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Introduction: Where is Literature?

Egypt's thwarted revolution of 2011 invited much scholarly and public interest in Egyptian creative expression (*ibda'* in Arabic). There has been much well-deserved attention paid to artworks and music, slogans and poems, blogs and novels, and those producing or making use of them – especially in the context of the revolutionary uprising.¹ Much of this attention has been rather selective, however. International interest in contemporary Egyptian cultural production has been almost exclusively focused on Cairo, and has until recently tended to highlight specific scenes that harmonise with the tastes and desires of a liberal-left international audience. This bias has recently been somewhat balanced by accounts with a wider perspective that includes a greater variety of aesthetics, and sites other than Cairo (notably El-Chazli 2018; Jacquemond and Lagrange 2020; Sprengel 2020a, 2020c). Cultural production in Egypt is grounded in a plurality of configurations of aesthetics and politics, and most of it takes place outside the internationally visible cosmopolitan scene. If we want to understand how artistic and literary imagination may be part of social dynamics, including both changes and continuities, it is imperative to pay attention to that plurality.

This book tells of writers, writing, and literary milieus in Alexandria, Egypt's second city. Some of them lean towards international avant-gardes, while others are committed to more conservative styles. Some of them have supported the uprising, others have supported the regime, and many have done both. Few have been successful beyond their circles, and it is unlikely that readers who are not familiar with Alexandria's literary scenes will know them. This is a conscious choice. Stardom is rare and exceptional. Most writers gain at best a modest share of fame and success in the course of their careers. This book tells their stories.

The book is made up of two parts, which have different configurations of authorship, and together make a twofold argument. Research was conducted

¹ With regard to literature, see Mehrez (2012); Colla (2012); Schanda (2013); El-Hajj (2020); and Jacquemond (2020). In the field of writing, bloggers in particular have gained significant attention (e.g. Hirschkind 2011; Jurkiewicz 2012; Pepe 2014). This is partly because blogging was instrumental in the shift of language and style that marked the first decade of the online era in Arabic writing that coincided with the 2011 uprisings. Blogs also provide a more durable record for study than other forms of online textual production. By the time of writing this in 2020, the short golden age of blogs was already over in Egypt, and blogs had become just one online medium among others, accompanied and overshadowed by more transient formats of social media (see Pepe 2014: 47).

from 2010 to 2019 by an anthropologist and writer in collaboration: the anthropologist Samuli Schielke, who is the ‘I’ speaking in first person singular in this introduction and in the second half of the book, and the writer Mukhtar Saad Shehata, who together with Samuli is the ‘we’ speaking in first person plural in passages describing fieldwork throughout the book, and as the collective author’s voice in the first half of this book.

The first half of the book, titled ‘About writing’ and co-authored by Samuli and Mukhtar, is an attempt to understand literature as a social practice between individual motivations on the one hand, and the supportive and limiting structures of societal and literary milieus on the other; together, these enabled the formations of certain literary voices and lives in Alexandria during the 2010s. Literary writing, we argue, has marginality as an at once enabling and limiting condition. It provides spaces of imaginary excess that may go beyond the taken-for-granted of a societal milieu, and yet are never unlimited. The shaping of imaginary and lived personae in this tension between idiosyncrasies and milieus is what we call the writing of lives.

The second half of the book, titled ‘Writing about’ and authored by Samuli while based on our shared fieldwork, explores some key themes of writing that we encountered – revolution, urbanity, religious faith, doubts, and certainties – and which all in one way or another address a life-worldly experience of plurality in absence of pluralism, where different ways of living, visions, and life, as well as corresponding literary aesthetics, coexist in conflict. The writers whom we met, and their writings, help us to think about literary imagination as part and parcel of such social conflicts and transformations, its role being neither one of resistance against power nor of guidance towards norms, but rather one of opened complicity.

Where is literature?

In his study of literary reading in Colonial Egypt, Michael Allan (2016) engages with a set of texts to argue against the assumption that there can be a world literature that is actually open to the world at large. Instead, Allan argues, ‘literature’ was a historically specific formation that was crafted and shaped in a colonial context, and that included some ways of writing and imagining while excluding others. The realm of world literature, according to Allan, is provincial and limited by the inherent secularity (in the sense of a differentiation of spheres of life that detaches imagination from the divine) of its imagination. In Chapters 7 and 8, I will question whether that world really is as secular as Allan depicts it to be.

However, I agree with him about the inherent provincality of any definition of literature. There can be no neutral and conclusive definition of what is and what is not literature, because it is never just a genre of speech or writing, but first and foremost a social institution. Any shared idea of literature is therefore grounded in relations of power, including some and excluding others. Importantly, it always includes normative aspects: those involved in it have implicit and explicit ideas about what is good literature, what deserves to be considered literature, and what does not.

Therefore, this book does not ask what literature is: for our purposes, it is everything that people we met in our fieldwork considered to be literature. They disagreed on many accounts. Some people greatly appreciated writings that others considered to be ridiculously wanting. Some people wrote poetry that others did not recognise as such. Some writings we encountered, such as graffiti and social media, were located on the hazy fringes of literature, possessing some aspects of what people we met would consider literary quality, while lacking others.

Instead, this book seeks answers to a more descriptive question: where is literature? Literature as a social institution cannot be deductively defined, but it can be described in a historical context. Asking ‘where’ instead of ‘what’ also means that this book is not intended to be a critical overview of the best and most important literature from Alexandria. In fact, many prominent Alexandrian authors and their works are absent from it. Such an overview would require critical reading, analysis, and appreciation (as well as deprecation) of texts, highlighting some of them as more worthy of attention than others. In contrast, this book is based on a decidedly ‘uncritical reading’ (inspired by Adam Reed 2018) of texts, intersected with the subjectivities of their authors and readers, and the social relations and circulations that make up literary life. Whenever possible, authors’ own interpretations of their texts are privileged, and their critical debates about other texts are drawn upon. I believe that this makes it possible to discover something about the societal grounding and relevance of literary writing that might be invisible in a critical reading.

This also means that we will not try to deconstruct, naturalise, or redefine key analytical terms that we have encountered and employed, because in our research context those terms are both *emic* and *etic* (that is, part of the language of the people whom we are studying, as well as the professional jargon of researchers). Such terms include literature and its Arabic counterpart *adab*, culture (*thaqafa*), and cultural production (*ibdaʿ*, also translatable as creative expression), all of which involve implicit and explicit normative claims and positionalities. As much as possible, we try to use these words with an awareness for their contextual meanings and implicit claims.

By doing so, this book aligns with a small but thriving academic subfield of anthropologies and sociologies of literature, writing, and cultural production, drawing notably upon Sayyid Uways (1991) on messages written on cars and carts in Egypt, Walter Armbrust (1996) on Egyptian twentieth-century modernism, Jessica Winegar (2006) on the rise of the private-sector art scene, Richard Jacquemond (2008) on Egyptian literatures of the twentieth century, Samia Mehrez (2010) on cultural politics in Egypt, Giedrė Šabasevičiūtė (2019a) on conservative literary circles in Cairo, and recent work about creative expression in Egypt collected in a roundtable edited by Darci Sprengel (2020b). On a comparative note, our work builds on the works of Pierre Bourdieu (1998) and Gisèle Sapiro (2014; Sapiro and Rabot 2016) on literary production in France, Michael D. Jackson (2013) on the existential grounds of writing, Khaled Furani (2012) on secularity and poetry in Palestine, Zuzanna Olszewska (2015, 2019) on literary scenes and social media of Afghan diasporas, Andrew Brandel (2016) on literary life in Berlin, and Adam Reed (2018) on literary reading in the United Kingdom. This book also draws upon recent approaches in literary studies that study texts with a closer attention to their context of production, circulation, and reading (Pepe 2014, 2019a, 2019b; Allan 2016). Many others are worth mentioning, and will be referred to in the course of the book.

This book makes two main arguments. The first is that literary writing can be understood as a limited excess of a social milieu's horizon of imagination, neither fully free nor fully contained; as such, it is grounded in sociality and thrives on various configurations of marginality. The second is that literature is complicit in, and helps us to understand, a condition of plurality in the absence of pluralism in urban lives and imaginaries in post-2011 Alexandria. These key arguments are grounded in an eclectic theoretical approach that draws on various academic theories, and most importantly, on several Alexandrian writers we spoke with who take the role of theoretical authorities; they are especially relevant to Chapters 1, 4, and 5.

A key analytical tension runs through the book: between social relations and structures on the one hand, and existential motivations and experiences on the other. Distinctions and competition are inherent constituents of literary milieus, which is why we have found it useful to think of literary sociality in terms of a competition for symbolic capital within a literary field, along the lines proposed by Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1998). Throughout the book, we draw upon an adapted version of Bourdieu's approach: adapted because we consider focus on symbolic capital and power to be necessary but not sufficient. Writing is an essentially social practice that is made possible and limited by the milieus and the fields of power in which the writer acts in her or his capacity as a writer. This dimension can be well understood in Bourdieu's terms. But writers are also com-

monly nonconforming, exceptional figures who are drawn to the work of literary imagination for various reasons. Although Egyptian writers often hope to speak for society, they are seldom read and heard – with the exception of a handful of literary stars. Writers may be respected, but they are also considered foolish or even weird by their relatives and colleagues; only in exceptional cases do they gain wealth and fame. How do we understand the motivations and consequences of writing in a society where there are much more effective and profitable ways of finding success and recognition? This idiosyncratic, non-deterministic aspect requires the addition of a more existential approach that highlights intersubjective experience (e.g. Jackson 2013; Ram and Houston 2015). These two approaches – social capital and existential motivations – do not easily fit together, but we have found them both to be necessary in making sense of our fragmentary field-work.

Anecdotal evidence

Most scholarly works on literature primarily engage with texts. Following a widely shared methodological consensus in literary and cultural studies, they provide critical readings and analyses of writings in historical context. They usually do not try to trace authors' motivations and social lives. This book does the opposite. Its descriptions of writers and writing are based on long-term ethnographic research in literary circles, thereby highlighting those parts of literature that are less accessible to a purely textual study: personal and social relations, motivations and careers, networks and circulations, which together constitute literature as a social institution.

Studying literary scenes by means of ethnography requires methodological explanation. In 2015, I received a rejection letter to an application for a visiting researcher position I had hoped to use to complete this book. One of the reviewers found the project otherwise good but was unimpressed by the methodology:

It lacks precision in describing exactly how the research is going to proceed apart from 'field-work' in collaboration with an Alexandrian novelist, making it difficult to assess whether the results will be obtained through rigorous research and analysis of data or merely from conversations and impressions of dubious anecdotal value (Reviewer 2).

The methodology section of my application was indeed sketchy, and the reviewer, a literary scholar based in Germany, was apparently not familiar with ethnographic methods. He therefore assumed that rigorous research cannot be based on conversations and impressions, but only on data of the kind that erases the

texture of conversations and social interaction in order to reduce it to calculable models.

In quantitative research, ‘anecdotal’ means that an interesting story does not yet prove that something is generally the case. In qualitative research, in contrast, anecdotes are where the knowledge is. While they do not tell us whether things generally happen so, they are indispensable for understanding how something has happened. Without a good measure of rigorous, anecdotal, qualitative evidence, we risk being left with blind correlations that we either do not understand or, even worse, misunderstand based on our prejudices and desires.

An anecdote is a short narrative that describes a one-time occurrence that happened (or is claimed by the narrator to have happened) to somebody in a specific time and place. Anecdotes entertain, but more importantly they also explain *how* something occurs. This book takes over ‘anecdotal’ as a positive identification and a programmatic stance, because it is the kind of knowledge it hopes to provide: textured explanations of how something took place in a specific place and time – explanations that make no claim for universal validity, but may turn out to be useful for the understanding of other contexts as well (Gallop 2002).

Thinking in an anecdotal way has two additional advantages that are relevant to this book. First, the anecdote as a narrative form provides common ground between literary narration on the one hand, and qualitative scientific knowledge in social sciences such as anthropology and sociology, and humanities such as literary studies on the other. This encounter of disciplines in a shared genre is useful for a book that is not meant to be simply a study *about* writers, but an ethnography *with* writers, drawing upon debates among writers as a source of potentially valid theoretical analysis.

Second, thinking of qualitative knowledge as anecdotal in a positive sense is closely aligned with the logic of ethnographic writing, a genre of scientific texts that develop interpretations and theoretical explanations based on the carefully recorded texture of conversations and impressions in a societal context. Ethnography as a genre of writing has had a somewhat problematic tendency to use what is called ‘the ethnographic present’, meaning a description of events that recurred in the past as if they would continue in a timeless present: an example is ‘Aspiring writers of Alexandria frequent cafés of the old Downtown’. Anecdotes, in contrast, are bound to a specific time and are usually recounted in the past tense. This makes them a better narrative genre for describing and understanding a changing situation in which unpredictable transformation is abundant and normality is a rather remarkable accomplishment. That was indeed the situation while our fieldwork was taking place in Alexandria.

I considered studying writing for the first time in the autumn of 2007, after meeting my friend T. while he was working as a health inspector in a bakery in a

small town in the Nile Delta – an utterly boring and pointless job that I describe in another book (Schielke 2015: 171). After his shift, we sat down in a café across the street; he took out a notebook and began to sketch the outline of a poem. I had not known he was a poet, so I asked him what had inspired him at that moment. Nothing in particular, he answered; he was just holding the moment. And that was it. We finished our coffee and went off to take photos of toktoks (three-wheeled auto rickshaws common in rural areas and informal neighbourhoods of Egyptian cities). I did not record our discussion about the poem in my research diary, but the conversation remained with me.

At the time, I was becoming increasingly interested in the role of imagination in social processes. My wife Daniela Swarowsky and I were working on our documentary film *Messages from Paradise #1* (2009), about young Egyptian men's dream of migration juxtaposed with older migrant men's dream of return. We had just interviewed T. in his capacity as a man who dreamed of migration. Now, I had for the first time encountered T. in his capacity as a poet, and began to think about other dimensions of imagination. This process of thinking was further propelled by my friendship with Mukhtar, who at around the same time was working on his first novel. In 2009 and 2010, Mukhtar and I together produced a short narrative film about class and other boundaries (Schielke and Shehata 2010).

For more than ten years, dreams of a better life through migration and social mobility, and literary imagination as a conscious, learned practice and engagement became my two main research themes. The first theme, which had begun in 2007 with my collaboration with Daniela, eventually became the subject of a book of its own (Schielke 2020a). And yet the two themes were initially one, and my field notes refer to them as one project as late as 2016. Indeed, these two kinds of imagination do not stand alone, and while this book describes the crafting of fictional worlds, it is also very much about various dreams and aspirations for a better life.

In 2010, I decided to begin dedicated fieldwork on the subject of literature. I wanted to avoid Cairo, Egypt's literary epicentre, because I felt it could easily render everything outside it invisible. At the same time, I wanted my research to take place in a big city that could host a variety of scenes and tastes. I had already done some sporadic fieldwork in Alexandria, and thus the city became my new Egyptian home base. At around the same time, Mukhtar decided to stop working as a private tutor (the main source of income for teachers) and was looking for freelance jobs to make ends meet. I asked him to work as my research assistant on a project on literary imagination, and our formal collaboration began.

As a fieldwork team, we drew on conventional anthropological methods as well as some experimental ones. We conducted extended participant observation in four literary circles (which we describe in Chapter 2), paid shorter visits to

numerous other circles, attended literary events and book fairs, met between fifty and a hundred writers in informal conversations, and conducted life-story interviews with twenty-five of them. We used interviews sparingly, usually to initiate a long-term research relationship with people whom we might meet many times over the years after our initial interview. We read works or excerpts from works by people whom we met, and on several occasions we invited people gathered in a café or at literary events to discuss certain themes, in what could be considered an intermediary form between symposium and focus group interview. Some of this fieldwork we conducted together, some separately.

As well as being participant observers, we were also active participants in the city's literary and intellectual circles. During the time of our fieldwork, Mukhtar published two novels, a collection of short stories, and two anthologies, along with numerous essays. He also worked as an editor at Dar Kalima, an Alexandria-based publishing house that was active from 2013 to 2015, and as a freelance copyeditor for publishing houses based in Cairo. I participated not as a writer of literature, but as a photographer who had held two exhibitions, as a participant in intellectual circles who had two books and a handful of essays published in Arabic during the period of our fieldwork, and as the teacher of a study circle on anthropology at the Alexandria Library. We were both involved in an artistic and literary collaboration on the figure of the stranger in Alexandria, which was curated by Daniela Swarowsky for an interdisciplinary research and art exhibition in Berlin 2013 (Swarowsky et al. 2013). Thus, while we have tried to maintain an uncritical, non-judgemental approach in our research and writing, we have also been part of the literary circles, scenes, and divisions that we write about. Our positionality inevitably, and hopefully in part productively, colours our argument. Mukhtar's fraught relationship with the independent downtown scene gave us the critical distance to think about the political economy of literary circles, while his dislike for populist colloquial poetry meant we paid less attention to that scene than it might have deserved. My lack of nostalgic commitment to a beautiful Alexandria of the past made me more attentive to those parts of the city ignored by nostalgia, while my ignorance of Arabic literature in its variety and depth made us pay less attention to intertextuality than would have been good for us.

As researchers, our position in the scenes we frequented was special but not unprecedented. As a European foreigner, I could profit from what in Egypt is called 'the *khawaga* complex' (*'uqdat al-khawaga*). This is a specifically Egyptian version of white privilege, whereby whiteness is not naturalised as normal, but exceptionalised as something worthy of special attention, privilege, and also suspicion; *khawaga* refers historically to non-Muslim foreigners living in Egypt. Mukhtar had no access to *khawaga* privilege, but he could draw upon more pro-

found cultural capital that was based on his extensive knowledge of Arabic language and literature, and soon found himself placed in the role of critic during fieldwork. Unlike most other social contexts, literary circles have a ready-made legitimate role for researchers, which is that of literary critic. Although this made fieldwork easy, it resulted in a need to explain that we were searching to understand but not to critically select and appreciate, and also that we were not translators – a role we did not want to be identified with because it would have changed the terms of interaction in a way that would have not been ethical. Although this book does contain some translations, they are a side effect rather than a main aim of the project.

The actual fieldwork process was much more erratic and fragmentary than this summary suggests. It was repeatedly complicated, fragmented, and interrupted by historical and personal events.

We had originally planned for approximately six months of fieldwork, spread between 2011 and 2012, and concluding in around 2013 or 2014 when the funding for the research project would end. This plan was thwarted almost immediately owing to the 25 January uprising, which turned everybody's attention to revolution and politics. This was also a good time to study the literary and cultural scenes, because 2011 and the years immediately following witnessed an intense vibrancy of cultural life; but repeatedly, our attention and that of our interlocutors was distracted by non-literary events.

This is not a book about the revolution or revolutionary literature. It would in any case be difficult to define what counts as such, because some writing in praise of the revolution was rather counter-revolutionary in intent, and some radical writings that emerged later were structured by the revolutionary experience but did not mention it. And yet the 25 January uprising and the three-year stormy season that followed were, along with the period of authoritarian stabilisation that followed, the main historical context of our research. January 2011 cast its shadow across the 2010s in Egypt, and became an inherent although not always explicit part of literary currents and writings. But this was not the only thing of importance going on, and many of the processes we witnessed had already been taking place before 2011 – some for a decade, others for a century – and they have continued into a time when a generation of people is coming of age who are too young to have had 2011 as their key formative experience. And even when dramatic events were shaking the country, we attended many gatherings where people were discussing poetry, styles, techniques, and aesthetics as if there was nothing else going on around them.

Another major reason for fragmentary fieldwork was our private lives. In 2011 and 2012, we were able to conduct fairly long-term fieldwork despite the dramatic events taking place around us. In 2013 and 2014, I was busy with the *In Search of*

Europe? exhibition that presented the work of a larger research team in Berlin. In autumn 2014, I returned to Alexandria with the intention of a long fieldwork stay until the next spring, but weeks later Daniela was diagnosed with breast cancer, and I returned to Berlin. During the three years that followed, I visited Alexandria many times but always for short visits, and Mukhtar's role in the project grew from research assistant to independent fieldworker and co-researcher. From the beginning, we had spent long evenings after interviews or gatherings to discuss and analyse what we had experienced. From 2016, Mukhtar also became the co-author of parts of our research output, which now form Part I of this book.

The co-writing process was based on shared reflections and discussions, based on which I wrote a draft text in English, to which Mukhtar gave feedback and suggestions in Arabic, which we discussed together in Arabic, after which I would write a revised text, sometimes involving several rounds of discussion and revision. Because of our different backgrounds of training and knowledge, misunderstandings were common, and sometimes became a productive source. A key concept of this book, 'the writing of lives', was originally a misunderstanding that resulted from my attempt to translate the concept of life-writing (*kitabāt al-hayat*) into Arabic. Life-writing is the broad category of writing that draws upon the writer's own life, such as autobiography. The writing of lives in this book became the reverse: kinds of living that are crafted in part through the practice of writing.²

The fieldwork we managed to do between 2010 and 2017 was fragmentary and full of gaps. Our exploration was never intended to give full coverage. In the spirit of ethnographic fieldwork that aims for depth rather than a panoramic vision, we consciously decided to focus on a handful of spaces and networks that welcomed us as researchers, while trying to keep an eye on their plurality and variety. However, the constraints of time have given us fewer opportunities to explore that plurality than we had hoped for. This means that many important sites of literary activity, even entire milieus, were only marginally part of our research or were omitted altogether. Important circles and scenes that would deserve to be discussed at length, but are not, include: Itlala ('look forward' or 'sunburst'), the most long-standing literary group in the city, established in the 1990s as part of the emerging literary avant-garde, and which continues to meet weekly at the Alexandria Library; public-sector cultural centres and regular literary clubs that meet at them; the Jesuit Cultural Centre; the Atelier d'Alexandrie; and foreign cultural institutions such as the Institut Français, Goethe Institut,

² In a further complication, Mukhtar later shifted to using the term *kitabāt al-hayat* in its standard sense of life-writing in his own work. To avoid confusion, we do not use the term life-writing in this book.

and the Russian Cultural Centre. There are countless other circles that are difficult to know about because they don't publicise their activities: groups of friends meeting at a café, university students organising around shared interests and passions, a constantly emerging and disappearing landscape of online networks, semi-private gatherings hosted by prominent or senior authors, groups dedicated to specific genres (such as horror, a vibrant scene), and many more. The most important gap in our fieldwork concerns commercial writing and publishing, and large-audience colloquial poetry. This gap is mostly because publishing and commercial networks are centralised in Cairo.

Our fieldwork ended abruptly in September 2017. Mukhtar moved to Brazil to study African Studies on a scholarship he had received there, and I put fieldwork entirely on hold after a recurrence of Daniela's illness and a prognosis that no longer included a prospect of recovery. For two years, the project was on ice, and both of us were absent from Alexandria.

Daniela passed away in June 2019. In the autumn of the same year, I returned to Alexandria for two visits. Those visits, along with a conference that Giedre Šabasevičiūtė and I organised in Prague in October 2019, inspired me to turn the many scattered notes and essays we had produced over the years into a coherent book. In February 2020, Mukhtar returned to Egypt but not to Alexandria, moving back to his family house in the village after a divorce. With the Covid-19 pandemic preventing travel, we could not meet to work on the book together. Instead, we kept up an online back and forth of feedback and critique based on my drafts. In the meantime, Mukhtar took the initiative to develop new online methods in order to inquire about writing in the absence of gatherings in person, and produced a YouTube series in which writers speak about their work; this is featured in Chapter 1.

Outline of chapters

Each chapter of this book answers a specific sub-question to 'Where is literature?'. The first part of the book, titled 'About writing' and co-authored by Mukhtar and Samuli, consists of three chapters that address writing itself as an activity. When and how do people become writers, and more intriguingly, how do some of them continue writing? If ideas of literature vary, then what do they entail, what enables them, and how are they distributed among literary scenes? What is the relationship between the cultivation of a literary voice and marginal, extraordinary settings? The second part of the book, titled 'Writing about' and authored by Samuli, locates writing in the urbanity and society of Alexandria

and Egypt. Chapter 4 asks what roles poetry and literary imagination may have had in the revolutionary process. Chapter 5 engages literary myths as theories of urbanity to help us understand what kind of a city Alexandria is, and what it is becoming. Chapter 6 explores how graffiti and social media have structured and commented upon urban and social worlds. Chapters 7 and 8 are each devoted to a single poet and reflect through conversations with them on the relationships there may be between poetic technique and imagination, and religious and moral stances. The afterword attempts to connect the two parts of the book by thinking about different roles for the writer that may be anticipated at a time when exile has become an increasingly common location of creative production.