and integrating it into underground rap, boom bap beats along with oriental maqams. "Beb el" (Gate of) is a reference to the Gates in the old towns built at the entrance of each town (Beb Bhar, Bab Bnet). A project in progress, it opens up to new ventures in hip hop with a purely Tunisian trace. While *Erkez Hip Hop* relies on Tunisian dialect, *Beb el Beat* blends the dialect with standard Arabic.

Rapper WMD rises well above the imaginative side of hip hop. His words are poetic in nature but salient. Targeting politicians, he sings in *Gloob Faydha* (Pouring Hearts):

طغوا، النفاق سلاحهم ...
أنذال يناقشون وضعنا الكاسد
جالسون بين الفاسد و الفاسد فاسد
أخي، راقب السياسي وقّه تكذيبا
كاد السياسي أن يكون إبليس...
لن تدوم زعامة، لن تدوم حصانة

They dominated, hypocrisy is their weapon...
Bastards are discussing our dire situation
Sitting between the corrupt and the corrupt another corrupt
Brother, watch over the politician, and loyally respect him
through lies
For the politician had almost been the devil...
No leadership will last, no immunity will last

Released in February 2021, just a few months before the May-June riots initiated by Tunisian youth, the segment is a blasting indictment against the political class, particularly the one prevailing in the parliament (and whom he cites their names

specifically in the track). He attacks the state of corruption in the political scene and the abuse of power reinforcing the domination of parties' leaders. A glimpse of intertextuality is present in WMD's performance: "watch over the politician, and loyally respect him with due lies/ For the politician had almost been the devil." The verses are inspired from the poet Ahmed Shawki who writes in the same rhyming pattern about the teacher: "Rise to the teacher, pay him your due respect/ For the teacher had almost been a messenger. "Therefore, rather than the people-electors watching over the politician's lies, it is the politician who manipulates the people in satanic-like ways. Equally interesting is the flowing confidence in the lyrics in that not only did the artist condemn political deeds but he was also able to foreshadow and remind them of the time when all these acts of deception will no longer be justifiable and those who carried them out will be hiding. In addressing politicians and legislators, standard Arabic is the accurate choice for sustaining the level of officialism and professionalism that should have been pursued.

In this context, imagining a radical reform is illustrative of what Marcuse conceptualizes of radical imagination as "constantly being held open and one that 'comes back' to us in the present to shake up our thinking" (Haiven, IX). The catalyst effect imagination trigger is a pressing factor for resistance. Hip hop embodies this faculty of imagining the radical and beyond it. In the contested scene in Tunisia, such tracks are only project samples of a bigger hip-hop political project to give voice to a personal struggle fused with the socio-political fight. For Haiven and Khasnabish, radical imagination is that "rich, complex, agent-driven and ongoing working-out of affinity" (III). The genre reflects such attributes in affinity and complex composition that shocks, unsettles. It does so by "speaking in a language of metaphor, myth, allegory and poetry as often as clever, cutting, bawdy and satirical political commentary" (XXI).

Hip Hop Watch Dogs: (Un)fulfilling the Revolutionary Promise

In the process of redrawing political lines, the cultural zeitgeist still provided commentary on the stagnation of the revolution's inner city blues. In *Nebni* (I build), the track flows with WMD:

<div dir="rtl">

أرسم ملامح حاضري، لا أنتظر إعانة
انتهك حرمة الممكن، حيث الممكن إستحالة
دسائس لا تنتهي، حيلهم لا تنطلي
تأجج في ظلام ليل لا يريد أن ينجلي

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I draw the traits of my present, I don't wait for any help
I violate the sanctity of the possible, for the possible is an impossibility
Machinations that don't stop, their twists don't get bought
Feel the flames in the darkness of a night that is not fading away

Empire adds to the statement:
Khobbila West el Khitabat shkoon bsh nesmoo'?
Shay mayji bessehl ena ezzhar taa'lamt nasnoo'
Lfouk yharkou lkhyout, louta shaab sheded lhyout
Hoony tkhaf rak tmoot, nheb mkhakh blesh hdoud

Lost between the discourses, who do we listen to?
Nothing comes easily and I've learnt how to make luck on my own
Up there, they are moving threads,
Down here the people are standing against walls
Here you get scare of dying, I want boundless minds

Nebni uses an ironic tone to reflect on the state of disillusionment dragging on for ten years. WMD speaks of the endless deceits and treacheries happening around politics, and none of which is rescuing the country from the havoc. He defies the

status quo by evoking the force of imagination, and the extent to which its role plays for his interest. He can defy the possible that has become impossible to reach; ironically, this alludes to the fact that basic rights have now become hard to access. "I draw the traits of my present '' is a powerful declaration of the radical. If reality is not satisfying enough, it can be recreated in order to be transformed for what is hoped for. More to that, "في ظلام ليل لا يريد أن ينجلي" ("in the darkness of a night isn't fading away") is a poetic allusion to poet Abul Qasim Chebbi's verse "لابد لليل أن ينجلي", "The night must fade". In other words, what brought the Revolution after the oppressive gloom, has not been achieved yet. To these declarations, an unwavering stance between hope and reality, Empire portrays the political scene full of confusion as to whom and to which discourse the people can believe in to keep going. The metaphor of a puppet show in which the state controls their threads, while the ordinary citizens are still being manipulated. Giving voice and giving hand to the audience, his advice is to reimagine one's own luck and get one's mind "boundless" for inspiration and realization of change.

Building Bridges, Not Walls – Arab Anglophone Diasporic Writers as Cultural Mediators
Nouh Anajjar

'Every culture is a mixture' (Jean-Luc Nancy)
'No culture can live if it attempts to be exclusive'
(Mahatma Gandhi)

Humanities as a scholarly field have constantly been criticized for not being entirely practical or utilitarian when it comes to advancing society and finding solutions to contemporary problems. Much of the theorization and findings remain inherently theoretical and descriptive in nature. However, humanities nowadays stand out not only as a fundamental key player in the struggle for meaning and quest for cultural diversity/difference, but more importantly as an ethicopolitical exigency in search for communal modes of existence and coexistence especially amid the culturally and religiously motivated violence, and the *Zeitgeist* of cultural paranoia that we are witnessing today. In this framework, literature as an artistic, historical and discursive document and as a creative transformative space provides the means for re-imagining and transforming communities and therefore the world. It is not so much the aesthetic and poetic dimensions of literary texts that matter nowadays but rather their politics. So, the question that poses itself nowadays is what kind of ethics we can build now and what kind of *world* literature forces us to foresee.

It is accurate to contend that literature has often been conceived in nationalistic terms, yet there is now more than ever a burgeoning propensity among writers to consciously transcend the nation state's poetics by declining to parrot the retold clichés of their cultural frame of reference and adopting a cosmopolitan and worldwide imaginary. In his article *The Trend of Modern Literature,* John Bell Henneman rightly states,

> "At the beginning of the new century, the conspicuous characteristic of literature is its striving to break down all barriers of speech and race and become world literature…The cosmopolitan is at home everywhere…Not that literature may not be located anywhere and derive from any source; however seemingly local in origin and provincial in outward aspect, its ultimate appeal must be the wider reaches of common humanity and that of truth itself".

In this juncture, Arab Anglophone Literature of migration stands out as a promising corpus of literature that is transformative and transcendental in nature. Historically speaking, the upsurge of this literature stemmed from the desire to know about the Other as a sort of reactionary enterprise among Arab writers to write back to the center/ metropolis and demystify the relationship between the East and the West, along with topoi of nostalgia, hybridity and identity crisis. Nevertheless, most of the critical corpus about this literature capitalized on viewing writers and their narratives via dichotomous discourse and dialectical polarities and therefore has been trapped within the lenses of the 'Either-Or" paradigm. This reductive and archetypal practice of reading and rendition, despite its appealing critical lure, precludes and overlooks the transcendental ethos of Arab Anglophone Literature as an expression and artistic mirroring up of a more intricate experience of hyphenated subjects and immigrants and as a counter-discourse to sweeping dogmatism and all sorts of ideological fundamentalism pushing in so doing the boundaries of

Arab Anglophone literature beyond anti-western sentiments, Eurocentric hegemony, parochial engagements, and orientalist legacies. That said, Arab Anglophone writers, writing from the margins and situating themselves at the edge of many cultures, compellingly voice and uncover in their radically transgressive and revolutionary aesthetics a relentless preoccupation with the universal, the cosmopolitan, and ultimately the human.

Arab Anglophone diasporic literature or Arab literature produced beyond the home is a miscellaneous corpus for it is made up of writings from authors who belong to different Arab countries namely Lebanon and Palestine. All of them hold dual citizenship, some live in Britain, a few live in Australia and most of them live in America. Among the prominent Arab diasporic writers we can cite Diana Abu Jabber, Susan Muaddi Darraj, Rawi Hage, Jarrar Randa, Rabih Alameddin, Laila Halaby, Joe Geha, Toni Hanania, Mona Simpson in North America, Leila Aboulela, Toni Hanania, Fadia Faqir, Ahdaf Soueif, Jamal Mahjoub, Robin Yassin Kassab in Britain, Abbas El-Zein, and El Hage Jad in Australia to name but a few.

By writing about cultural translation, hybridity, and blurring binary oppositions – say West / East, civilized / primitive, rational / irrational… – these writers have enunciated their position as cultural mediators and translators. The common denominator between their narratives is the effort to open up a third space where cosmopolitanism and cultural pluralism seem to be the only eccentric weapons to negotiate and interrogate totalitarian authorities, common-sense conceptions of identities, and communities as well as taken for granted cultural practices.

In fact, by acting as cultural mediators, Arab Anglophone writers living in the diaspora propose nothing short of a reconsideration of notions of identity and culture. Remarkably enough, the same way postmodernism was decisive in shaping postcolonial studies as a process of questioning power relations and Western ascendancy, it is also very significant in

its articulation of a new theory of identity that is destabilized by processes of postmodernity, globalization, and migration. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's substantial theorizations about identity and becoming are of paramount importance. Their popular line of reasoning revolves around their aggregate denial of frozen and fixated identities and their celebration, on the other hand, of 'nomadic' and flexible identities that "take flight" and that is more like 'rhizomes' "always folding, unfolding, refolding "(*A Thousand Plateau*, 20). For Deleuze and Guattari, identity "is always in motion, it is always a coming-into-being, a never-ending project of becoming that includes being what we are already and becoming what we might be in the future" (Qtd. in Sutton and Jones 46).

Postmodernism is well-known for the idea of the fragmentation of the self, anxiety and they are potently allied with hybridity and cultural translation. "[O]ur identity" asserts Rushdie, "is at once plural and partial and sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures ....it is not an infertile territory for the writers to occupy."(15) Therefore, Arab Anglophone writers writing about hybridity, cosmopolitanism, and humanism as processes of transformation is a response to Rushdi's invitation to explore the problematics of identity in the postmodern landscape and mindscape wherein the lack of stability, fixity and displacement are increasingly gaining ground, and where subjects are becoming translatable entities, continually liable to change; wavering between *being* and *becoming*. It is from this ambivalent context of uncertainty and multiplicity of identities as well as the transnational character of contemporary culture that Arab Anglophone diasporic writers have drawn inspiration to tell stories of characters who play the role of cultural mediators and who dwell in cosmopolitan and transnational spaces.

A last significant point to make is that these writers are themselves hybrid writers. Being American/Jordanian, Australian/ Lebanese, British/Syrian, these writers have certainly grasped the sensation of what it means to have a bi-cultural identity and to have one's selfhood fashioned by two dissimilar cultures with all the impediments and contradictions that ensue. Furthermore, with the hope of dramatizing such issues and envisaging another possible community and identity, these authors add their voices to the mounting yet significant corpus of minority discourse. This latter is defined by Jan Mohammed and Lloyd as a theoretical articulation of the political and cultural structures that connect different minority cultures in their subjugation and opposition to the dominant culture (1990 ix). Indeed, as minor literature, Anglophone Arab diasporic literature, despite its marginality, is highly political, communal, and enunciative.

Finally, even though most of human history has been stained by violence, colonialism, civil wars, imperialism there is now a global propensity towards a celebration of intercultural dialogue and recognition of cultural differences. In his interesting article *Is the Notion of Intercultural Dialogue a western concept?* Henk Griffioen maintains that the west has witnessed a shift in its perception of the Other. While in the past the Other was a mere dialectical construction to understand the self, now there is a shift towards a more dialogical understanding of the other and towards accepting cultural differences which are essentially irreducible (1). Griffioen goes on to argue that this new form of dialogical dialogue seeks fundamentally common horizons and imagines a new mode of human possibility and coexistence (3). Arab Anglophone literature in the diaspora is framed within this line of thought as it attempts to transcend nationalism and bridge cultural differences while envisaging what Edward Glissant calls a 'poetic of relation' and '*Tout monde*' paradigm, meant to transcend the facile assumptions of difference, multiculturalism, and fossilized categories.

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From poetry to cinema, from microblogging to theater, from literature to journalism, arts and media are always a fertile ground for experimentation and imagination, creativity and political dissent. That is the case across Arab and Muslim societies, too. This e-book strives to shed light on those very intellectual resources – often neglected, at times repressed – to unpack the complexity of societies and cultural experiences across the MENA region. A specific focus is provided, in the second part, on the social and cultural ferment in Tunisia, a particularly interesting reality, that deserves special attention in this season of great political and democratic uncertainty.

This collection of essays – signed by renowned authors, promising scholars and journalists – is the output of the 2021 edition of the Carthage Seminars, jointly convened by Reset DOC and the Tunisian Academy of Sciences, Letters and Arts-Beit al-Hikma, with the support of the Henry Luce Foundation, and dedicated to Pluralism in Arab and Muslim Societies. Freely circulated, this monograph seeks to highlight the relevance of and further encourage creativity and cultural pluralism across Arab and Muslim societies.