

MICHAEL ALLAN AND
ZEINA G. HALABI

Introduction

In a famous scene from Tayeb Salih's *Mawsim al-Hijra ila al-Shamal* (1966; *Season of Migration to the North* [1969]), the narrator scans various books arranged in the library of Mustafa Sa'eed. A list of categories and titles follows: "Books on economics, history and literature. Zoology. Geology. Mathematics. Astronomy. The Encyclopedia Britannica." As though a seemingly exhaustive catalog, the passage goes on to reference specific types of books on the shelf: "Books bound in leather. Books in paper covers. Old, tattered books. Books that look as though they'd just come straight from the printers." Eventually, as the seemingly endless list continues, the narrator makes a harrowing observation: "Not a single Arabic book." Shocked by this glaring absence, he adds "A graveyard. A mausoleum. An insane idea. A prison. A huge joke" (Salih, 1966/2009: 137).

The absence of Arabic literature in the imaginary library at the heart of this canonical Arabic novel has been read, quite importantly, as a sign of the alienation of the Arab intellectual. Mustafa Sa'eed, like the book's narrator, studied in England before returning to Sudan, and both characters share the struggle that this experience imposes upon them. The lacuna in the scholarly library gestures to the limits of colonial education, but it also invites a broader set of questions about the place of Arabic in world literature. Were one to reconcile the limits of this fictional library, what titles might be added to the shelf? What might it mean to count, catalog, and canonize a collection of books that could be understood as modern Arabic literature? And what sorts of occlusions would, with time, seem as glaring as the linguistic occlusion framed at the heart of Tayeb Salih's novel?

For scholars of Arabic language and literature, there is a temptation to treat modern Arabic literature as a problem of taxonomy, to frame the terms of a field whose contours can be known and defined, and to reckon with the imperial oversights manifest in collections such as Mustafa Sa'eed's library. There is equally a temptation to assert that modern Arabic literature is somehow distinct from the traditions and debates contained in other

languages on the library shelf. The first of these two positions treats modern Arabic literature as a supplement to world literature. In this understanding, the oversight of world literature can be corrected, improved, and remedied by assimilating more linguistic traditions into its fold. Reckoning with the absence of Arabic titles in Mustafa Sa'eed's library would be a matter of adding books to the shelves, enriching the collection with a list of recognizably Arabic titles. Arabic authors would stand alongside other literary greats – Charles Dickens, Gustave Flaubert, and Naguib Mahfouz – each conferring value one unto the other. Were one to add Taha Hussein, Radwa Ashour, Ghassan Kanafani, and Hoda Barakat, the library would grow ever better, or so it might seem.

Countering the world literature model, the second temptation, which espouses the logic of exceptionality, is equally pernicious. In this understanding, Arabic literature – with its specific poetic, liturgical, and prose traditions – requires being studied on its own terms, separate from the universalizing lexicon imposed upon it by world literature. The modern Arabic novel, far from being a foreign and adapted literary form, derives from traditions such as the *ḥikāya*, the *ḥadīth*, the *maqāma*, and the *riwāya*, something scholars have claimed even about Salih's novel. For scholars invested in this position, the absence of Arabic titles on the shelf is less a problem of supplementarity than it is a matter of Arabic exceptionality. With its own history, critical vocabulary, and disciplinary traditions, modern Arabic literature is seen to require its own library, its own set of references, and its own texts, rather than simply being merged into the various languages, forms, and genres of world literature. Or so we might be led to believe.

Alongside the logic of the supplement and the exception, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Arabic Literature* embraces debates within modern Arabic literature as a paradigmatic framework for literary study. Neither a supplement to world literature nor exceptional to its generalizable terms, modern Arabic literature informs the very questions that constitute historical, national, linguistic, and literary grounds. Whether in terms of its transnational dimensions (from Iraq, Palestine, and Syria to Morocco, Algeria, and the Arab diaspora) or its linguistic registers (from *fuṣḥā* to *‘āmmiyya*), modern Arabic literature helps both to unsettle and enrich the terms of literary inquiry, especially as regards periodization, language, history, and genre. What follows in this volume delineates frameworks and debates that highlight the dynamic contours of our field. Divided into four parts, the volume connects modern Arabic literature to world literature, comparative literature, Middle East studies, and literary history, as well as to media studies and feminist, queer, and ecological criticism. In this sense, the volume

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is both local, anchored in specific time periods, texts, and references, and outward-looking, connecting, relating, and unsettling how many categorizations have traditionally functioned.

The critical corpus that has informed how we research, translate, anthologize, and teach modern Arabic literature has attempted to challenge Orientalist injunctions to celebrate the classical age as the epitome of Arab civilization and aesthetics. Since the 1970s, scholars have read the modern iterations of Arabic literature as a tradition in the making, one that both resonates with Western literary narratives and is also rooted in premodern Arab tropes and genres. These scholars have pointed to the ways in which modern Arabic literature ultimately evokes a modern Arab world view, against the backdrop of faltering nation-states and the ebb and flow of national liberation movements. Scholarship that has defined our field has often aimed to demonstrate both the authenticity and the modernity of Arabic literature in the long twentieth century. These works tend to focus on narrative genres, such as in Roger Allen's *Selected Studies in Modern Arabic Narrative: History Genre Translation* (2019) with attention to the biography, the novella, and the short story (Hafez, 2007), but also, at times, almost exclusively with attention to the novel, such as in Muhsin al-Musawi's *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel: Debating Ambivalence* (2003).

While the origins, history, and transformation of the Arabic novel are frequently chronicled with regards to debates about tradition and modernity, the scope of Western influences continues to animate current scholarship on genre (Hafez, 1993; Moosa, 1997). As the national guardian of the modern tradition, Arab secular male poets such as Mahmoud Darwish (Nassar and Rahman, 2008), novelists such as Naguib Mahfouz (Davies-Johnson, 2011), thinkers such as Taha Hussein (Malti-Douglas, 2014), and playwrights such as Saadallah Wannous (Mejcher-Atassi & Myers, 2021) have often taken centerstage. Parallel to the genre-focused approach, scholars of modern Arabic literature have also tended to conduct historiographies of modern Arabic literature. Literary historians have examined the Nahda as the precursor of literary modernity and the postcolonial nation-state as the reluctant upholder of its values. These scholars often focus on historical junctures that mark the beginning or end of decisive eras (e.g. pre-1948, post-1967, pre-civil war, post-Nasser), approaches that can be found, for instance, in Deheuvels, Michalak-Pikulska, and Paul Starkey's *Intertextuality in Modern Arabic Literature Since 1967* (2006), which narrate the changes within modern literature through the lens of the nation-state. In this spirit, the modern literary tradition is not only a window to historicize the modern Arab world, it also presents a literary corpus that helps account for

sociological changes and transformations within Arab cities and societies, and social classes (Hafez, 1993).

The heterodoxy of the field has been unsettled by scholarship that attempts to redress the centrality of the Egypt/Levant model, of *fuṣḥā* as the sole language of the literary (Booth, 1990), and of secular nationalist male intellectuals as gatekeepers of the tradition (Booth 2001, 2022; Cooke, 1996). Despite groundbreaking attempts to identify the aporias of the canon and close its epistemological gaps, the national secular identity of modern Arabic literature and the dominance of its temporal, linguistic, and genre-specific presumptions remain the norm by which Arabic literature is most frequently anthologized and by which its canonical scholars are initiated. Scholars such as Roger Allen (2019), Mustafa Badawi (1993), and André Miquel (1993) provide frameworks that organize key time periods and writers, and others such as Sabry Hafez (1993) and Matti Moosa (1997) narrate the rise of the novel in Arabic, providing overviews of specific texts alongside a broader historical narrative. Wail Hassan's handbook (2017) and Salma Khadra Jayyusi's anthologies (1991, 2008) provide robust research tools with a different aim than that of this volume.

Acknowledging critical breakthroughs that have marked the field of Arabic literature, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Arabic Literature* probes a century of scholarship concerned with the linguistic and cultural specificities of the modern literary canon to defend its authenticity. It does so by challenging the centrality of the epistemological model of time/language/geography/medium that has marked the field of Arabic literature. In so doing, the volume delineates the uncharted path that constitutes the future of modern Arabic literature. *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Literature* challenges the fundamental contours of the field and engages in close readings of paradigmatic works of modern Arabic literature. The goal, then, is not to provide a systematizing catalog of titles and authors, but to demonstrate, through its close engagement with texts, how modern Arabic literature enriches and nuances connections to literary study across national and linguistic frameworks.

Scope and Structure

In both scope and structure, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Arabic Literature* provides a critical framework for scholars at all levels to engage key debates and questions in the field. The various chapters draw together cutting-edge experts from across the world and at various levels in their careers to contextualize critical debates through the close analysis of specific literary texts. What emerges is both a reference guide for readers interested in

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field-defining questions and a model for the critical analysis of specific works of modern Arabic literature. From novels and poetry to digital media, and from North Africa and the Gulf to the Arab diaspora, the volume helps to define the key topics, themes, and questions that have structured conversations in the past. The volume also looks to the future, engaging contemporary developments in the politics and aesthetics of modern Arabic and considering how current textual practices inform potential directions for the field.

We have organized *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Arabic Literature* around the coordinates of time, geography, language, and media of modern Arabic. These four key parts are meant to entertain the shifting and evolving contours of our field of study. The chapters in the volume shed light on questions that permeate other national and non-national literary traditions, and they each emphasize how Arabic literature intersects with fundamental literary questions: everything from the historical and material grounds of disciplines and institutions to the style, form, and use of language in its numerous registers. The volume thus challenges conventional structures for world literature (based on authors, generations, nations, or genre), with an eye to the numerous entanglements and contributions that modern Arabic literature offers to literary analysis within and beyond the region known as the Middle East.

Each chapter revolves around a key term, providing a point of entry for readers interested in a specific question within modern Arabic literature, and highlights a specific case through which to reflect on the significance of critical concepts. What emerges is a constellation of writers, thinkers, and topics that help to illuminate general problems of literary form with readings and engagements with literary texts. The volume, then, contains multitudes, serving both as an index and an archive of passages from modern Arabic literature, and as a gesture toward future paths for reading, engaging, and imagining our field. As you will see, what follows revolves around questions rather than time periods and geographies – that is, the parts address the when, what, where, and how of modern Arabic literature.

When? The Time of Modern Arabic Literature

To establish the groundwork for the volume, the first part explores the temporal dimensions intrinsic to the periodization of modern Arabic literature. What is the time of modern Arabic literature? How has time been construed and preserved in literary forms? How has periodization been revisited and challenged? An enduring origin story marks Napoleon's arrival on the shores of Egypt in 1798 as a crucial year for transformations integral to the rise of a modern era. As the story goes, translations across languages,

the emergence of new genres, as well as transformations in schooling help to facilitate Arabic literature as a site within a world republic of letters. And yet, as the three chapters in this opening part attest, this pervasive timeline is far from straightforward. Hannah Scott Deuchar helps to highlight how there were writers, readers, and literary practices well in advance of Napoleon's arrival, and how social reforms linked to modernization were already underway during the Ottoman period. Maha AbdelMegeed allows us to understand how the common distinction between modern and classical Arabic literature, which turns on a chronological approach to literary history, necessarily confronts the recurrence and reformulation of classical forms within the modern period. And in Chapter 3, Teresa Pepe moves from reflections on pasts and presents to consider the future, which she tracks through Arabic science fiction, posthumanism, and the waning of the Anthropocene. This opening cluster of chapters helps to underscore the shifting temporalities that expand modern Arabic beyond the constraints of periodization.

Few frameworks permeate and fossilize modern Arabic literature as much as the *Nahda*. Hannah Scott Deuchar's opening chapter provides a critical approach to uses of the term and its impact on the imaginaries of literary pasts and futures. She turns, in doing so, to Jurji Zaydan's 1892 article, "*al-Nahda al-Misriyya al-Akhira*" ("The Recent Egyptian *Nahda*"), which already features the ambivalence the term has. Merely to invoke the *Nahda*, Scott Deuchar argues, is to name a historical moment in order to make a claim about history itself. She builds from this observation to note how the term often accompanies discourses of cultural decline (*inḥiṭāt*) and freedom (*hurriyya*) in the Ottoman context, and uprisings or revolts, such as the term's use in the comparative analysis of Turkish and Indian reforms. From seemingly finite textual details, Scott Deuchar extrapolates an entire critical approach. She offers a conceptual history of a key term and ultimately situates Arabic literature within global discourses of modernity at the crossroads of history, empire, and revolution.

Alongside the prevalent *Nahda* framework are the concepts and practices of modernity, often measured against a European scale of time and historical development. Maha AbdelMegeed grapples with how modernity informs and frames approaches to modern Arabic literature. She notes a persistence of a cartographic imaginary that delineates European from non-European literature on an imagined map of world literary forms. She argues that this geographic compartmentalization limits constructive approaches to the literary dimensions of modern works. Her chapter turns to Muhammad al-Muwaylihi's (1858–1930) *Hadith 'Isa ibn Hisham* (1907), which she analyzes for its formal coherence and narrative epistemology. Rather than contextualize al-Muwaylihi within received understandings of history, she

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weighs how the complexities of literary form in al-Muwaylihi's work allow for the reimagination of history itself. Emphasizing conjunctions between history and form, AbdelMegeed pushes modernization beyond the spatial and temporal axes through which it is commonly understood. She thus centers literary form as inseparable from modernity itself.

How have Arab writers since the Nahda conceived of the future? How do they evoke their ecological aspirations and anxieties in futurist literature? And what do their changing visions of ecological futurism tell us about what has constituted the political in the long twentieth century? Teresa Pepe moves from reflections on pasts and presents to consider the future, which she tracks through Arabic science fiction, posthumanism, and the waning of the Anthropocene. She looks closely at how the Egyptian writer Ahmad Khalid Tawfiq speculates about the social – economic effects of anthropogenic changes in his bestselling novel *Yutubiya* (2008; *Utopia* [2012]). The literature of ecological futurism in Egypt, in both its utopian and dystopian iterations, is abound with the theme of “greening the desert,” a necessary condition for colonial domination and, later, national autonomy. Entwining discourses of posthumanism and the Anthropocene with Arabic literature, the chapter expands outward to map writers from Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, all of whom enfold the futures of science fiction with reflections on the present and the past. Like Scott Deuchar and AbdelMegeed, Pepe provides a pathway through which to understand the dynamics of temporality and history that inform modern Arabic literature.

What? The Languages of Modern Arabic Literature

Where the first section questions the “when” of Arabic literature, the second considers the language(s) of Arabic. It might seem a truism to ask what is Arabic in modern literature, and yet the four chapters in this second part each consider some of the dynamic linguistic questions at the heart of modern Arabic. What is Arab in modern Arabic literature? How are questions of power and gatekeeping predicated on the standardization of *fuṣḥā*? In what ways do the vernacularity and hybridity of Arabic challenge linguistic and nationalist presumptions about aesthetics and unsettle the status of Arabic as a transregional language? And how does the translation of Arabic literature contribute to processes of canonization, whether in the national or world literary canons? These are a few of the questions that the authors of this part on the language of modern Arabic literature address. They do so by examining works by canonical writers and thinkers, such as Taha Hussein; renowned but yet to be canonized poets of the oral poetic tradition, such as

Fuad Haddad, Salah Jahin, and ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Abnudi; and writers like Mourad Alami, whose works have yet to receive critical attention.

The binary *fuṣḥāl/‘āmmiyya* model of reading the linguistic properties of the modern tradition is under scrutiny in this part. Noha Radwan speaks of Haddad, Jahin, and al-Abnudi as a group of vernacular poets in 1960s Egypt, who sought to uphold the political and aesthetic potential of colloquial poetry, decentering thereby the power of *fuṣḥā* as the sole vehicle of the aesthetics/politics nexus. The divide, to which Radwan points, appears to have a history, as Kristen Brustad suggests. She shows how the demarcation between *fuṣḥā* and *‘āmmiyya* is a thing of Arab modernity, one that had been hitherto foreign, where the vernacular, or multiple registers, of Arabic had always overlapped in literary Arabic. If this divide has a history, then it can and must be challenged – a challenge that Brahim El Guabli takes on in his chapter on Darija. El Guabli makes a case for reading the modern tradition of Morocco outside the binary model of Arabic/Francophone. El Guabli explores what he calls the “syncretism” of Darija, a hybrid register that would allow us to read the Moroccan novel phenomenologically, at the interstices of multiple languages and registers, making available experiences of what it has meant to be Moroccan in the twentieth century.

Nationalism is inextricably linked to the historical (hence, historicizable) divide between *fuṣḥā* and *‘āmmiyya*. Twentieth-century nationalist or proto-nationalist movements and ideologies, whether promoting anticolonial national independence or transregional unity, were focused on denouncing, then erasing, non-Arab influences on the Arabic language. El Guabli argues how anticolonial processes of Arabizing the postcolonial Moroccan state have led to the foreignization, if not vilification, of the Amazigh language spoken by the majority of Moroccans as the language that had been protected by the French colonizers as a means to divide the Moroccan nation. On the reverse of the coin, the celebration of *‘āmmiyya* in Egypt, whether in poetry or other art forms under Nasser, cannot be separated, as one deduces from Radwan’s chapter, from proponents of Nasserism that found in the Egyptian *‘āmmiyya* the vehicle of and receptacle for an anticolonial socialist Egyptian and, hence, authentic subjectivity (*dhāt aṣīla*). Whether in Morocco or in Egypt, Darija or *‘āmmiyya*, anticolonialism was a defining feature of the gatekeepers of the Arabic linguistic divide.

If the *fuṣḥāl/‘āmmiyya* divide cannot be dissociated from nationalism and anticolonial projects, then the power-laden processes of both “Arabization” and “standardization” are inextricably linked to the power of the Arab postcolonial states. The standardization of *fuṣḥā*, which began as an intellectual endeavor by Nahda intellectuals, as Brustad argues, morphed in its postcolonial nationalist iterations into language academics, state-led

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institutions that ensured the purity of *fuṣḥā*, as a state language, while strictly managing processes of domestication of imported lexicon. El Guabli speaks about how the consolidation of linguistic power in the hands of the state has led not only to the domination of Arabic at the expense of Francophone and Darija literatures, but also to the emergence of an elite in Morocco, representing the interest of both the state and the class of language purists. This consolidation of power at the hand of the state has led to a static understanding of what Arabic can be and has precluded notions of change, whether linguistic or political. It has specifically elided the political critique inherent in non-Arabic registers – namely, literature in Darija and *‘āmmiyya* – and has led to the marginalization of literary voices resisting state orthodoxies. This has had stakes, as Anna Ziajka Stanton argues, in how Arabic literature has been translated, and in what has been made legible or foreign in translation practices. Equally attentive to the mechanics of power and the language of the literary, Stanton posits that even though translations of Arabic literature have made Arabic literature legible within the canon of world literature, they have yet to deprovincialize literatures of Europe and North America, which continue to influence processes of canonization in the Arab world through translations and literary awards.

Engaging with modern Arabic means recognizing that modern Arabic literature is itself a field of contestations within the Arabic language, enough so that what it means to read in Arabic means questioning the very grounds of language for this intrinsically transnational and translational literature. And so, to unsettle the *fuṣḥā/‘āmmiyya* binary by examining its link to the emergence of the postcolonial state or its fusional relationship with power is to rethink the perennial question: Where to locate the literary in the *fuṣḥā/‘āmmiyya* binary? Thus, what is, again, *adab*? Read separately and together, the four chapters of this section cannot seem to dissociate the historicizable, power-laden status of *fuṣḥā* from the status and power of grammarians whose linguistic worldview has set the parameters for the ways in which literature has been defined and experienced. These four authors point to Darija, *shi’r al-‘āmmiyya*, novels in *‘āmmiyya*, and the politics of their translation as an exit from the rigidity of the binary model. They also seem to suggest ways in which we can read the political and aesthetic in the crypt of that which is modern, standard, and Arabic in modern Arabic literature.

Where? The Geography of Modern Arabic Literature

Moving from time and language, the third part broaches the geographies of modern Arabic to question the spatial paradigm of world literature. Where do we locate the boundaries of modern Arabic literature? Are regional

classifications viable tools to understand the literary in the contemporary moment? Moneera al-Ghadeer, Yasmine Khayyat, Samia Kassab-Charfi, and Johanna Sellman each take up questions of regionalism that permeate the study of modern Arabic literature by examining the specificities of spatial categories such as East, West, and Gulf, and the genre of exile literature. They raise questions about national literary currents internal to these designations in the works of authors such as Mohammed Hasan Alwan, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Rabai al-Madhoun, Jawdat Fakhreddine, Abbas Beydoun, and Béchir Khraïef, blurring the lines between regionalism and nationalism in constructive ways. Each of their chapters explores connections to fields such as Indian Ocean studies, Mediterranean studies, and African studies to consider how regional framings inform our reading of modern Arabic literature.

The geography of the modern Arabic literary tradition points to the Mashriq, Maghrib, Khaliq, even Exile, as cardinal points, to each its etymology, genealogy, and inherent tensions that still intersect at three crucial points: These spatial categories imply a relational position, condition subject (de-)formation, and presume imagined homogeneity. Together, the authors ask timely questions about the viability of these special categories in the contemporary juncture.

Although the nominations of Mashriq and Maghrib are etymologically derived from the movement of the sun, they perform much more. All four authors historicize the geography of the modern and point to the cardinal points as being always already in relation – a troubled one, at that – to a constructed locus, a European center that they are expected to mirror, casting “doubt on the centrality of the Center, of the mainland with its discriminating symbolic structures,” as Kassab-Charfi argues. The Mashriq evokes similar disquiet as a space defined not only by its troubled relationship with the center, as represented by capital cities and urban literary circles, but also through having the state of Israel in its orbit. Khayyat points to how “Poets of the South” Abbas Beydoun and Jawdat Fakhreddine are subaltern to Beirut while being tragically proximate to Palestine, which they could only experience through the violence of the Israeli state that permeates the fragile borders. Exile, as Sellman maintains, evokes a similar relational problem as its “semantic field encompasses words linked to expulsion, banishment, and negation,” a state of detachment from a national or linguistic space of origin.

While the spatial categories of Mashriq and Exile are relational in terms of their proximity or marginality to a constructed center, they have an additional layer of marginality that pertains to their intrinsic connection to the Palestinian question. The literatures of Mashriq and Exile, as Khayyat and Sellman argue, are predicated on the intersection of loss, romanticized or violent. To Khayyat, the Mashriq is an imagined category, whose borders are

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imbricated in violence that remains outside discourse and language, one that engenders an ethos of resistance – from Sartre’s travelling notion of literature of commitment, *adab al-iltizām*, and Ghassan Kanafani’s *adab al-muqāwama* (resistance literature), all the way to their contemporary iterations in the genre of *al-adab al-mushtabik* (embedded literature), materializing under Israeli occupation and held witness to it. Akin to the category of Mashriq, exilic literature can also be traced to an original juncture of loss that defined consecutive generations of Palestinian intellectuals, from Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Edward Said, and Mahmoud Darwish all the way to Rabai al-Madhoun, whose work Johanna Sellman reads in great detail. If the cardinal points are always already relational, they are bound to be linked to the ontological. The question is not only about where the literary is positioned in relation to a constructed locus, it is also about how subjectivities are constructed in the same process.

Sellman maintains that exilic literature suggests a necessary opposition between self and place. The exiled are stranded between two spaces from which they are denied: their place of origin and that of their exile. This position of this double and enduring estrangement allows exilic subjects to cultivate a “scrupulous subjectivity,” as Edward Said would have it (1983, p. 27), an “originality of vision” that unsettles the normative, allowing the exiled to engage in what Said identifies as secular criticism, which draws on a word-centered episteme that becomes a catalyst for change and emancipation (pp. 1–30). Exile literature is thus bound to animate characters that are exilic intellectuals: “knowledge peddlers,” as Jabra would describe his generation of Palestinian exiles, portrayed as tragic romantic figures, as a modernizing force and a force of a troubled Arab modernity (1979, p. 83). If the experience of exile is intrinsic to subject formation, then the writers’ geographic proximity to Palestine, as a land they cannot access and their imbrication in the violence of war, engenders an anxiety of writing, of responding to the political/aesthetic nexus, as Yasmine Khayat maintains.

Perhaps no other geographic category unsettles its presumed homogeneity other than that of the Maghrib. Like all other categories, the Maghrib is a transnational category, but it is unique insofar as it brings together literatures of Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria, with European, Mediterranean, African, Eastern Arab influences, inviting literatures of the North African Francophone diaspora and gesturing hesitantly to that of the Amazigh. This network of influences, languages, registers, and accents, the constellation of travelling authors and traditions, constitute together what Kassab-Charfi identifies as literary “capillaries,” so complex that they don’t sit comfortably in the presumed stable border and uniform identity of the Maghrib. The national framework for reading Maghrib literature becomes so permeable,

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having “a profound effect on literary creation, of which it is in a way a metonymy,” as Kassab-Charfi aptly puts it.

With an eye on the contemporary moment, the authors examine the viability of these geographic categories. Khayyat ascertains that the category of the Mashriq will remain viable as long as it remains positioned in relation to the state of Israel and imbued with violence and loss. Sellman articulates the question from another angle: how to read exile literature today through the tensions and contradictions the category implies, in relation to the emerging genres of refugee literature or literature of forced migration. Can we continue to sustain a theoretical and ethical distinction, she asks, between literature of exile and that of displacement and migration? Sellman’s answer is conditional on whether the concept of exile will be able to sustain an ethical orientation vis-à-vis emergent forms of displacement even as it positions itself within the capacities that literature and arts can offer. Kassab-Charfi maintains her skepticism toward the category, insisting on finding a way to make visible the capillary nature of Maghrib literature beyond Arab and French-centered, nationalist, and inherently restrictive worldviews. Pointing to the conceptual limitations inherent in the category of “Gulf literature,” Moneera al-Ghadeer argues for a critical move to reposition “the Gulf” identity “in relation to the landscape of Arabic literature, to that from which it was disconnected as a geography and culture.” Finding the balance between a critical eye on local specificities and a commitment to reading Gulf literature outside the logic of exceptionalism and isolationism is a way for al-Ghadeer to take the category forward.

How? The Media of Modern Arabic Literature

The fourth section raises questions about the media, forms, and genres of modern Arabic. How is modern Arabic literature aestheticized, produced, and circulated? What are its primary genre and forms? How does modern Arabic literature inform and transform histories of print culture, genre, and new media? From print history to textual forms, this fourth section returns to a common thread throughout the volume, which weaves together the past, present, and future of the field. In her chapter, Hala Auji reflects on the rise of modern print culture and its implications for transnational distribution and an imagined community of Arab readers. The following two chapters track debates around modern Arabic poetry and the modern Arabic novel. Jeffrey Sacks considers a fold in poetic address where Mahmoud Darwish both speaks of poetry and performs poetic speech, and Rebecca Johnson takes the novel as a transnational literary form with a rich translational and transformational history. In all three chapters, modern Arabic literature

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comes to be understood in its means of expression, whether connected to printing practices, poetic speech, or the novel as form.

Even before considerations of genre and style, modern Arabic literature turns on transformations in the circulation of print linked to developments with presses. Auji's chapter probes prevalent Eurocentric views that had overlooked the aesthetic, material, and physical attributes of eighteenth-century print. Engaging the dynamics of scriptural economies, Auji offers an overview of literary-scientific journals, serialized print, and the rise of a mass press, all while focusing on an entry on "printing" in *Kitab Da'irat al-Ma'arif* (1900), which serves as the first in-depth assessment of the technology's history and practices. She demonstrates how Arab Christian and Muslim designers did not simply incorporate Western technologies into their practice, but rather negotiated, redefined, and appropriated these technologies, thereby forging a practice at the intersection of scribal and print cultures. Her chapter unsettles prevalent narratives in Nahda historiographies that normalize East/West binaries, and suggests new notions and methodologies for texts, genres, and ideas in modern Arabic literature. She notes how the entry on printing draws Chinese print technology into the history of modern Arabic, and she directs attention not only to what the entry says, but to its mode of presentation, including questions about typography and illustration. Her chapter thus models print technology both as a thematic concern in the rise of modern Arabic literature and as a functional practice integral to the configuration of words and images on the page.

Just as Auji explores the link between literature and print culture, Jeffrey Sacks investigates how poetry engages the social implications of language. His chapter opens with Mahmoud Darwish's "The Penultimate Speech of the 'Red Indian' to the White Man," which poses the question "Will you not memorize a little poetry to halt the slaughter?" Sacks examines the question's shifting mode of address – that is, its connections to colonialism in Palestine (Darwish's origin), the United States (the site of the poem), and Iraq (under attack at the time of publication). For Sacks, poetry's "situation" is inseparable from a discourse on Arab poetics, which he carefully traces across a range of key texts: Louis Awad's *Blutoland* (*Plutoland*), Nazik al-Malaika's introduction to *Shazaya wa Ramad* (*Shrapnel and Ashes*), and Adonis's *Muqaddima li-l-Shi'r al-'Arabi* (*Introduction to Arabic Poetry*). A close reading of Darwish's poem becomes a means for thinking critically about how modern Arabic poetry resonates across geographies and political moments. At this intersection between poetry and a discourse of poetics, Sacks ultimately shows how the poetic in Darwish structures a relation to language, tradition, and time. What arises is a theory of poetry as the material forms of social existence in linguistic acts.

From the chapters on print culture and poetry, Rebecca Johnson concludes the volume by drawing our attention to the place of the novel in modern Arabic literature. Given the prominence of the novel as a basic form of national legibility within a world system, Johnson jumps into these debates directly, grappling with the perennial question of what constitutes the first Arabic novel, but also engaging the transnational origins of the form. The chapter shifts from the conventional debate over the purportedly first Arabic novel *Zaynab*, published in 1913, to focus instead on Khalil al-Khuri's *Wayy, Idhan Lastu bi-Ifranji (Alas, I Am Not a Foreigner)* from 1860. Johnson notes that this remarkable text can never be reduced to a simple story of Westernization. She looks closely at the politics of translation, adaptation, and publication, and disrupts the conventional account of the modern Arabic novel by placing translation and recreation at its heart. Her astute reading of al-Khuri's book sheds light on the modern Arabic novel as a story of circulation across and within languages. Far from serving as a fixed form, in this chapter – and across the volume – modern Arabic literature delimits a range of dynamic debates and questions that help return us to key questions about the very status of literature.

Why? The Trials of Modern Arabic Literature

If we began our introduction with an imaginary library in *Season of Migration to the North*, then we transition here to a library of a different sort – and to the central consideration of the why of modern Arabic literature. Upon his release from his ten-month sentence for breaching public decency by publishing a chapter of *Istikhdam al-Hayat* (2014; *Using Life* [2017]), the Egyptian writer Ahmed Naji published *Hirz Mikamkim: Al-Qira'a wa-l-Kitaba dakhil al-Sijn* (2020; *Rotten Evidence: Reading and Writing in an Egyptian Prison* [2024]). Naji's prison memoir does not sit comfortably in the genre of prison literature that writers such as Abdel Rahman Munif, Sonaallah Brahim, and Nawal Saadawi carved in the canon of modern Arabic literature. Instead, it takes the genre elsewhere, focusing not on the trials of the incarcerated writer, but rather on what he read during his incarceration: the prison library that was available to him in jail and the ad-hoc library he made for himself, in spite of his jailors.

Naji describes the prison library as a space designed to perform a rehabilitative role. On its shelves are books that are seemingly disparate: The memoir of Jihan al-Sadat; the complete works of Tawfiq al-Hakim, Anis Mansour, and Naguib Mahfouz; scattered volumes by Taha Hussein; Egyptian realist fiction of the 1950s; books on Christian, but mostly

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Islamic theology; others on *turāth* (tradition) translations of Orientalist authors; and many bestsellers.

Naji (2014/2017) divides the books that are permitted by the state into genres: “Greatness. Eternity. Revelation. Enlightenment. Edification. Educating the people. Lighting the path. The superiority of the Islamic bidet over the achievements of Western culture. Authenticity and modernity. Why the Arabs have lagged while others have flourished. Self and other, East and West. Cairo the victorious, built by a lowly sweet-maker” (193). This concise and sarcastic exposé of the prison library narrates the history of Arabic literature and thought since the Nahda in just a few concepts: Facing the illuminating, modernizing, if not westernizing mission of the nineteenth-century *udabāʾ* (litterateurs), Islamic thinkers sought to answer the question of the civilizational gap vis-à-vis Europe by insisting on the authenticity (*aṣāla*) of the Arabo-Islamic civilization. As the sarcastic account continues, Naji suggests that with the advent of the postcolonial moment, Islamist, leftist, and nationalist intellectuals began reckoning with a faltering Arab subjectivity in the wake of losses and setbacks. The aforementioned trials of Arab modernity found a home in the national novel, the crown jewel of the modern literary canon. Such seems to be the story of modern Arabic literature: Its *time* is the Nahda and the long twentieth century; its *language* is a sanitized modern standard Arabic; its *space* is the boundaries of the postcolonial Arab nation; and its *medium* is the national novel.

What seem at first disparate genres and titles turn out to be slogans that double in the hand of the state and its jailors, who imagine *adab* as a tool to discipline those who have strayed from the tenets of the canon, an intrinsic component of its mission of *taʿdīb* (disciplining). What does a writer who strayed from the canon read while in prison?

While Naji scoffs at the strand of modern literature made available to him by the state, he revels in the books he receives from friends, ultimately constituting his personal library. Naji asks his friends for the latest by contemporary Arab prose poets, state-of-the art experimental fiction. They send him the poetry of the libertine Abbasid poet Rashid bin Ishaq, Taha Hussein’s *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, volumes on language ideology and *turāth*, particularly through the deconstructive approach of Abdelfattah Kilito. He reads classics of world literature – Borges, Nabokov, and Kundera – but also unorthodox writers such as Galeano, Modiano, Murakami, and Susan Sontag, all in translation. In contrast to modern publishing practices that have long erased translators from the covers of their own translations, Naji understands that world literature could have only come to him through the labor of curators-translators who, like him, attempt to explore the potential of modern standard Arabic by making

available new worldviews through translation, challenging thereby the major texts and authors that constitute the modern Arab literary canon. And so he names Rana Hayek for her translation of *Des inconnues* (1999; *The Unknown*) by Modiano, Nael El-Toukhy for his translation of *Chahla ve-Hezkel* (2010; *Rachel and Ezekiel*) by the Mizrahi writer Almog Bihari, Bukowski's *South of No North* (1973), translated by Amani Lazare, among many others. As Naji presents to his readers titles and authors whose subversion of the modern canon was left unnoticed by the imagination of the prison guards, he becomes a reluctant curator of contemporary literature.

And yet, Naji does not present a fixed notion of what constitutes the contemporary in literature. Not interested in the game of definitions that his jailors had mastered, Naji shies away from explaining what contemporary literature is all about. Rather, he demonstrates it. Contemporary Arabic literature, as it transpires, is only experienced through the limits of the modern canon. Its time is the current juncture of incarceration; its language is modern but certainly not standard Arabic, and also in translation; its space trespasses the boundaries of the postcolonial Arab nation; and its medium is any text that defies attempts at classification and standardization, one that allows the incarcerated to imagine a space for the literary beyond the confines of their cell. Naji's contemporary library tells an alternative story, one that outwits that of the state that claims to safeguard readers of *adab* from the perils of contemporaneity. As we turn now to the chapters outlined here in the introduction, we enter a curated space of texts and questions, and at each stop along the way, the chapters emphasize the dynamics that keep Naji's contemporaneity ever part of the engagement with literary pasts and futures in the time, place, language, and forms of modern Arabic literature.

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