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Border Crossings: Arab Humanities at Home and Abroad

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Part I
Beirut, 2020

On September 7, 2020, Fouad Ayoub, president of the Lebanese University—the only public institution of higher education in a country with thirty-six private universities—issued an official circular addressed to students hoping to register for academic year 2020/21. Circular no. 34 stipulated that students must pledge in writing to "respect the reputation of the university, its officials, and its professors; and not to commit any aggressive act against them on social media networks, or any other visual, print, audio and electronic media outlets." Ayoub's circular welcomed the students back with a direct threat to their right of freedom of expression. The threat came in the wake of public criticism of his policy that students must sit for their exams despite the lack of appropriate COVID-19 safety protocols.

One of the core functions of the humanities is fostering close reading capacities as well as critical analytical and synthetic skills. Those of us who teach know from experience that those are not just empty mantras worn out by frequent repetition in the presence of public officials and private-sector donors who ask us to justify our utility and our existence. A deliberately slow pace of discussions in the classroom is needed to teach students how to analyze the constitutive elements of a complex structure and how to relate seemingly unrelated parts together. This deep learning process, which constitutes a momentary interruption of the faster and faster tempo of life, ends up offering students new perspectives on things.

The humanities' slowness is a virtue and a condition of possibility. It is a virtue because it enables students to step out of the dominant temporal logics governed by a drive to increase productivity. In that sense, it constitutes a momentary sanctuary from the shadow of the job market that hovers above the students' college years and pushes them to pad their résumés with a string of accomplishments and activities. It is a condition of possibility because teaching a student how to critically assess an argument and formulate one herself, orally or in writing, takes time. Nurturing the imagination and cultivating critical dispositions cannot be expedited.

The faculty of the imagination and the capacity to question critically are thus nurtured by the humanities, but they also transcend their borders. They spill over from disciplinary confines and texts into the world. We hope that the skills we nurture will enable students to reflect on what they take for granted in their lives and how they were brought up, and that in the process, the seemingly natural grip of the forces constituting their worlds will be loosened. When the humanities are enabled to fulfill their core mission, they are self-surpassing.[1] They are transposable to multiple academic domains and relevant outside of the academy. The humanities are integral to an informed understanding of and engagement in public life. More than any other cluster of subjects, the humanities tie the university not to profit-making markets and the specialized worlds of experts but to the polis.

This role of the humanities outside the university can help us understand the Lebanese public university's predicament. Ayoub's circular requiring students to take a vow of public silence undercuts the mission of the university. It forbids individual students from criticizing the administration's policies, and in doing so, it seeks to underscore that students, as a collective body, have no say in how the institution is run. It imagines education as the delivery of content to mute subjects of top-down administrative policy, forgetting that students are citizens or residents who have a right to freedom of speech and to engage in public life. In the wake of pressure from student groups and concerned faculty, Ayoub momentarily backed off, withdrawing—for the time being—the circular. Having lost trust in their administration, student groups are still not sure about what the future may bring.

The questions Ayoub's circular raised about freedom of expression, censorship, and the undercutting of the mission of the university (by its own administration) are hardly new to students and researchers in the Arab world. How can the humanities' nourishing of the faculty of imagination and its fostering of self-surpassing critical skills flourish when the public university works to curtail its students' public critical speech?

Cairo–Paris–Cairo, 1913–19

Let's leave Lebanon for a minute and head back in time to early twentieth-century Egypt. Taha Hussein (1889–1973), a towering Egyptian thinker, relates how the Egyptian University, shortly after it was founded in 1908, sought to control the

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[1] Rosalind C. Morris, "Conflicts and Crisis in the Faculties: The Humanities in an Age of Identity," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 84, no. 3 (2017): 589.

research of Egyptian graduate students enrolled in foreign universities. Those students, Hussein recalls, had to receive the approval of the Egyptian University's administration, which requested to read their dissertations before they were submitted at the university they were enrolled in abroad.[2] This requirement was set up after the commotion and public indignation produced by a dissertation on the status of women in Islam defended in 1913 at the Sorbonne in Paris. Its author, Mansur Fahmi, lost his position at the Egyptian University and didn't regain it until after World War I. Hussein recalls that while he was a university student in Cairo, he was summoned by the university's administrative council, which read him a thesis by an Egyptian student in Europe before interrogating him about its content. When Hussein completed his dissertation at the Sorbonne on Ibn Khaldun, the fourteenth-century Arab thinker, he complied with the university's regulations and sent a copy back to Egypt for approval before submitting it to the Sorbonne.

Hussein's recollections do not only inform us about the policies instituted by the Egyptian University early on, when Egypt was still under British colonial rule, to police and censor the work of Egyptian graduate students earning doctoral degrees in the humanities abroad. More important, in relating the Fahmi incident, Hussein underscores how, from very early on, research in the humanities crossed the disciplinary boundaries of specialized research in the academy to stir fiery societal debates. In other words, even works like dissertations, which are not necessarily addressed to an audience of nonspecialized readers, could become the subject of public ideological polarization and conflict in the society at large. These political contestations are not without serious personal consequences for researchers like Fahmi and others who were caught in maelstroms because of their works. I come to the predicament of researchers a little bit later in this essay. Before I do so, it is worth mulling for a bit longer over the question of the ideological impact and reception some works in the humanities have outside the confines of academia in the Arab world.

Every once in a while, the Arab humanities move out of their home bases to become a site of contestation over the soul of the national or religious community.

> The Arab humanities, today in particular, far exceed the territorial borders of the Arab region. . . . What effects does the deterritorialization of research and teaching of the humanities produce?

2 Taha Hussein, *The Days* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2001), 364.

Let us take a quick historical detour that will flesh out that point. A fundamental feature of anticolonial nationalisms in Asia and Africa, writes Partha Chatterjee, is the division of "the world of social institutions and practices into two domains—the material and the spiritual."[3] The material domain, he tells us, is the "outer" one that encompasses spheres like the economy, science, and technology, in which the West has firmly established its superiority. Modernization, development, catching up with West, industrialization, economic models, engineering, and so on belong to the outer domain. The spiritual domain, on the other hand, is the "inner" one that is the sanctuary of identities, cultures, forms of life, and worldviews. Keeping in mind Chatterjee's distinctions, we can look at the humanities in the Arab world, which have a predilection for engaging questions of self and other or past and present as explorations that take place in the inner spiritual domain. The "other" that scholars could not help but reckon with was, of course, the West. First, it was a colonial military occupying force. Then, after independence, the structural imbalance in economic, political, military, and cultural power between the former colonial powers and their former colonies affected the lives of successive generations.

Beirut, 1978

Conceptual translation is a helpful tool for examining how Arab thinkers explored the relationship between self and other as they reckoned with the question of modernity and its relation to the West. Some sought to "nativize" foreign, modern concepts by finding their equivalents in Arab–Islamic histories and cultures. For instance, they would call for an indigenous Arab or Islamic socialism whose origins they traced back to the life and deeds of one of Prophet Muhammad's early companions. Alternatively, they would argue that the principles of capitalism could be found in Islam. These strategies of translation, which sought to bridge the gap between self and other and past and present, were criticized for their ahistorical logics. Their critics argued that they sought to ignore historical transformations by attempting to prove the existence of the fundamental principles of such a wide array of modern practices, ideologies, and economic systems in the sacred book and in early Arab–Islamic societies and cultures. Husayn Muruwwa (c. 1910–1987), the Lebanese former cleric who became an acclaimed communist literary critic and Islamic studies scholar, was one those who questioned these ahistorical shortcuts. He proposed a historically materialist reading

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[3] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 6.

of Arab-Islamic cultural heritage that underscored its historical dynamism in its own context as he sought to "uncover indigenous sources of radicalism to more firmly root the Arab liberation movement in a cultural context of its own."[4]

The politics of conceptual translation are influenced by the translator's intended audience. When the translator is addressing a local audience and translating a foreign concept (as Muruwwa did), rendering the unfamiliar familiar takes the form of nativizing concepts and rereading one's tradition through the conceptual lens of other traditions. At other times, a translator takes their own tradition's concepts and seeks to render them familiar in the eyes of foreign audiences. For instance, the concept of *shura* in Islam (the principle of consultation) is sometimes translated as "democracy" to unfamiliar audiences.

These various strategies of translation shed light on how Arab intellectuals reckoned with the question of modernity. Whether they were addressing Arab audiences or foreign (predominantly Western) audiences, their different translation strategies underscored how their societies can be modern on their own terms. The conceptual resources of their traditions, they argued, enable them to be modern without being forced into the mold of the Western intellectual tradition. They can also generate an internal emancipatory dynamic without undergoing Westernization, which requires a radical break with the past and abandoning one's cultural heritage.

New York–Bloomington, 1980

Allow me to flesh out this last point out by underscoring how these politics of translation do not happen in a vacuum but are often a response to multiple powers. I do so by relating stories of racist encounters from the memoirs of Leila Ahmed (b. 1940), an Egyptian-born scholar of women studies and religion, who has produced important works on gender and Islam. Ahmed retraces her early interactions with US-based feminisms and women's studies conferences—at Barnard College and in Bloomington, Indiana—underscoring her shock at the "combination of hostility and sheer ignorance" that she, and other Muslim panelists, encountered from the White women in attendance. It is worth quoting her recollections at length:

> Whatever aspect of our history or religion each of us had been trying to reflect
> on, we would be besieged, at the end of our presentations, with furious ques-

[4] Steve Tamari, "Reclaiming the Islamic Heritage: Marxism and Islam in the Thought of Husayn Muruwah," *Arab Studies Journal* 3, no. 1 (1995): 123.

tions and declarations openly dismissive of Islam. People quite commonly did not even seem to know that there was some connection between the patriarchal vision to be found in Islam and that in Judaism and Christianity. Regularly we would be asked belligerently, "Well what about the veil" or "what about clitoridectomy?" when none of us had mentioned either subject for the simple reason that it was completely irrelevant to the topics of our papers. The implication was that, in trying to examine and rethink our traditions rather than dismissing them out of hand, we were implicitly defending whatever our audience considered to be indefensible. And the further implication and presumption was that, whereas they—white women, Christian women, Jewish women—could rethink their heritage and religions and traditions, we had to abandon ours because they were just intrinsically, essentially, and irredeemably misogynist and patriarchal in a way that theirs (apparently) were not. In contrast to their situation, our salvation entailed not arguing with and working to change our traditions but giving up our cultures, religions, and traditions and adopting theirs.[5]

To be a proper feminist, these White feminists were telling Ahmed, you have to jump ship. You cannot be both a Muslim and a feminist. You have to make a choice between modernity or Islam.

Conceptual translation, which is an integral part of interpretation in the humanities, is one strategy scholars adopted to counter the suffocating weight of racist exclusion. It is an integral part of the counterarchive assembled to oppose the authority and endurance of racist colonial knowledges that demand a conversion (of both scholar and concept) out of a tradition constantly disparaged for being inferior. Conversion is just another name for severing our present from our past, for being born again into enlightenment.

Conceptual translation is not the only road to navigate the relation of self to other and past to present; nativism, universalism, and modernization theorists all have their own paths. Nativists underscore the superiority of their own values and do not engage in translation that renders either the unfamiliar familiar by domesticating it or the familiar unfamiliar by estranging audiences from what they take for granted. Hard-core universalists also do not feel the pressure to translate, since they do not acknowledge the distinctions between self and other. For example, Islam, in their view, is a difference that does not make a real difference. Modernization theorists criticize their own culture for being mired in traditional values that reproduce backward social structures. They seek to overcome the past, which they see as a burden to usher in the forward march to progress.

[5] Leila Ahmed, *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America—A Woman's Journey* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 291–92.

Part II

So far, I have addressed two main issues. I first illustrated some of the issues faced by students and researchers in Arab universities and how the work that takes place there moves beyond the walls of the academy, generating wider societal and political controversies. I underscored how universities that are supposed to be the custodians of the humanities and the transmitters of critical skills can do the exact opposite by censoring their students' freedom of expression. I showed that censoring students has a longer history and has not only affected their freedom of expression but has also targeted their capacity to pursue autonomous research. Second, I provided a sketch of some of the major conceptual issues—self and other, past and present—that generations of Arab humanities scholars have faced and some of the strategies they devised to address them. I now move to the second half of this essay by zooming out to the wider background on which the study of the humanities unfolds in the Arab region and its consequences, particularly the increasing deterritorialization of the Arab humanities and the diasporization of researchers and students.

At Home: Interrupted, Restricted, Surveilled

The study of the humanities in the Arab world does not take place in a political vacuum. Less obvious are the repercussions of colonial, neocolonial, and postcolonial regimes of power on the humanities. The Arab university itself exists in a wider political setting characterized by authoritarian and occupation regimes, civil wars, foreign military invasions, and economic sanctions, which have eroded its autonomous functions. Scholars of the humanities, needless to say, have suffered, both as researchers and citizens-residents, from the conditions in which they have to live and work. For instance, we have been witnessing since about 2012 the dispersal of Syrian scholars across the world; alongside their compatriots, they have fled a regime that drops chemical weapons on its own citizens. Some Egyptian scholars and students have also fled their country as the military regime continues to crack down on dissenters. At times, scholars were the object of targeted assassinations and death threats by the various regimes in power in the region. In Beirut in 1972, Israel assassinated Ghassan Kanafani, Palestinian novelist, literary critic, and journalist. Husayn Muruwwa was close to eighty years old when two gunmen, widely believed to belong to a Shi'i Islamist faction, got into his apartment and shot him dead in his bedroom in 1987, during one of the bleakest periods of the Lebanese civil wars (1975–90).

In June 2005, Beirut lost Samir Kassir, one of its encyclopedic historians and courageous editorialists, whose car was booby-trapped. It is widely believed that the Syrian regime or its local acolytes were behind the assassination.

Assassination is tragic, but it is not the only way power operates. In addition to foreign invasions, occupations, civil wars, and economic hardship, the lives of scholars (and their capacity to think, teach, and travel) have been severely affected by imprisonment, lawsuits, job dismissals, constant surveillance, and the denial, withholding, or refusal to renew visas and passports. This tragic state of affairs is exacerbating the dispersion of Arab scholars and students of the humanities across the globe.

The Arab humanities, today in particular, far exceed the territorial borders of the Arab region. If we decide to confine them exclusively to the latter in a logic reminiscent of the geographic divisions of area studies, we would be falling short of addressing one of the major consequences of the multiple regimes dominating the region. How do we take stock of the increasing diasporization of scholars and students of the humanities? What effects does the deterritorialization of research and teaching of the humanities produce?

Abroad: Sanctuary, Autonomy, Minority

Finding sanctuary in the metropoles of the world guarantees (most of the time) the personal safety of scholars and students of humanities. As we think through the deterritorialization of the humanities, I insist on including students to make sure that we account for those young men and women who took part in the first wave of Arab revolutions in 2011, some of whom joined graduate programs abroad after subsequent counterrevolutionary waves forced them to leave. In addition to personal safety, moving West provides thinkers with a space to research and teach that is not constantly subject to the gaze and interference of political powers. For those lucky enough to find non-precarious jobs and win fellowships and grants for their research, their new homes may provide them with a more or less stable, middle-class life. However, the move entails much more than the trinity of safety, autonomy, and sufficiency.

Dispersal is far from a frictionless process. It is often transformative. Not only do scholars and students have to learn how to inhabit new academic institutional cultures, they also have to negotiate the new disciplinary and linguistic spaces in which they find themselves. To move requires a confrontation with the ideological and intellectual stakes of one's new home. This entails learning how to navigate hegemonic theoretical paradigms, hot research agendas, fund-

ing opportunities, and disciplinary gatekeeping practices. But this is not just a learning process. It also involves shaping one's research in the humanities to reflect what is interesting to work on at the moment, what is important, what is urgent, what will be funded, what theories are the most critical, what methodologies are the most valid, and so on.

Becoming a minority—legally, institutionally, culturally, intellectually—is a fraught process. It projects the newly minoritized subject into a strong, preexisting force field, the pull of which is hard to slip away from. The force field pulls the diasporic scholar-student to become a cultural translator who may be called upon to provide authoritative accounts of their culture—the authority of which is grounded in their identity as Arab or Muslim. It also pulls them to answer, again and again, a set of parochial yet authoritative questions. For instance, a Syrian scholar who is escaping the murderous Assad regime is turned overnight from a revolutionary citizen into a Muslim minority resident in Europe who is read according to where he stands on questions of Islamic radicalism, Islamic religious laws, and women's and LGBTQ rights. These dislocations are often not reckoned with, even though at times they are very difficult to live through.

> Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics are not arenas where a community articulates its relationship to its past and imagines its futures. This is why losing the multiple sites of humanities production across the world is a grave matter.

Research and Roles Abroad: A Sisyphean Task

The force field also moves scholar-students away from their initial research preoccupations and public-political concerns and toward a confrontation with the structural and everyday racism against Muslims and Arabs. In such a context, to be a critical scholar is to produce work in the humanities that counters the racialization of Arabs and Muslims and attempts to dislodge the authority of scholarly, media, and political discourses that erase the heterogeneity of Muslim and Arab communities and freeze them in monochromatic, stereotypical snapshots. Forty years after Leila Ahmed confronted the racism of White feminists, that task has not lost any of its relevance. In fact, it became more urgent in the wake of the Cold War, when the West's Soviet enemy disappeared and a supposed clash of civilizations between Islam and the West appeared in its place. In

our post–post–Cold War world, characterized by planetary environmental concerns and a heightened interconnection facilitated by the circulation of capital, humans, and viruses, which has produced a reactionary wave of chauvinistic nationalist movements, Ahmed's task is still on the order of the day.

The critical diasporic scholar of Arab humanities is a Sisyphean figure. Generation after generation, they are condemned to repeat the task of undoing the racist webs engulfing their culture. As soon as these webs are undone, they are spun again under a new name. This work is important and exhausting at the same time. By perpetually fighting stereotypes and erasures, speaking back to power, and deconstructing racialized logics, scholar-students produce a valuable counterarchive. Yet this work also sucks one's critical scholarly energies away from confronting other problems and imagining different worlds.

In addition to affecting the lives of researchers and inflecting research agendas, the deterritorialization of the Arab humanities alters their role. They are no longer part of a community's collective conversation that seeks to articulate the relationship of past to present, self to other. As the distinguished historian Albert Hourani wrote in his autobiography, "the writing of history is an act of self-reflection of a collective consciousness, a community taking stock of its own past and what has made it what it is, creating its own principles of emphasis and categories of explanation."[6] The deterritorialization of the humanities moves researchers' work out of the spiritual domain of the nation (to draw once more on Chatterjee's felicitous distinction) and into the contested terrains of minorities in their new homes. These diasporic politics in their liberal iterations often take the form of calls for recognizing, including, and representing those minorities in the political life of the nation, as well as in its educational institutions (university administration, departments, centers) and intellectual canon (diversifying the curriculum). In their more radical iteration, these politics are part of the calls to decolonize political spaces, institutions, and canons of the humanities beyond the liberal celebration of diversity. Although these debates are crucial to the current debates on the soul of Western host nations, they are not necessarily the central questions of the Arab humanities back home. As scholars and students migrate from their disciplinary departments at home to area, ethnic, and diaspora studies departments in the metropoles, the humanities are transformed.

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[6] Albert Hourani, "Patterns of the Past," in *Paths to the Middle East: Ten Scholars Look Back*, ed. Thomas Naff (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 54.

Coda

I am certainly not criticizing the increasing deterritorialization of the Arab humanities, and I do not want to be understood as lamenting its production from, and teaching within, Western universities. I am writing this essay in between my seminars at a university in the United States. I do not seek to sketch a world of hermetically sealed binary divisions between the diasporic Arab humanities and those at home. Researchers, students, and ideas travel in both directions when political authorities allow them to cross borders or they manage to smuggle themselves in without being intercepted.

Yet it is hard not to see how the deterritorialization of Arab humanities and the diasporization of its scholars and students are processes that partake in enriching their hosts (societies, institutions, colleagues, and students) and impoverishing the homes they leave behind. This is not necessarily a nationalist statement. Instead, it is simply a reiteration of the basic observation that the production, circulation, and transmission of the humanities are essential for a society to flourish. Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics are not arenas where a community articulates its relationship to its past and imagines its futures. This is why losing the multiple sites of humanities production across the world is a grave matter, regardless of what one thinks of the agendas driving research in humanities in the metropoles. The stakes are far too high to leave the matter exclusively in Western hands.

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