Theory in a Global Context:
A Critical Practice in Five Steps

This CARGC Paper 17 was first delivered as the CARGC distinguished lecture in September 2021. Its author Professor Tarek El-Ariss, the James Wright Professor at Dartmouth College and Guggenheim Fellow 2021-22, is a distinguished scholar whose work spans academic disciplines and languages to examine notions of the subject, community, and modernity. His research interests include: Arabic and comparative literature; visual and digital culture; gender and sexuality studies; and psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and affect theory. He is the author of *Trials of Arab Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political* (Fordham, 2013) and *Leaks, Hacks, and Scandals: Arab Culture in the Digital Age* (Princeton, 2019), and editor of *The Arab Renaissance: A Bilingual Anthology of the Nahda* (MLA, 2018).

Reflecting on his personal journey as a scholar, writer, and critic in this paper, Professor El-Ariss delineates five stages of critical practice in his encounters with theory, comparative literature, and Middle Eastern studies. These five stages are: critique of representation, occupy the canon, impasse and breakdown, cross-disciplinary sublime, and new writing genres. While his discussions of all five stages are wide-ranging and full of insights, I would like to highlight his experiences with one of the five steps – impasse and breakdown.

El-Ariss writes that at certain point of his engagement with theory, he found himself in impasses, which he characterizes as "moments that challenge our relationship to the discipline, the debates surrounding it, and questions of epistemology." Let us recognize that reaching such impasses is no small intellectual accomplishment in and of itself, for many of us probably never experience these moments of crisis. How many of us ever question our relationship to our own academic disciplines or our epistemological assumptions? Note that the state of impasse and breakdown happens in the middle of El-Ariss's five-stage theoretical practice. This mid-way state is a turning point. It is these moments of crisis that lead him to new adventures and new discoveries – indeed, to a new style of writing that is more associative, transgressive, and cross-disciplinary.

Professor El-Ariss finds a way out of impasse by turning to Arabic theoretical models, concepts, and ways of knowing even as he continues to be deeply engaged with Western theory. He begins to move between theories and cultures, "galloping to-and-fro." The zesty image of galloping to-and-fro well captures the work of translation, a restless crossing over and between languages and cultures.

A scholar who constantly crosses linguistic and cultural boundaries is first and foremost a translator. The implications of this notion of a scholar as translator are profound – and not just for global communication studies. Does it mean, for example, that proficiency in more than one

language and culture is a prerequisite for any theoretical enterprise? In the context of critiquing Western theory, does this mean proficiency in non-Western languages and cultures? Indeed, in what ways might the process of developing multiple linguistic and cultural proficiencies be an essential part of meaningful new theoretical practices? These are only a few of the many important questions Professor Tarek El-Ariss raises in this paper, directly or indirectly. I trust this paper will resonate with many scholars in the field of global communication studies and beyond.

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The invitation to give the Distinguished Lecture in Global Communication, on which this article based, came in early 2020. At the time, I was writing a book on monsters, portals, and the posthuman, and was planning to present on that topic. I was planning to discuss how the emergence of the schizoid through the infinite reflection of screens and words collapses space-time configurations, thereby forcing us to confront the archaic full on. So when the Covid-19 pandemic occurred and thrusted us into the world of viruses and Zoom, I was supposed to feel vindicated as the monsters I was describing had finally materialized. The book, I thought, was going to write itself. Instead, I felt disoriented. My voice as a scholar, as a theorist, felt uncertain. Coupled with the economic and political collapse of my country of origin—Lebanon—and the social upheavals that have shaken the US to its core, the pandemic and its modalities of confinement and anxiety forced me to question my intellectual trajectory and theoretical specters. I found myself drawn to the autobiographical, to anchoring the self in my writing rather than revel in its fragmentation. Turning inward, I entered those portals that I had identified in my book *Leaks, Hacks, and Scandals: Arabic Culture in the Digital Age* (El-Ariss 2019), not in order to reach the archaic and the mythological and understand something about Arabic culture and theory, but to reach a more intimate, perhaps even personal truth. When the confinement started in March 2020, the monsters that I was theorizing had morphed into something quite profound, coming from a place at the origin of the self. All I wanted to write about was growing up in Lebanon during the civil war (1975-90) and how I eventually turned to fiction and philosophy to confront social and political disintegration and to make new meaning. A different sense of self and its representation flashed in front of my eyes, from which I couldn't turn away.

Although in what follows I will not discuss growing up in Lebanon during the war, I will nonetheless turn inward, to another autobiographical trace, revisiting my intellectual trajectory and scrutinizing specifically my engagement with critical theory. This turning inward, I hope, will allow me to address some of the questions and ethical imperatives that we need to raise as an intellectual community today in order to develop new critical practices, writing genres, and forms of communication that operate at both local and global levels. I hope to historicize and situate theory in a global context, approaching it as an intellectual tradition that has produced powerful critiques of normativity and decentered text, image, and genealogy. At a time when the US is also turning inward, reckoning with its own history and grievances, it's important to raise questions about the global and the worldly, and by extension, questions about area studies and how they might intersect with and inform this reckoning. What did we learn from theory and how could we draw on this

learning to develop a critical practice capable of responding to crises and informing current social and epistemological reconfigurations? What writing genres and forms of communication need to be devised to engage with audiences, the worldly, and the global today?

CRITICAL THEORY: A GENEALOGY

One of the most important scholars to draw on the tradition of critical theory in order to engage social and political realities is Edward Said. In *Orientalism* (1978), Said invites us to think about the construction of the Orient, about prejudice, and about forms of domination that are expressed through discourse formation and knowledge production. Reflecting on his task, Said wrote: "What I took myself to be undertaking in *Orientalism* was an adversarial critique not only of the field's perspective and political economy, but also of the sociocultural situation that makes its discourse both so possible and so sustainable" (2000, 299). Said thus points us to an important link between, on the one hand, what we are doing as scholars, that is, the kind of knowledge production that we are invested in, and on the other hand, the related sociocultural situation that makes certain forms of knowledge production possible. To question one is to confront the other, making the political integral to the critical practice.

Said engendered in many of us an urgency to rethink, question, and reevaluate canons and curricula. Today, with the awareness generated by the #BlackLivesMatter movement, the Covid-19 pandemic, and other crises around the world, the sociocultural, i.e., the "worldly" in Said's sense,[1] necessitates a reevaluation of current forms of knowledge: what does it mean to "produce" knowledge? What are the power dynamics involved in this production? Who is constituted as "other" in these intellectual endeavors? For Said, the stage for this rethinking stems from theory and fields like comparative literature, which have crossed over into a variety of fields such as anthropology and media studies, shaping forms of looking inward to question racial and ideological normativity and eurocentrism in their various manifestations.

Theory is a meaning-making process that necessarily crosses disciplines, complicating and defamiliarizing the familiar. Jonathan Culler writes: "We use the term theory to designate discourses that come to exercise influence outside their apparent disciplinary realm because they offer new and persuasive characterizations of problems and phenomena of general interest: language, consciousness, meaning, nature and culture, the functioning of the psyche, the relations of individual experience to larger structures, and so on. Theory in this sense is inescapably interdisciplinary" (2007, 3–4). Thus, theory is the platform for not only imagining, but also synthesizing a variety of critical stances that have the power and potential to make us rethink what we teach, how we teach, how we write, how we train students, and how we engage the world.

There are many ways one can construct a theoretical genealogy and trace its development. I would like to highlight 1968 as a defining moment in this context for a variety of reasons. Nineteen sixty-eight marks the height of the protest movement against the Vietnam War in the US, and

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1   See Said 1983.

is a watershed year for the civil rights movement as well. Moreover, May 1968 is associated with the student movements in France and elsewhere that prompted intellectuals and academics to reexamine hierarchies, systems of meaning, and curricula.[2] Soon after, in the early 1980s, the AIDS pandemic generated models of engagement to critically interrogate regimes of power and how they deal with crises—health and otherwise. In response to those social and political upheavals, theory was forged through new systems of thought and critical practices in order to confront and make sense of a changing world and values. We can think of Michel Foucault, of the advent of French theory in the US, and, of course, of Jacques Derrida's famous lecture at Johns Hopkins in 1967, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," which is believed to have launched poststructuralism, especially in American academe. Deconstruction and discursive criticism forced us to rethink models of normativity, centrality, and hegemony as they manifested in literature, visual culture, media, and beyond. Judith Butler (1988; 1990), coming a generation later, engaged with Derridean and Foucauldian critiques to deconstruct gender and sexuality. Stuart Hall (1986) drew on Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci to think about hegemonic power and how it is deployed, especially in the context of race. And of course, Edward Said, a contributor to this theoretical genealogy—and a critic of it as well[3]—described how the Orient is construed as a category of analysis and domination through models of representation and disciplinary formation.

This theoretical genealogy is an important historical narrative that we must reckon with and draw upon, critically reflecting on where we stand in relation to it today. Critical theory, which emerges largely from a Western tradition, mounts one of the most radical critiques of this tradition as well, and of the way the West has been produced and imagined through language and ideology, metaphysics and historical thinking. The engagement with theory has the potential to produce the kinds of decolonial and decentering practices that are fundamental to our current environment. Furthermore, situating this theoretical genealogy in relation to other fields and cultural contexts has the potential to reconfigure our understanding of the humanistic tradition at large, leading it to rethink its canonical formation. My work as a scholar of comparative literature and Middle Eastern studies evolved with this reconfiguration in mind, practicing a form of internal critique that both draws on critical theory and opens it up to different contexts and genealogies beyond those of the West. This engagement has led me to develop a critical practice that I will lay out here in the hope of starting a conversation about the mission and scope of literary criticism and cultural critique today.

A CRITICAL PRACTICE IN FIVE STEPS

Coming from a background in philosophy and literature at the American University in Beirut and moving to Rochester, New York, in the early 1990s, I discovered at the University of

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2   For the effects of May '68 on Arab intellectual and political consciousness, see Di-Capua 2021.

3   On the centrality of the west in the discipline of comparative literature, see Melas 2007. Also see Allan 2016, which engages the question of world literature and the assumed models of reading therein.

Rochester queer and feminist theory, postcolonial theory and cultural studies, psychoanalysis and deconstruction. These theoretical paradigms and models of engagement were already shaping a generation of thinkers but also artists and art theorists like Walid Raad and Laura Marks, who graduated from there. In Rochester, I discovered new theoretical approaches but also interdisciplinary crossings involving texts, images, and culture. There I learned how to engage them simultaneously through a critical multitasking that revealed crucial for my intellectual and professional development. Processing this new knowledge and eventually recognizing where my interests lie, I moved to Cornell for my PhD in comparative literature, immersing myself in the intellectual community that drew thinkers and theorists from across the globe. At Cornell, I lived and breathed theory. It was like those language immersion programs that I would later discover, where students make pledges to only speak in the target language for the length of the program. Except mine lasted for years, and not weeks or months.

With time, I moved back and forth professionally between comparative literature and Middle Eastern studies departments and saw and contributed to debates of theoretical exploration as a framework beyond the traditional departments of comparative literature, French, or German. Theory entered departments dealing with the Global South, and with languages like Arabic,[4] Chinese, and Hindi. These models of critique began expanding by initiating dialogues at the intersection of the local and the global, center and periphery. The critical practice I develop here emerges from an intellectual development involving learning and teaching, and student training and community building across fields and disciplines. This practice consists of five critical approaches and stages, which I lay out here in chronological order:

(1)   Critique of Representation

(2)   Occupy the Canon

(3)   Impasse and Breakdown

(4)   Cross-disciplinary Sublime

(5)   New Writing Genres

1. Critique of Representation

This essential first step draws on Foucault to activate discursive criticism as a way of describing the production or "construction" of the object of knowledge. Be it race, gender, or the Orient, this object has become the primary focus of analyses in the humanities and even the social sciences that have taken up theory either directly or indirectly. These analyses consist in identifying the power structure that shapes representation. The critique of representation coincides with the linguistic turn of poststructuralism and the assumption that there was nothing outside

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4   See, for example, the essays collected in Selim 2011, on "Theory and Arabic Literature in the United States." More recently, and in the context of intellectual history, see El Shakry 2021.

representation. Thinkers and theorists associated with this critique such as Derrida sidelined questions of materiality through the critique of what he calls the "metaphysics of presence"—Western metaphysics' claim to the immediacy of meaning. Therefore, discussions in the early 1990s were marked by inquiries about the construction of identity, models of representation, power structures, and the deployment of hegemonic paradigms. Scholars wrestled with how to critique these constructions and with what theories—Frankfurt school, feminist theory, and so on—to expose their normativity, violent deployments, and forms of exclusion and othering.

The critique of representation is a fundamental first step in dismantling a normative construction, be it literary or visual. Understanding where power lies is essential but it should not be considered as the ultimate aim of theoretical analyses within this tradition. If we settle for merely identifying the moment of hegemonic expression, then our work as critics would be incomplete. Not only that, but the aim of the analysis would be the Western or Eurocentric mechanism through which the object has been constructed, known, and dominated, rather than the object itself. Ultimately, this critique is only interested in the West and its power and hegemony, thereby asserting the West's centrality though condemning it at the end. It is important to critique representation but also to resist subscribing to the view that there is nothing outside of representation and that there is nothing outside of Western discourse, otherwise something like the Orient—and by extension Islam or anything related to this epistemological category including Arabic, Chinese, or Japanese literatures—would be totally unknowable. One needs to keep in mind that once these categories are constructed and start to circulate, they also become meaningful beyond the Eurocentric or orientalist framing that lies at their inception.

The critique of representation assumes that there is no outside to Western representation and its linguistic and epistemological nomenclature that has given birth to the disciplines within which scholars operate. These disciplines organize knowledge production in American and European academe but also in many places including in the Middle East and the Global South more generally. In this context, it is crucial to allow this critique of representation to bear on non-European geographic areas and languages, and understand the inner workings within these non-Western texts and contexts without reducing them to the Eurocentric or Orientalist model of representation. The push to decolonize texts by purging Western discourse has captivated scholars seeking to engage non-Western literary and artistic objects. These approaches are important but they risk leading to false and oversimplified dichotomies, presuming that it is possible to identify the Western episteme and extract it surgically in order to read texts and analyze them in some culturally "authentic" fashion. This would either relegate the object or text to irrepresentability or, worse, reduce it to some primary origin preceding Western discourse and discipline formation. This introduces claims of authenticity and essence, leading to the reification of constructed binaries such as those involving gender, sexuality, and race, for instance. These approaches inadvertently erase the entire development of modernity as a global and networked model involving cultural exchange but also war and conquest. The important question then becomes: how to decolonize in ways that are internal to the western episteme with which we have to contend?

2. Occupy the Canon

While the first step, i.e., the critique of representation, is fundamental, it is futile without the second step, which paves a way forward. By "canon" here I do not mean the literary canon or the canon of mainstream culture that became the object of critique and debates in literature and English departments in the 1980s especially. What I mean by canon is the canon of theory that includes texts by thinkers such as Freud, Derrida, Foucault, and Butler, to name a few. In order to occupy and reconfigure the canon of theory, one needs to ask: what constitutes theorical reading in the new millennium? What meaning production mechanism emerging from the Global South can inform and shape our understanding of objects and phenomena more generally? What are the examples and contexts that are "universalizable," that could contribute to the way we think about, for example, the novel as a form, or modernity? How can a scholar of Arabic, engaging affect theory or theorizing questions of materiality, address and engage with the ongoing haunting of the metaphysics of presence that Heidegger and Derrida brought to the canon of theory? How do we transfer and perhaps translate theory beyond the Eurocentric canons and its specters?

Working in comparative literature and area studies, I realized that it's essential to have an active presence at the table of theory. There should be an engagement with Arabic texts or Arabic media not simply as an illustration—a case study or an "authentic" example of otherness—reduced to its regional and cultural occurrence, but rather as a phenomenon that will alter the way we think about media in general (in theory), or the way we think about media in a global context that is populated by provocative manifestations of literary and media studies. A study of a particular Arabic novel or TV series shouldn't be reduced to its cultural context, but rather should illuminate our understanding of TV series or the novel as such—as it has evolved from picaresque narratives—including the Arabic *maqamah*, *One Thousand One Nights*, traversing intertextually through the landscape of the British and French novels in the 19th century, to the present. These specific engagements with global cultural contexts specifically need to operate as engagements that have general—theoretical—repercussions in the humanities and the social sciences as well. In this context, we need to develop theoretical analyses of cultural artifacts that have historically been marginalized, and allow these analyses to contribute and shape the canon of theory and its genres, fields of study, and epistemologies.

To recall a historical context, the new millennium and in part 9/11 saw the movement of comparatists or English-trained scholars into area studies departments like Middle Eastern studies, bringing under the same roof social scientists with humanists, Orientalists with postcolonial critics. At the time, scholars who were working on Arabic or Islamic studies were either in classics, or in English departments "doing" "Third World Literature." This was the case, for example, at the University of Texas at Austin where I taught for many years. Therefore, aesthetic texts from the postcolonial world or Global South were often selected, taught, and read for political interventions, or to open an anthropological or sociological exploration, hoping to understand these distant cultures. Generally, Arabic novels were read to gaze at the different cultures, or in order to grasp a particular cultural mindset. Global South novels or media were not engaged with or taken up

as aesthetic products, the study of which can have actual effect on the way we understand them theoretically. Instead, they remained confined to their contexts as anthropological artifacts and never as aesthetic objects. I and many of my fellow scholars systematically argued that these aesthetic objects from the Global South have to be read in such a way as to bear on the way we understand general concepts such as genre or modernity, for instance.
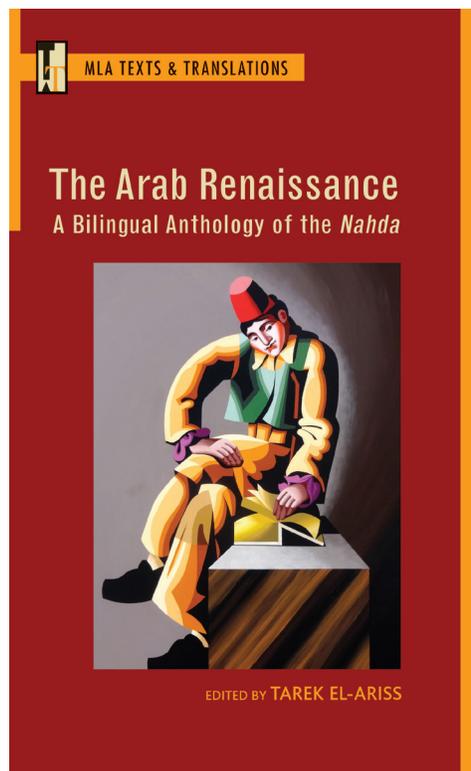

Fig. 1: The Arab Renaissance (Cover)

The question of modernity specifically has been a very important part of my work. My work and that of many colleagues challenged the perception of modernity in the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, or Africa simply as a borrowing from or mirroring Western modernity. Debunking European modernity as an "original" version that reflects like a platonic form on other copies or imitations, we sought to read modernity as a networked system to which contribute multiple sites and practices involving the Global South. Transformations and innovations in literature happening, for example, in Beirut or Cairo in the nineteenth century, are not only having effects on the development of modern Arabic literature but on the development of literature as such and thus constitute an integral part of the history of the novel and its evolution.[5] This approach to the Arabic context to bring it to bear on global theoretical models and epistemologies characterizes my work on the Arab renaissance or *nahda* (El-Ariss, 2018b), and the work of Moneera al-Ghadeer

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5   These questions were raised and tackled in Rebecca Johnson's book *Stranger Fictions* (2020).

(2009) and Omnia El Shakry (2017) on psychoanalysis and the Arabic tradition. Al-Ghadeer situates the eleventh-century philosopher Avicenna who discussed in his work the black bile and melancholia in the genealogy of psychoanalysis that includes Freud, Ferenczi, Lacan, and Klein. In a similar vein, El Shakry, in *The Arabic Freud* (2017), reads the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's theses on love and traces his reading of 13th-century scholar and mystic Ibn 'Arabi. She then returns to mid-20th-century Egypt and tries to explain how psychoanalytic notions were being translated into Arabic, making the argument that if Lacan was being linguistically translated into Arabic, then the mystical, Sufi tradition is also being translated into modern Egyptian society through Lacan's engagement with Sufism. What this amounts to is an intervention in the canon— that of psychoanalysis—and the way it was constructed and conceived in a Eurocentric model. Indeed, this type of intervention has been, and continues to be, a fundamental intellectual struggle for comparatists and intellectual historians who are straddling these multiple traditions and geographies while engaging with theory.

One comparative exercise I undertook in this respect is writing the entry for "Scandal" (El-Ariss 2020) in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*. To start with, it is such a delight to write about scandal in general, and especially within a genealogy of literary theory. In this essay, I was able to tell the story of scandal starting with Aphrodite and the *Arabian Nights* and ending with Egyptian activist Alia Al Mahdy, whom Marwan Kraidy has written about in *The Naked Blogger of Cairo* (2016). To reconstruct and decolonize a theoretical genealogy or term—as I do with the term "scandal"—is what I mean by occupying the canon. The Global South context, including that of Al Mahdy, but also Arabic literature and media, is no longer relegated to the margins or receiving ends of theory but is read instead in order to rethink canonical views on philosophical or media genres and traditions that we imagine begin and end in the West.

3. Impasse and Breakdown

After we level the playing field and engage various traditions, texts, and ideas by exploring their theoretical possibilities and situating them with the canon of theory and the humanities or social sciences more broadly, we will often find ourselves in impasses—moments that challenge our relationship to the discipline, the debates surrounding it and questions of epistemology. What happens when these engagements with the global context challenge or derail from the canon of theory? What are some of the critical moments that require a new language to grasp being at the intersection of disciplines and theoretical models? In fact, I first experienced this impasse when I was writing my dissertation at Cornell and had to choose my primary texts. At the time, I wanted to understand the genealogy of Orientalism that Said was dismantling, so I ventured into the eighteenth century and read texts by Montesquieu and Holbach, among others, to understand how Islam and the Ottoman Empire were being imagined as the "other" of European enlightenment. This investigation led me to eventually bring in the nahda in the nineteenth century and examine Arab intellectual engagements with this Orientalist tradition (El-Ariss, 2018a). Putting those two corpuses into conversation, I sought to draw on the postcolonial, deconstructive, and psychoanalytic tools to make my argument. However, I started observing textual phenomena that

my theoretical toolbox did not allow me to explain, such as people breaking down and collapsing while traveling in Egypt, Greece, or France. Therefore, I needed to describe and theorize this collapse. Questions of the psychosomatic conditions soon became part of a story that I needed to explain, but I didn't have the language—the theoretical language, that is—to account for what I was uncovering in these texts. This is when I turned to affect theory, which was a new approach I had not considered. Practically, I started assembling a new language because my particular theoretical training lacked the language needed for the interpretation of these unique textual findings.
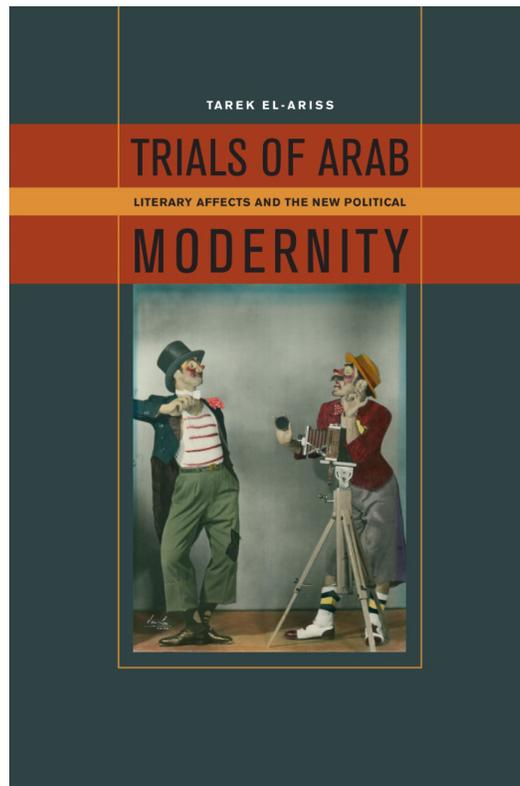

Fig 2: Trials of Arab Modernity (cover)

Keeping the global context of theory in mind and its intersection with area studies, affect theory did not solve my critical quandary. It wasn't enough to engage, for example, Deleuze and Guattari and their concept of the assemblage (1987), or non-verbal acts in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003), in order to explain certain phenomena that I was observing. I had to bring in Arabic theoretical models to read these texts while exploring the Western theoretical questions. It's reading with and along different theoretical traditions that allowed me to unravel the impasses I mentioned. In *Trials of Arab Modernity* (2013), I turned to Arabic authors from the fourteenth century such as Ibn Fadlan (2003), who travels to Russia and offers in his narrative a register about aversion and the visceral as a framework of the encounter. An Arabic theoretical register started to share the scene with that of affect and the unconscious. Engaging with Arabic conceptual terms like *kashf* (revealing, unveiling) and *aḥdāth* (episodes, events) allowed me to reflect on processes of unveiling and the event to

theorize Arab modernity as a somatic condition. Arab modernity is more than *ḥadātha* (innovation); it is also about *aḥdāth* and *ḥawādith* (accidents, encounters) and new genres. These concepts are brought into dialogue with those of Benjamin (1968) who does the same with Baudelaire when reading the latter's poetic modernity. The Arabic events of the nahda thus become integrated within a larger theoretical framework that deals with modernity in Europe, the Ottoman Empire, and beyond (El-Ariss, 2013).

This galloping to-and-fro described here is the result of theory impasses, which arise from a need to recognize the otherness in and of the text—to make it legible. Put differently, this is the work of translation, not as a one-dimensional process from a language to another, but as a constant crossing over and between languages as well as cultures, as Benjamin theorizes it in "The Task of the Translator" (1996). Thus, this third step, which consists of forging new discourses through translation and otherwise, is crucial, for it is about responding to a demand the text (rather than the world) makes on the critic. It is an urgency that arises organically from the text, indicating that the tools at the scholar's disposal don't do justice to the phenomena at hand. We should also prepare students to encounter these phenomena that challenge their training, especially when they are in the process of conceptualizing their projects. They need to be ready to develop new tools that will allow them to imagine, speculate, and engage in the theoretical bricolage described here. The training has to open new horizons and prepare students to stage theoretical conversations, thus moving away from understanding theory as a methodology that could be applied to a text or an image. The global framework introduced here breaks apart the singularity of theory as an integrated system of meaning production.

4. Cross-Disciplinary Sublime

Starting conversations and forging new theoretical languages that draw on multiple traditions and temporalities often generate encounters that are both linguistic and disciplinary. The impasses and breakdowns described above often lead to cross-disciplinary encounters with which I had to engage throughout my work and especially in my second book, *Leaks, Hacks, and Scandals* (2019). My engagement not only with literary texts but also with digital media in this book led me to experience what I'm calling here a "cross-disciplinary sublime." The reference here is to Edmund Burke's sublime as something that causes both pain and great exhilaration. Encountering phenomena that not only force the critic to question their theoretical training but that also require them to engage with multiple fields at once generates this experience of the sublime I'm describing here. For example, in my chapter on Twitter in the Gulf region, I engage with a character who constructs himself—or themselves—as a knight coming from pre-Islamic Arabia, but also as an exegete who has immediate access to the religious text and to news simultaneously. This Twitter knight engages in the practice of exposure and unveiling (*kashf, faḍḥ*), leaking news and analyzing events by drawing on the mystical tradition in Islam, producing a kind of writing that literary critics might also characterize as surrealist. Furthermore, this blogger or Twitter handle serializes their tweets, creating suspense and partaking in genres often associated with a nineteenth-century novelistic tradition wherein novels were first published in instalments in newspapers and then assembled as a unified text (El-Ariss, 2019, 107-113).
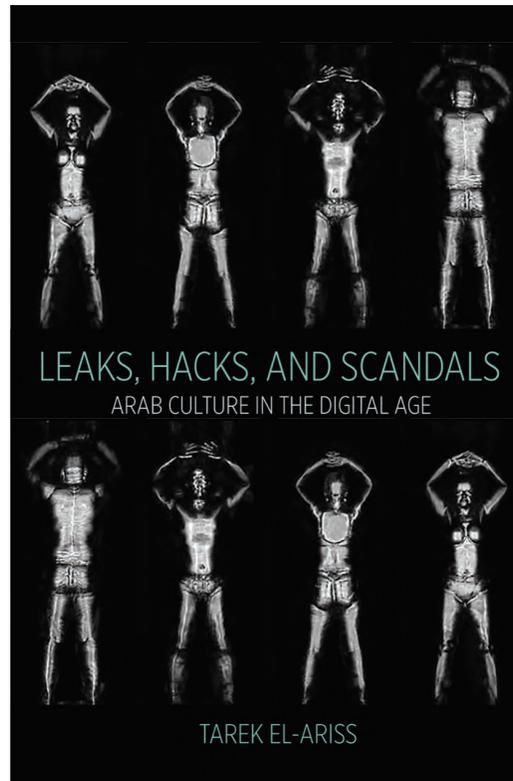
Fig 3: Leaks Hacks and Scandals (cover)

In trying to understand the phenomenon of Twitter in Arabia, I found myself having to engage with multiple fields and traditions including Islamic exegesis, surrealism, the nineteenth-century novel, and cyber culture, to name a few. Media studies, literary studies, or even cultural studies, which are often equipped to handle this cross-disciplinary multitasking, were not able to capture that which I was observing. Facing this phenomenon, the critic often feels overwhelmed, having both to delve into scholarly traditions outside of their humanistic training and having to follow the path of speculative inquiry and theoretical association to draw the critical picture and make a coherent argument about new media, digital culture, and communication. This critical state involves an experience of a cross-disciplinary sublime that forces one to question and rethink notions of expertise and interrogate reading practices. The portals opening online to pre-Islamic Arabia and to mystical writing that one must enter collapse the critical distance between oneself and the text, between oneself and the medium. The critic ends up entering the text that they are trying to understand, only to find themselves pulled into traditions and affective engagements, that leaves them vulnerable and questioning of their expertise and the power of their interpretive practices. Add to this a pandemic and social and political upheavals that shook the world to the core and you have an epistemological crisis but also an opportunity to rethink, to speculate, and to imagine.

5. New Writing Genres

My current book project dwells in the portal of the personal that my previous book opened up. In this model I'm laying out for a global, theoretical, and critical practice, the last step takes up questions of vulnerability, the "I," and the power of reading and interpretation. How do we merge the personal with the critical in one textual space especially when we were trained not to do so? Dealing with personal narratives as a way of describing an intellectual genealogy, my new book project is about growing up during the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90). In thinking about my own intellectual trajectory and the war experience, my writing becomes literary, associative, and generically transgressive. In this model, I follow and trust my associations that take me from Derrida to Greek mythology to the classical Arabic tradition and to contemporary cyber culture. At the same time, the writing process is social, communal, inasmuch as it is solitary. I read passages from chapters to friends and colleagues who then share their insights and their own associations. In other words, my own critical practice embraces the various factors at play both in my mind and in my world—much like other writers today, not necessarily academic, who are forging new writing genres, and crossing genre boundaries.[6] The current book is evolving through interactive encounters, incorporating models of critique and aesthetics that change our understanding of reception, audience, and circulation in the traditional literary critical sense. The text, as it is being produced, is already engaging and constructing its own audience, who also take part in its production. The author-critic is engaged in a series of dialogues and performances that generate the text, relinquishing thereby the singularity of the authorial I. By bringing the I into my literary and critical practice, I expose it as in *fadh* and *kashf* (revealing, exposure), relinquishing in the process its centrality. The I in this new stage of writing is an invitation for other I's to enter and take part in the production process. The I, in fact, is lost in theory.

The autobiographical in this last critical step becomes also the ultimate stage of theory. In fact, the self and theory are not mutually exclusive, but are rather constituted in complementary fashion. The new writing genres I'm exploring in this new book open to this speculation and imagination I started out identifying. My imagination and the disorientation emerging from the state that we have entered is taking me to the autobiographical and to something akin to autotheory. This engagement with the theoretical and philosophical framework has been fundamental to thinking the global in terms of knowledge production that crosses disciplines and languages. It has also been taken up in various ways by thinkers and artists including Etel Adnan and Abdelkebir Khatibi, for instance. This process involves drawing on the personal in order to explore the formation of the thinking I, of the scholarly I, by unpacking the history and the associations emerging from particular experiences and cultural contexts. In the book I'm currently writing, one of the themes and movements I explore is that of "water," engaging it as a framework for remembering and for retrieving my experience in Beirut during the civil war (El-Ariss 2018c). In dialogue with psychoanalysis and affect theory both consciously and unconsciously, this exploration allows me

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6   For examples of essays that challenge genres, and also for an example of the way I think collaboratively and collectively, see the essays collected in El-Ariss 2021.

to understand how memory is constituted. The object of inquiry in this book is not only what the self can know, process, and explain, but also how this knowing self is constituted in the first place through various encounters and affects involving war, fiction, and media.

CONCLUSION

In describing my intellectual trajectory, I attempt to identify a critical practice in five steps and stages that draws on theory to engage the world. The encounters I have described occur across languages and fields, literary studies and communication, and take place in global contexts from Arab cyber culture to nineteenth-century Egypt or France. By way of conclusion, I'd like to return to Edward Said with whom I began, and his notion of "world," which, in Said, isn't a synonym for the global. Rather, for Said, the "worldly" is that which is precisely outside the *text*. Therefore, Said, in a sense, presents a critique through concepts of worldliness and secular criticism expert culture, which excludes the power of texts in the world (1983). This leads me to seek ways to write and engage that are simultaneously inwardly and worldly, and to rethink in the process these notions of expertise, as well as our critical practices and forms of engagement. It's important to explore ways to write ourselves into our analyses— not as protagonists, but rather in a way that acknowledges the limitations of our tools as readers, and the complicity of fields with forms of power. The sense that scholarship or academe is faced with an impasse offers an opportunity to rethink intellectual trajectories but also devise new ways of engagement. As we keep on finding new avenues of critique and new models of writing, let us continue trying to decenter and decolonize in good faith.

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