

The World Humanities Report

The Humanities in the Arab Digital Age

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The Humanities in the Arab Digital Age

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When the COVID-19 pandemic led to global shutdowns starting in March 2020, a new Arabic verb was born: *tazawama* (to zoom).¹ This new word was not announced by a supreme council on the Arabic language in Cairo or Damascus—the traditional centers of Arabic linguistic norms—but on Twitter. Immediately, people started sharing the announcement and marveling at the translation that draws on the three-letter root *z-w-m*. They applied it to other forms of communication platforms including Skype and FaceTime. This new verb generated wonder and excitement, inspiring people to adapt more words that would fit their needs. The process involved pleasure in translation, creatively drawing on the richness of the Arabic language to play and confront the demands of a new reality.

This process of translation and adaptation in the digital age, which has given us words like *wasm* (tag) and *taghrid* (tweeting), is not new. A similar process occurred in Abbasid Baghdad in the ninth century, as well as during the *nahda*, the cultural renaissance from the nineteenth century onward that gave rise to Arab modernity's various projects and institutions. *Nahda* thinkers turned to classical texts and lexicons—such as Ibn Manzur's *Lisan al-'Arab* or al-Fairuz-abadi's *Al-Qamus al-Muhit*, which are now available and searchable online—to coin new words that would contain the modern. Words like *mulakama* (boxing) and *ishtirakiyya* (socialism), coined by polymath Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq, were created through this process. Just like the creators of *tazawum* today, al-Shidyaq turned to games and poetry, drawing on the three-letter roots of the Arabic lexicons and incorporating them into his magnum opus, *Leg over Leg* (1855).² New words meant to represent modern concepts and phenomena or coined simply for their peculiar sounds and musicality unfold on pages upon pages of

¹ Mourad Diouri (@e_arabic), "The Arabised term (TAZAAWAMA) was cleverly coined by my very dear friend Dr. Muntasir al Hamad of @QatarUniversity @MuntasirHamad. This verb has emerged recently w/ the rise of remote teaching and virtual meetings using @Zoom_us," Twitter, July 10, 2020, 3:22 p.m., https://twitter.com/e_arabic/status/1281685354635042820/photo/1.

² Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq, *Leg over Leg*, 2 vols., trans. Humphrey Davies (New York: NYU Press, 2015).

al-Shidyaq's book. In many ways, the *nahda* was constituted through this spirit of innovation, translation, play, and performance.

Looking at the Arab world today, it is easy to imagine that this spirit of play and innovation was defeated because of ongoing calamities. In fact, this spirit survived and continues to shine in the midst of crises, from war and economic collapse to pandemics. This is not to say that we are witnessing a new *nahda* moment that is benefiting from social media and digital innovation, but that the *nahda* as a process of play and wonder is still ongoing. To gauge this spirit, we need to go online and pay attention to the new words being created, or go into public spaces and recognize new tunes, art practices, and social interactions. Specifically, it is to the humanities, understood in a broad sense, that we need to turn in search of processes that create new meaning and knowledge and generate excitement today.

Legacy of the Nahda

The word “humanities” is translated in Arabic as *insaniyyat*, which is a literal translation centered on the notion of the human (*insan*) and humanity (*insaniyya*). But the “humanities” could also mean *aadab* (culture) and *funun* (arts), namely, the cultural products that depict how societies understand themselves through words, poetic utterances, music, and art, to name a few. The word *fan* (pl. *funun*), which today is taken to mean “art,” encompassed a variety of disciplines and techne that were constitutive of the humanities. During the *nahda*, the notion of *funun* and *aadab* were essential, often depicted in journals that had names like *Thamarat al-Funun* (*Fruits of the Arts*),³ which dealt with politics, culture, and the arts. As for *aadab*, which is the plural of the untranslatable word *adab* (literature, belles-lettres, ethical and aesthetic refinement), the most important statement about it occurred in 1859 in a speech given in Beirut, titled *Khutba fi Aadab al-Arab* (*Culture of the Arabs Today*).⁴ In this speech, polymath and educator Butrus al-Bustani hailed the founding of schools and printing presses across the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire through personal and collective initiatives as bringing about the *nahda* and leading to progress and refinement. al-Bustani captured a moment when the humanities benefited from the vision and freedom of people who came together to found schools and

³ Tarek El-Ariss, “Thamarat al-Funun,” in *The Arab Renaissance: A Bilingual Anthology of the Nahda*, ed. Tarek El-Ariss (New York: MLA Texts and Translations, 2018), 153–62.

⁴ Stephen Sheehi, “Butrus al-Bustani,” in *The Arab Renaissance: A Bilingual Anthology of the Nahda*, ed. Tarek El-Ariss (New York: MLA Texts and Translations, 2018), 3–19.

cultural organizations independently of government sponsorship. This vision was embodied in specific curricula that shaped education across the region. In his “Brief Statement about Al al-Bayt University,”⁵ which he founded in 1922, Iraqi thinker Fahmi al-Mudariss established the humanities as a core component of modern education. He argued for including the study of psychology along with that of religion, the arts along with the sciences, explaining the links between the latter and the benefits of their combination in producing enlightened citizens.

The *nahda* humanistic models involving individuals and organizations forging cultures and curricula of enlightenment constitute a modern Arab intellectual and institutional tradition. This tradition has given rise to various schools and centers from al-Bustani’s al-Madrassa al-Wataniyya (National School) in 1863 to Christine Tohme’s Ashkal

Alwan (Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts) in 1993 and beyond. Just as al-Bustani’s school was a response to the sectarian civil war and massacres that consumed Lebanon and Syria in 1860,⁶ Askhal Alwan emerged from Tohme’s vision and labor and that of a community of artists and

intellectuals trying to make sense of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90) after its end, as they confronted a spectacle of ruins, displacement, and unbridled reconstruction plans. One of the premiere art and culture centers in the region with its own publishing house and extensive library, Ashkal Alwan plays a key role that is often expected from government agencies of culture and education. Over the years, Tohme established a dynamic institution that responds to crises by hosting forums on politics and censorship, gender and sexuality, and visual culture and urbanism. For instance, when the catastrophic explosion occurred in Beirut in August 2020, Tohme offered her space to local artists who had lost their studios to come and continue working.

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⁵ Muhsin al-Musawi, “Fahmi al-Mudarris,” trans. Anna Ziajka Stanton, in *The Arab Renaissance: A Bilingual Anthology of the Nahda*, 20–30.

⁶ Ussama Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2019), 69–70.



Figure 1. Home Workspace Program 2013–14 with Anton Vidokle. Photo courtesy of Ashkal Alwan.

Kulte in Rabat is the brainchild of Yasmina Naji, who founded it in 2013 to provide gallery space, a cultural center, and a publishing house. Kulte hosts conferences and exhibits works by local artists, organizes community events around questions of language and identity, and publishes books dealing with issues from race in Morocco to women’s inheritance rights.⁷ Naji and her collaborators work with artists and intellectuals in Morocco and abroad to center issues vital to people’s aspirations and daily concerns. These collaborators include curator and author Omar Berrada, who founded Dar al-Ma’mûn in Marrakech in 2010. This other organization offers residencies for literary translators and artists and promotes cross-cultural exchange.

Involving libraries, residencies, publishing houses, and cultural programming, these organizations from the Levant to the Maghreb and beyond have unearthed works by authors and artists who did not fit a state canon of culture, pushing their work into the limelight and making it available through translation projects that

⁷ Omar Berrada, M’barek Bouhchichi, Ali Essafi, Emmanuel Iduma, and Stefania Pandolfo, *The Africans / الأفارقة* (Rabat: Kulte, 2016); Ymane Fakhir, *The Lion’s Share / حصة الأسد* (Rabat: Kulte, 2017).

are transforming and enriching the Arabic language. These groups deal with questions of identity, language, and issues that make up the humanities at large. Through polyvalent spaces, they give rise to a vibrant community of artists and thinkers and urban planners who interact and contribute to producing new art, literature, and unique visions for their cities and the region. In the process, they forge the kind of interdisciplinary knowledge that is local and global, literary and urban, political and performative. They show how art practices intersect with scholarly research, translation practices and theories, and other writing genres that question the disciplinary divisions of artistic and academic work.



Figure 2. Poster for a roundtable discussion and documentary film screening at Kulte. Image courtesy of Kulte.

The humanities are emerging from these dynamic spaces of production and collaboration, a phenomenon that is being increasingly recognized and supported by grant agencies and councils.⁸ Just like their *nahda* predecessors who moved across the United States, Europe, and the Middle East to write, publish, translate, and exchange, people like Berrada and Naji operate between Morocco, France, and the United States, benefiting from and exploring diasporic connections to

⁸ “AFAC and ACSS Award Six Research Projects,” Arab Council for the Social Sciences, December 20, 2019, <http://theacss.org/pages/fora-and-debates/1066/afac-and-acss-award-six-research-projects>.

complement and sustain local arts and culture. Even Tohme works with artists and curators who occupy transnational spaces, collaborating with organizations in Lebanon and abroad to produce events that take place in multiple sites. Working with the Sharjah Art Foundation, in 2017 Tohme curated a biennial that took place in three cities (and countries) simultaneously: Sharjah (United Arab Emirates), Beirut (Lebanon), and Dakar (Senegal). The program highlighted the connections between Arab, African, and global cultures and the arts. The pan-Arab and pan-African unities of the 1950s and 1960s, championed by the likes of Gamal Abdel Nasser, are practiced today on the ground through local curators, artists, and patrons moving us to different conceptions of what Arab identity is and what Arab arts and culture are and how they travel. If al-Bustani was alive today, he would point to these culture creators and organizations as performers of the *nahda* in the digital age.

New Narratives, New Genres

The publishing houses focusing on the arts in the Arab world from Sharjah to Beirut to Rabat are complemented by publishing houses that are reshaping our understanding of literature and new writing genres. Publishers like Dar Onboz, Mofradat, Snoubar Bayrou, and Khan Aljanub (to name a few) publish books that are increasingly breaking down boundaries between art and literature, producing graphic novels and experimental texts. For instance, Ahmed Naji's *Using Life*, a graphic novel that landed its author in jail because of allegedly explicit passages, was produced in collaboration with designer Ayman Al Zorkani and launched with mugs and T-shirts sold. Works like Naji's are published in translation by AUC Press, Darf, and the series Emerging Voices from the Middle East that I founded at the University of Texas Press. This series published a bilingual edition of Walid Taher's *A Bit of Air* and translations of Hilal Chouman's graphic novel *Limbo Beirut* and Naji's *Using Life*. These publications involved extended collaborations between designers, authors, scholars, editors, and translators in the United States and in the Arab world. Such collaborations offer new ways of engaging with Arabic literary and cultural production abroad, influencing how and in what context Arabic literature is taught and read. The process of production, but also the translation and circulation, reposition Arabic literature and culture as part of the humanities in the American academic context and beyond. Despite the stereotypical association of the Arab world with conflict and fundamentalism, new Arabic culture appeals to an audience that is interested in the political context but can also appreciate the aesthetic

and literary production on its own, which increasingly situates these works in the humanities at large.

Publishers and editors in the Arab world and the diaspora, like Margaret Obank and Samuel Shimon in London, founders of *Banipal* (1998–2023), helped shape the production and reception of Arabic literature in the new millennium.

This process is aided by new literary prizes that contribute to the decentralization of publishing. These prizes, based primarily in the Gulf, have supplanted the cultural apparatuses of state institutions suffering from lack of

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funds, vision, freedom, and a coherent national narrative that literature ought to represent. The Arabic novel no longer tells the story of the modern Arab subject, building themselves and the nation, moving from tradition to modernity, and advancing toward a future through struggle and sacrifice. Nor does Arabic poetry sing the glories of the tribe and the nation. This Arab subject and their imagined continuity across time and space are displaced and dislocated. New narrative structures corresponding to diasporic experiences and a new consciousness are emerging from contemporary writing practices. Suffice it to read Hoda Barakat's novel *Barid al-Layl* (*Voices of the Lost*), winner of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2019, to find this dislocated if not broken Arab subject, moving across hotels and airports, unable to construct a coherent narrative of belonging.

Coupled with political instability and accelerated migration, the advent of social media and new communication technology has altered how people write, narrate, and compose poetry in Arabic. For instance since its inception in 2006, Twitter became a platform for communication and news but also for literary performance and narration. In fact, many Arab authors and cultural organizations have taken to Twitter, recognizing its potential as a site for literary experimentation, translation, and poetry, including ArabLit and Adab. Tied to the Riyadh-based foundation and including an extensive digital library, Adab's Twitter account posts poetry and excerpts from novels that are originally in Arabic or translated from world literature. In one example,⁹ a quotation about isolation by Fyodor Dostoevsky generated a series of responses including origi-

⁹ أدب (@adab), "al-'uzla zawiya saghira, yaqif fiha al-mar' amam 'aqlih" [solitude is a small corner where the individual faces their own reason], Twitter, August 18, 2020, 10:14 a.m., <https://twitter.com/adab/status/1295740846495629313>.

inal poetry composed by followers, paintings sourced online representing the idea involved in the quote, and quotations by other Arab and world authors dealing with the same topic. Dostoevsky's quotation, translated and tweeted in Arabic, created a world literary space involving live performances and literary and visual associations. The responses construct a new literary imaginary, connecting cultural traditions across languages and time periods. Twitter in this context serves as a platform for Arabic and world literary performance and translation that fulfill a humanistic function often associated with institutions of learning or comparative literature classrooms.

Literary performances on Twitter would not have been possible without digital humanities, or the process of making books, manuscripts, and lexicons available online.¹⁰ Curators and translators, but also hackers and leakers play a major role in putting these sources online.¹¹ Downloaded books and novels challenge our understand-

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ing of copyright and the law but also allow ideas and texts to circulate in an unprecedented fashion. Magazines and books published in Beirut, for instance, no longer need to be smuggled across national borders because they are now easily available to a readership across the Arab world and the diaspora. Censorship, cost, and geography cannot withstand the online circulation of texts and ideas that are producing a new model of Arab culture in the digital age. Be it Ibn Manzur's *Lisan al-Arab* or al-Asfahani's *Kitab al-Aghani* or even the Quran, Arabic online sources are growing and becoming more organized and readily searchable. Even books that existed in manuscript form with limited circulation or tucked away in libraries at Cambridge or Harvard are now available to all—not just to experts. This availability breaks down systems of expertise, allowing individuals to access and play with the Arabic language root system to create new words like *tazawum*. It also allows an artist or author to discover and adapt from *Kitab al-Aghani* or from Qazwini's *Aja'ib* to construct a graphic novel set in a futuristic or ancient context. Digital technology is reshaping the field

¹⁰ Elias Muhanna, ed., *The Digital Humanities and Islamic and Middle East Studies: An Introduction* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016).

¹¹ Tarek El-Ariss, *Leaks, Hacks, and Scandals: Arab Culture in the Digital Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

of Arabic literature and culture, bringing about new concepts and experiences of space and time by creating a dynamic relation between present and past, old and new forms of Arabic language, the classical tradition and new writing and arts. This phenomenon that was initiated during the *nahda*—starting with Rifa‘a al-Tahtawi or al-Shidyah, both of whom edited medieval manuscripts and lexicons and used them to innovate—continues today. Scholars of Arabic and Islam, including Phil Kennedy, Michael Cooperson, and Shawkat Toorawa, recognize the importance of this *nahda* spirit enabled by contemporary resources and technologies. These scholars founded the Library of Arabic Literature, which is translating this heritage in bilingual editions and making many of its publications available online. The online availability of these texts brings this process to a new level of acceleration and circulation. This quantitative change involving speed, access, and searchability will lead to a qualitative change—a new way of thinking of one’s identity, language, and history.

On the Ground and Online

When the Beirut port explosion occurred in August 2020, donors around the world mobilized to deliver funds and goods to organizations on the ground. Crowdfunding campaigns sought to circumvent official channels that either stopped functioning or were untrustworthy. This strategy denoted that organizations and actors on the ground are providing the services that the state and its various agencies ought to provide. Instead of waiting for those institutions to materialize or serve their constituencies in effective and transparent ways, donors directed resources and attention to the actors on the ground. Although reforming the institutions of the state is important, there is a culture taking place in polyvalent spaces that exhibit, teach, and publish, thereby allowing artists to create and sell and authors to write and feel inspired.

To support the humanities, it is crucial to identify the organizations and sites that are producing them and creating new meaning and knowledge. The translation and publication projects are a major part of this process, which started in the *nahda*, aided by the spread of printing presses and journals. The humanities, understood in a decentralized and democratic fashion, need to break with the canons of literature and culture dictated by local governments and antiquated universal and Eurocentric ideals. Social media might generate entertainment and news, but it also contains new writing genres and wordplay that might rival the most modernist (or classical) poetry. A user-based experience and model that captures these new phenomena is needed. Understood in this fashion,

the humanities will help sharpen the tools of staying alive for individuals and communities facing various crises and for languages that will grow (and not wither) as a result of play and translation. In a time of great uncertainty about the future of individuals and communities, we must turn to these practices, which are not always visible or quantifiable.

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