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Afterword: On exiles and alternatives

This book's meandering ethnographic exploration of Alexandrian writers and literary scenes ended with a reflection about the common ground of romantic subjectivity that is shared by two poets who may seem to have little in common. However, the romantic common ground of authorship that is so widespread in Alexandria today is not only about subjective expression; it also equally involves the talent and skill to communicate, to have an effect. In a literary and social world where plurality more often than not does not imply pluralism, what may such communication entail, and what might its effect be? In this afterword we reflect on that question through an engagement with two recent theoretical inspirations, combined with our own trajectories after the end of our fieldwork.

In September 2017, we both left Alexandria to take different directions. Mukhtar, who had lived permanently in Alexandria since 2004, migrated to Brazil as a graduate student after separating from his wife. Samuli, who had been moving back and forth between Berlin and Alexandria since 2010, settled permanently in Berlin to stay close to his wife who was sick. Samuli returned to Alexandria on two visits in autumn 2019, and Mukhtar moved back from Brazil to his native village in spring 2020. Owing to the Covid-19 pandemic and other developments out of our control, we were not able to meet. In consequence, instead of spending long evenings debating in Mukhtar's living room as we had done during our fieldwork, we became involved in long online chats about the book manuscript between 2018 and 2020. And as our lives and careers took a turn away from Alexandria, our networks and ideas became more affected by Egyptian and Arab exiles in Europe and the Americas.

We were part of a trend. Egypt was experiencing a major emigration of highly skilled people with intellectual and artistic interests. This emigration was related to an increasingly widespread sense among them of life in Egypt being too repressive, the opportunities too limited for them to stay. But as people moved abroad, their anxieties and traumas travelled with them. A part of the sense of exile that we encountered among people from this class is a painful sense of privilege mixed with disconnection: a sense of confusion that results from enjoying a pleasant gathering of like-minded spirits abroad while knowing that back at home, tens of thousands are in prisons, often with fabricated charges or no charges at all, and that the life of ordinary citizens is cheap. It involves knowing that staying away from politics is not a safeguard either. While we were writing this in summer 2020, a moralist media and legal campaign in Egypt against young female influencers on the social media platform TikTok resulted in two-year prison sentences.

ces and public shaming for a number of women for ‘offending Egyptian family values’. Even intentionally banal commercial entertainment is not a safe haven in post-2013 Egypt. As soon as one gains a significant audience, be it for politics or for product placement, one becomes a potential target. From the vantage point of an exile, one can be concerned, angry, and frustrated about such and other developments – but also safe. The price of that safety is disconnection. And yet for many, it is not only a price, but also an accomplishment.

Berlin became a particularly hip spot for what Samuli only half in jest calls the bohemian Arab exile (*al-manfa al-bohimi*). People in that scene regularly mastered a cosmopolitan habitus and connectedness that were rather rare in Alexandria. They were involved in sophisticated academic and activist debates, and many were highly politicised. They attended parties that aligned with Berlin’s reputation at the time as the capital of Europe’s hip nightlife. At a party (not a hip and extravagant one, though, just a gathering at home of a kind that is held in Alexandria as well) hosted by a young Egyptian scholar in Berlin in 2019, Samuli became involved in a discussion about literature with someone who had moved from Egypt to Berlin, and who argued that he had stopped reading Arabic literature because he found God guarding and limiting the authors’ scope of imagination, which he didn’t like. This confused Samuli. He recognised the idea of a religious framework of the imagination from his encounters with conservative scenes, but he had not previously thought – as his conversation partner did – that writings of the cosmopolitan avant-garde shared that framework, if in more implicit ways. Samuli was at the time reading scholarship that described contemporary Egyptian literature as essentially secular, while the person he met at the party described it as not secular enough to be interesting for him.

Of course, this conversation tells us more about the kind of parties Samuli attends in Berlin than it tells us about Arabic literature. But then we have argued throughout this book that the kind of parties people attend is an important part of literature.

In an influential and much-discussed essay published in January 2019, the political scientist Amro Ali (who moved back to Alexandria from Australia after completing his PhD, and who has been a frequent visitor in Berlin) proposes that the Arab community in Berlin must claim a voice and a mandate as the provider of new narratives and alternatives that can benefit the city and the Arab world alike. Amro Ali is highly inspired by the thriving liberal-leftist Arabic speaking intelligentsia that has gathered in Berlin, making use of its political freedom and plurality, networks, and affordable rents it offers (affordable when compared with Beirut or London, not compared with Alexandria). At the same time, he is troubled by the tendency of Arab intellectual circles towards seclusion and self-sufficiency that results in good ideas and productions being ‘hurled into a void’

(Ali 2019: 6) and lost in ‘a black hole’ (p. 13). In his view, Arab intellectuals in Berlin have potential for much more: ‘Berlin will need to be actively thought of and treated as one critical hub and safe space to reconstruct alternative narratives and futures’ (p. 12). To do so, Amro Ali calls the cosmopolitan intelligentsia of Arab origin in Berlin to act as organic intellectuals who speak with, to, and perhaps also for a wider society – a conscience of the nation of Berlin, as it were, not so unlike the self-understanding of twentieth-century Egyptian nationalist modernism (see Chapter 2):

The intellectual exile body will need to forge an intimate relation with café staff, barbers and other occupations critically positioned within common social spaces. The ‘antiquated’ flyer will hold more weight than a Facebook post as the mere act of handing it to someone restores an invaluable human transaction that makes bonding and togetherness more realisable than what social media can offer.

It would be a delusion of utter proportions to think the mosque and church have no place in this endeavour. Any project to live out one’s secular fantasies is doomed. There needs to be a move beyond the spaces of smoke-blowing chatter over Foucault versus Deleuze and the echo chamber it entails. This is not a matter of merely tolerating faith because it is deeply rooted in the Arab community. Rather, it implies coming to terms with the constructive role faith can play in an increasingly alienating environment and, therefore, that it needs to be better framed and understood rather than overlooked by intellectual currents.

[...]

The Arab author is simply one manifestation of the same political spectrum that produced that barber. The author just happens to be one of the most visible, most political, most clearly articulated expression of Arab grievances. Yet the author should not forget that he or she developed, consciously or not, from the same background and reservoir as the rest of society and the upheavals of the Arab Spring. This is where they draw their strength and legitimacy from; and this society has a very large reservoir of pain, unhappiness, confusion, and uncertainty. But when the intellectuals and activists not only recognize the futility of separation from that background, but also return to and engage with it, not as shewerma-buying customers but as citizens-in-exile in an ever-expanding conversation with moral obligations, the securing of a steadfast future is aided. (Ali 2019: 13–15)

The forward-looking narrative that Arab Berlin can offer according to Amro Ali’s vision, is to keep alive, cultivate, and spread the pluralist, loving, and democratic potentials that were released but defeated in the uprisings of 2011. The Arab intellectuals gathered in Berlin can, according to Amro Ali, help Arab societies gradually recover from the violent authoritarian powers that rule it, and they can also help Germany heal itself from its own rising wave of right-wing nationalism.

The problem of self-referentiality and a lack of outreach that Amro Ali identifies, is also something that Mukhtar recognises among his own literary networks, especially those that hail from his native village. The literary circles and

milieus that we analysed in Chapter 2 have a tendency to generate small and solid echo-chambers or what Mukhtar in a recent essay (Shehata 2020) calls ‘cultural pockets’. Those pockets often give their participants a sense of accomplishment and skill, with the consequence that writers who move out of such pockets into wider networks are for the first time exposed to a harsher kind of critique that is about questioning and not about praise and recognition – with the result that they resentfully withdraw to their safe spaces of mutual recognition again. In contrast to the highly educated bourgeois-cosmopolitan scene in Berlin that Amro Ali writes about, Mukhtar’s concern is with rural and provincial intellectuals and writers who, socialised in supportive pockets with their closed sets of values and standards, move to Alexandria or Cairo where they experience the challenge of plurality and critique as a personal threat and offence – a regrettable waste of talent and opportunity. While Amro Ali and Mukhtar look at different social classes, they share a concern about what they see as effective self-marginalisation of writers and intellectuals that prevents them from being heard by a larger audience, and from developing their own voice and ideas in a way that could be useful or inspiring for others.

And yet, from what Samuli knows from his time among some of the bohemian-bourgeois Arab exiles, most of them have little connection with mainstream Berlin – be it ethnically German, Arab, or other. They are not in Berlin because of Berlin, but because it is a safe haven, a hub for the like-minded who might not be able to live and debate as they can, if not in Berlin. For some people, such as Samuli’s conversation partner about literature at the party, Berlin provides a rare chance to finally live out a secular fantasy – so why the hurry to give up that hard-fought fantasy? The author and the barber may have a refreshing conversation about concerns they share, but both of them are also likely to hold some very divisive stances that could put a quick end to the conversation. If the barber is skilled in his profession, he will know how to entertain a good conversation with his customer without raising issues that would hurt. It is easy as long as the two don’t know each other too well. The Arab intellectual community in Berlin, as far as Samuli has encountered it, thrives on a peripheral contact with the many mainstream societies (Arab and others) of the city, and yet it could not survive in full exposure to them. Such exposure would drain people’s energies and resources, because they would be constantly busy explaining, legitimising, and adapting themselves. It would be the end of Berlin as a safe space.

We have long debated among ourselves whether self-marginalisation by writers and intellectuals is a problem or a productive condition. Mukhtar tends to see it more as a problem, Samuli more as a productive condition. We agree on the description of the condition, however – a description that is provided in the eight ethnographic chapters of this book. Alternative visions and ways of life or

unusual, strange ideas, values, and tastes cannot survive in full exposure to the societal mainstream. Even fairly conventional and conservative ideas thrive on a degree of outsider position, some luxury of time and space apart that allows authors to play with and develop them (Chapter 1). Turning them into literary text means, by definition, to give them a safe space that is marked as outside the ordinary (as we described in Chapter 3). That space is nevertheless not hermetic; on the contrary, it invites an audience to engage with it. The audience must be willing to engage with those strange ideas on their own terms, however, otherwise the authors may either remain unheard (as in Chapter 4) or face grave consequences (as in Chapter 7).

If we look at those special places and times as accomplishments in their own right, a different image emerges, one where the sense of shortcoming involved in ‘marginal’ is replaced by the sense of improvement involved in ‘alternative’. Seen that way, literary and intellectual engagements are not about acting as the conscience of a nation, as it were, but about crafting imaginary and material lives on a small but effective scale.

This idea echoes an emerging interest in Egypt, especially among liberal-bourgeois intellectual, literary, artist, and activist circles, towards alternative lives and lifestyles. From that direction also comes the other theoretical inspiration we engage with in this afterword. In December 2019, after a break of five years, a long-awaited new issue of the influential non-periodical journal *Amkenah* (according to its subtitle ‘concerned with the poetics of places’), edited in Alexandria by Alaa Khaled and Salwa Rashad (2019a), was released. The theme of the new issue was ‘alternative lives’.

Combining photo essays, literary texts, travel writing, theoretical essays, and interviews, the issue presents a map of alternative communities and social projects, long-distance travels, pilgrimages and mountain hikes, bohemian and artistic careers in Egypt and abroad. On the pages of this volume at least, a privileged and recurring location of such alternative lives in Egypt is in the desert, where some try their hand at alternative ecological farming and tourism, others go mountaineering, and yet others undertake a pilgrimage to the remote Sufi shrine of Sidi Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili in the far south-east of Egypt. Cities and rural communities in the Nile valley also feature in the volume, but articles about them are fewer in number and more pragmatic in tone, less carried by a sense of fascination.

In Alaa Khaled’s and Salwa Rashad’s (2019b) literary and photographic travel journal of the southern Red Sea region that opens the volume, Alaa Khaled meditates on the openness and the non-binary relation to time and existence he sees embodied in nomad lives of the Ababda and Bishariya ethnic groups. The desert and nomadic lives become a site to imagine a life beyond the binaries that

divide society from nature, centres from peripheries, past from present – a more authentic, immediate way of being that, according to Alaa Khaled, can provide an alternative to city life and its political and societal conflicts. It is alternative not as opposed to something, but as a parallel, other reality that is constructive (as ideally expressed in farming and community projects) rather than antagonistic in nature, echoing the theme of heterotopic spaces that we develop in Chapters 3 and 5 of this book. In the introduction to the volume, he develops the same idea in more conceptual terms:

Maybe ‘hope’ was in the past put into the service of impossible ‘utopias’, which want to be released upon earth; thus in the past, the alternative was exemplary, and carried within itself the seed of its own transience, for it was searching for a paradise on earth. Perhaps now, ‘the alternative’ has liberated itself from this utopia, and has become free and planless about its paths and choices, lacking a centre that would guide its choices, running as it does after a ‘hope’ wherever it may find or feel it. Perhaps the old and new projects and experiences collected in this issue are one part of a map of this ‘errant hope’ and its journeys.

[...]

The alternative in this elusive age we live in, is not the marginal, and does not carry the ambition to smash the centre or to take its place. [...] The alternative neither contradicts nor resists; instead, it encompasses in order to live and persist. (Khaled 2019: 7)

The turn to search for alternative lives and places is linked with an interesting historical shift in the spiritual self-positioning of a section of the urban intelligentsia. It is no coincidence that the shrine of the medieval mystic Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili plays such an important role in the emerging landscape of alternative travel in Egypt – alongside the more pleasure oriented beach resorts in Dahab and Nuweiba. The spiritual radiance of the Sufi shrine is enhanced by its exotic location in a remote mountain range inhabited by nomadic people from an ethnic minority. The widespread appreciation of twenty-first-century intellectuals for the non-binary, non-rationalist ecstasy of Islamic mysticism stands in a contrast to intellectuals of past generations, who more often saw in the same Sufi shrines a source of backwardness and error. The sociologist Sayyid Uways (1998), who with remarkable perceptiveness studied the letters sent or brought in the 1960s to the grave of the legal scholar Imam Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi‘i (d. 820), also insisted that the visitors were ultimately mistaken and misguided in their hope to reach the Imam al-Shafi‘i through their letters. Many among the current cosmopolitan intelligentsia, in contrast, actively embrace mysticism – some from the distance of uncommitted fascination and exploration, others by actually joining the mystical path in the guidance of a spiritual leader.

Also in more worldly terms, writers and intellectuals from the same alternative-bourgeois milieu appear less likely than their predecessors to try and act as

a conscience of any nation, and more likely to search and create something valuable among a circle that is willing to share in the attempt. In a conceptual essay included in the same issue of *Amkenah*, the anthropologist Amal Idris-Haroun (2019) points at the paradox of that move: the circle is also the shape of power in capitalism based on circulation, and as much we may seek to overcome the oppressive power of the global economy, our alternative lives, too, take the shape of chosen circles that exclude what does not fit into them.

Alternative lifestyles tend to be romantic by default – not necessarily in the sense of romantic subjectivity, but in the sense that they are driven by a longing for something more immediate and humane than capitalist production-consumption processes, governmental power, and urban anonymity. However, the paradox is that such longing becomes possible only with the material and energy resources provided by precisely those processes. It is not the point of view of the few remaining nomads of Egypt; it is the point of view of highly educated city-dwellers with cosmopolitan connections who have the means to desire something they miss in their urban lifeworlds and see (or hope to see) realised in nomadic lives. That vision renders invisible the history of internal colonisation of desert regions by the Egyptian state – especially the Sinai, and more recently, the disputed border territory of Shalatin and Halayeb in the southern Red Sea region – which has made those regions now increasingly accessible for urbanites searching for alternative lives.

Amro Ali's proposal to make Berlin the hub of a new narrative and mission embodied by organic intellectuals, and the visions of alternative lives and lifestyles collected by Alaa Khaled and Salwa Rashad on the pages of *Amkenah*, may at first seem to be as far apart as their respective metonymic locations: the cosmopolitan urbanity of Berlin and the mountainous desert of the Red Sea region. And yet pilgrimage to Sidi Abu al-Hasan and ecological farms and vacations in South Sinai are in a sense not so unlike Kreuzberg, the heart of left-wing multiculturalism in Berlin. The realities and possibilities they represent are all marked by their being different from a wider mainstream, however defined. They are bound to specific times, places, and groups of people that are in various ways extraordinary. While Amro Ali struggles with their resulting insular tendency and hopes to overcome it, Alaa Khaled and the authors of the new issue of *Amkenah* rather embrace it.

This productive tension has an important recent history: the 25 January revolution, which failed in changing the regime, but succeeded in creating temporary revolutionary heterotopias that live on as political myths – and by so doing has also made islands of alternative lifestyle more attractive. At the same time, such alternative islands are also among the few possible paths left: ten years after the uprising, they remain possible and to some degree safe because they don't chal-

lenge dominant relations of power, while attempts at wide-scale societal or political mobilisation will now very likely result in exile, imprisonment, or death.

No matter whether authors have the explicit aim to offer critical questioning or concrete utopias (as in Chapter 5), literature as a social space is much more prone to generate heterotopias, that is, special spaces out of the ordinary, than it is to communicate with the society widely. Very few literary texts accomplish the latter feat. And yet this is not to say that heterotopias would be ineffective, lost, wasted in a black hole. What if we instead think of the lives and writings that are produced in rural literary pockets, in the various circles and scenes in Alexandria we studied, and in the bohemian-bourgeois exiles in Berlin as an accomplishment? They would be a dubious accomplishment for sure, one that comes at the price of various layers of exclusion and seclusion. But they are an accomplishment all the same, a landscape of alternative lives that are effective not because they may or may not heal Egypt, the Arab world, or Germany, but simply because people who entertained them have indeed generated real alternative lives for themselves – even if only partially, only at specific times at marked spaces, and with many frustrations.

No matter what its intentions may be, one of the things literary writing most reliably produces are alternative lives in shared margins – although those lives generally are much more precarious, partial, and short term than those described on the pages of *Amkenah*. The parallel worlds of reading, writing, and socialising (Chapters 1, 2, and 3), the political affects cultivated in revolutionary poetry (Chapter 4), the competing myths of the city (Chapter 5), the moods generated and the claims marked by wall-writing (Chapter 6), and the search to embrace or overcome the condition of an uncertain world (Chapters 7 and 8) – all these are effective realities that have emerged from literary explorations. At the same time, these realities repeatedly, almost systematically, fall short of what those who entertained them would have expected – fame and recognition not gained, an independent life not accomplished, a reform of society not completed, a regime not overthrown, claims to public space made but not kept, ways of living in a city lost to construction projects, new ways of thinking not appreciated by conservative audiences, old ways of thinking not recognised by avant-garde critics, and the path towards certainty lost in haze.

The problem of alternative lives is not simply the question of their realisation or non-realisation. The striving to live one – be it in fictional texts, in the safe spaces of literary meetings, or in full exposure and confrontation with the social mainstream – in itself effectively produces an alternative life. The problem is that many are disappointed because they expected that other life to be happy, or long-lasting, or world-changing, or in other ways up to their ambitions – while in reality it simply is what it is: other. In that capacity of otherness, it can in turn

also ‘seep into’ (to follow the wording of Andrew Brandel 2016: 177) ordinary life, and become its ambiguous companion or accomplice.

Thinking of imaginary explorations and their practical pursuits as an effective if elusive and transient reality that simply is what it is also means that those explorations and pursuits are under no circumstances innocent (just as it would be mistaken to assume that they generally involve resistance against hegemonic powers). They are possible through available material and cultural resources, means of privilege and mobility, circles and pockets of mutual encouragement. There is no exemplary innocence nor universal inspiratory power, because every expression is enabled by strings of complicity. Attempts to accomplish such an impossible feat are worthy of attention, however, because they may result in something else, something less exemplary and less far-reaching and yet not meaningless nor insignificant. An ambitious attempt to change the world by speaking truth to power leaves a dent, as it were, in the world, while truth may not win. A pilgrimage to Sidi Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili may leave the pilgrim’s prayer unanswered, and yet it does something to the pilgrim and, with luck, may leave a trace in the readers of the travel account.

We, too, know the pull of the south-eastern desert. In February 2017, we undertook a journey – a pilgrimage, a literary exploration, a tourist trip, something of those in combination – to the shrine of Sidi Abu al-Hasan (Shehata 2019). After a hazardous car ride in the night, we arrived at the site, which we found almost empty because it was a working day and not the pilgrimage season. The next morning, we gathered at the shrine. Each of us had come with urgent worries at the back of our minds, but sitting in the realm of the sheikh, we found that we had no questions to ask. If the journey had seemed to have a purpose before we undertook it, once we arrived, we found that it was its own purpose and outcome.

Image 52: The homeward journey begins after a pilgrimage to Sidi Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili, Humaythara, February 2017.