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Poetry and Possibilities in Contemporary Egypt

Reem Badr
reembadr@aucegypt.edu

The American University in Cairo

The School of Humanities and Social Sciences (HUSS)

POETRY AND POSSIBILITIES IN CONTEMPORARY EGYPT

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by Reem Hatem Ibrahim Mohamed Badr

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لو كاره التمثيل

اقفل من الاول

لو شفت فيا جميل

ف انا لسه هتحول

هو التراك دا طويل

ولا التراك طول

إني أراك بتميل

و انا روحى بتنمل

انا ابن هذا الجيل

يا قتيل يا متسول

هو التراك دا طويل و لا التراك طول!

.

.

من زمان عايز أقترح ع الدولة

توفير اراضى المدافن

و استغلالها مساكن للشباب

ومحدودي الدخل

أو استغلالها لدفن نفايات نووية

للقضاء على الشباب و محدودي الدخل

المهم يعنى..

يستغلوا الأراضي دى ف حاجة مفيدة

و كل واحد يدفن اللى يخصوه ف قلبه

و اهوا برضوا لما يحب يزورهم تبقى المسافة مش بعيده

بس على الله الدولة تسيبنا ف حالنا

و ميدخلوش على قلوبنا

عشان مشاريع جديدة

زينب - أحمد الطحان

Introduction

I walked all over downtown, from bookstore to bookstore, trying to find Gamal's anthology. It was our second meeting so I wanted to have it with me this time, to be able to talk to him about it having had my own experience with it. After about 30 minutes I decided to give it up. I was tired of walking, and every place so far had either never heard of the anthology, or did not have it in stock. I had no real idea where else to look and the unfamiliar streets studded with police vans were becoming overwhelming, so I cut my losses and went to the cafe where we had agreed to meet despite the twenty minutes I still had.

I picked a table near an electricity plug so that I could charge my phone, and waited. The red metal chairs were uncomfortable, especially as I sat slightly bent over, tethered as I was to my phone's charger, and the live Jazz music was slightly too loud. I received a text from Gamal that he was held up in traffic and was running late. I ordered hot chocolate and settled in. Almost an hour late, Gamal finally arrived, wearing a black cloth mask with a plastic circular ventilating thingie, a navy blue shirt with a flower pattern, and a silver hoop in his right ear, a bit higher than an earring would usually be. It contrasted heavily with his otherwise typical, conservative looking demeanor, with short neat hair, a short neat beard, and a silver ring with a black stone on his left hand. He was carrying a pack of cigarettes and a notebook, different from the one he carried in the first meeting but with a similar vibe. It was interesting to later discover that he did not carry a pen though, when he wanted to note down his friend's number and had to borrow one from me. The moment he came in, after shaking my hand, he handed me a bar of dark chocolate and apologized profusely for making me wait.

We chatted about his upcoming signing, the projects he was working on, and poetry. "Curiosity is what creates poetry", he told me, talking of an interest in people, an attunement to

what they were saying, as what got him through the five years he was imprisoned, and enabled him to have a collection of poetry at the end of it.

Then he recited one of the poems he had written in jail, stuttering over certain parts, remembering as he went. “I had not recited this one for two years”, he explained.
As he recited the poem his voice changed, became higher and deeper, and he fell into a rhythm of words and breath. I leaned forward to hear him over the loud saxophone in the background. Part of me had followed him into his rhythm, my breathing synching with his pauses, my ears attuned to his voice, but there was another part of me that remained in that red chair. It wondered whether I should uncross my arms as I listened, whether I should be looking him in the eyes or slightly to the side, whether my mmms were too loud, or not loud enough. It felt simultaneously as a performance and a disclosure, as too intimate and not intimate enough. Whatever it felt was too fragile, as if I breathed too loud it would tip over and break.

Sticky and Slippery

Kalam, or verbiage, in classical conceptualizations of the Arabic language is either *manzoom* (structured, regimented), or *manthoor* (dispersed, scattered). There is the dispersed unmemorable language of everyday speech; It is *nathr*, or prose. Then there's poetry, *shi’r*: language confined by meter and rhyme, and thus elevated, protected from clutter, made to stick (Ibn-Rashiq 1963).

It made sense to term the measured and rhymed parts of the language *shi'r* then, as *shi'r* came from the verb *sha'ar* which translated into apprehended, or knew. What was poetry was what stuck around as truly known, truly understood. Poetry was a repository, a *diwan,* and the poet the bearer of knowledge and memory (Ibn Rashiq 1963, Furani 2012).

The centuries compromised the integrity of that foundational understanding of what poetry is. The years showed that the structure of meter and rhyme were far from enough to protect verbiage from clutter , or to create the elevated memorable texts befitting poetry. There had to be something more to it. Shawqy Dayf, one of the most prominent Arab literary critics and scholars of the 20th century, put it as the "soul that flutters and the life that pulses" (1961) within the poem that made it what it was. Meter and rhyme were just not enough to give language that life on their own. This coincided with the turn s*ha'ar* took as a verb. Over the years it was reduced to feeling and emotion rather than the all-encompassing knowing. Poetry, Dayf argued, was *'atefa*, layered with thought, and with poetic imagination. All three were crucial to poetry, but the *'atefa* was at its core. *'Atefa* is a cousin of emotion but the translation leaves a lot behind. It comes from the verb *'ataf* which means to bend, or to lean, and is associated with tenderness, connection, and mercy.

The problem is that *'atefa* is intangible. You cannot take it into the palm of your hand or point to it from afar, disentangle it from the weave that is a text to see whether it is a poem or not. You can only feel it, intuit. Poetry, thus, is necessarily ambiguous, forever fleeting any attempt to define it.

Dayf himself acknowledges that. Claiming that mystery is integral to poetry, due to its connection to the psychic life of humans. Others have also identified that fleetingness. Fu'ad Haddad, one of the forefathers of Egyptian colloquial poetry, argued that poetry precedes languages and thus eludes any attempt at defining or describing it. Like everything is made up of water, and thus you can never describe it in terms of anything else, so is poetry. Humanity, and language, is made up of the poetic, and thus you can never use language to describe it.

This slipperiness of poetry was made even more evident when measure and rhyme were unceremoniously overthrown from their throne. The 'free Arabic poetry movement' brought upon a poetry freed from any of its constraints (Furani 2012, Radwan 2012) and all was left was the soul of the poem, a disembodied sense of what a poem is and is not that escapes language. As one of Furani's interlocutors puts it:

> "Where the sha'iriyya [poetics] of a poem lie is a difficult question. There are no criteria that distinguish poetry from nonpoetry. I know that it is poetry, but I don't know why. Add to this that modern time opened the doors between prose and poetry. In Arab history, the issues were clear, the limits were meter and rhyme. No one could say that outside those borders there is poetry. Today this is no longer correct." (2012, 201)

This stickiness of poetry means that it can do something in the world, while its slipperiness means that it is in a privileged position whereby it can take different forms, usually attempting to capture 'meaning' or ways of becoming deemed too indefinite or disruptive as to not be accessible via other means. This was realized by generations of Egyptian poets who used their poetry to shape the worlds and themselves in different ways. It was also realized by the state, evident in its institutionalized definition through education curricula as well as by other actors who are constantly attempting to set their own boundaries delineating the borders of poetry.

This ethnographic inquiry starts exactly at this essential disjuncture at the heart of poetry, and the multitude of dualities it spawns between text and performance, the intimate and the public, emotionality and sociality, past and present. It is primarily an inquiry about possibilities. I set out to follow poetry in all of its elusiveness, inbetweenness, the way in which it is in excess

of every category meant to bound it, as it attempts to inhabit and make sense of a world marked by constraint and rigidity, a world where "the expanse narrows"[1], "reality turns into concrete", and "the spaces we move in got smaller and smaller until we were stuck in place"[2], to quote some of my interlocutors. I argue that poetry, in its dual capacity as method and medium, is uniquely positioned, particularly because of this elusiveness, to allow us to grasp and comprehend often unexamined facets of life in today's Egypt and its politics.

"In the absence of ready concepts, metaphors speak to the non-spoken and to sensibilities that escape consolidated conceptualized forms," Ann Stoler notes in a discussion on the inadequacies of language to conceive of a complex, elusive world (2016, 339). An added complexity when it comes to poetry is that it is, as Karin Barber notes of texts, a "part of social reality but they also take an attitude to social reality" (2008, 4). Poetry thus has a double presence as object of inquiry, and a site of theoretical intervention and reflection, not only on the social in which it is embedded but also on itself. Its conceptualizations are thus to be treated seriously as organic theoretical frameworks, invaluably insightful but also necessarily subject to critical scrutiny, and constant reconfiguration, as they are taken into the field. Poetry is absolutely a space where 'major conceptual archetypes' and 'foundational metaphors' appear in their first formulations, before they reach their full transformative potential, as Victor Turner hypothesized (1974, 28), but it is also simultaneously a space where dominant, entrenched, 'structures of feelings', in this case the model of opposition and resistance, dwell (Williams 1977).

[1] This is quoted from a conversation I had with Noura, a young poet, around a wave of controversy surrounding one of her poems. This is discussed further in chapter 3.
[2] These are quotes lifted from a conversation held with Salma, a poet, and Waleed, a self-proclaimed hobbyist and lover of poetry, around the current state of poetic practices. The discussion is revisited in chapters 1 and 2.

In the initial iterations of this project I could only conceive of poetry's possibilities in terms of resistance and subversion. This was perhaps my "romantic" attempt to grasp at "hopeful confirmation of failure-or partial failure-of systems of oppression" (Abu-Lughod 1990, 53), but more than that it was an uncritical adoption of the dominant root metaphor underlying Egyptian colloquial poetry's own understanding of itself, one that leaked over into scholarly and popular conceptualizations of it. As I will discuss in greater details later in this introduction, colloquial poetry in Egypt has historically established a conceptualization of itself as subversive, a weapon in the hand of the righteous against oppressors, and of its poets as politically committed activists and dissidents, "entrusted with a mission to treat the ailments of society and aid those reaching out for help" (Aboubakr 2015, 36).

Upon entering the field, however, it became evident that resistance was becoming a dying metaphor. I was met over and over again with a resistance to resistance so to speak, often in the sense of an outright refusal from interlocutors to conceive of their poetic practices in those terms. Notions of poetry's power to stand up to power, to aid, or those of poets as warriors and figures of opposition were met with either scoffs of dismissal or disinterest, or sighs at their naivete .The consensus was that resistance was irrelevant, either impossible or undesirable. It was not enough to step out of romanticizing resistance and into approaching it as a diagnostic of power as Lila Abu-Lughod compellingly argues (1990), but to do away with it as a framework altogether. What remains in its stead dwells "at the very edge of semantic availability" (Williams 1977, 134), emergent still, yet to be nameable and apprehendable. Thus, rather than attempt to superimpose a theoretical system that it will inevitably leak out of, patch together 'stranger-concepts' in a way that does not aim at creating a "correspondence of meaning" but at generating "*disjunctive homonimity*, that destruction of any firm sense of place that can only be resolved by the

imaginative formulation of novel worldviews," as called for by Giovanni Da Gol and David Graeber (2011, vii-viii), a plethora of insufficient metaphors.

Metaphors, Dying and Sprouting

Poetry's notions of resistance are necessarily political. In fact, they involve a particularly narrow conceptualization of politics, which I use Politics to denote for the purposes of this thesis, one that "pertains to the procedures of modern nation-states: political parties, elections, the workings of bureaucracy, and revolutionary moments" (Bush 2015; 189), and is "limited to the relationship between the dominant and the subordinate" (Ortner 1995, 176) - what would be termed in everyday Egyptian discourses as *siyasy*. Thus, the waning of the resistance model can be linked to the perceived political failure of post-revolutionary Egypt, and the "new normal" of violent authoritarianism and disavowal of traditional political practices in the years following 2013 (Armbrust 2019). It is symptomatic of the way the poetry and its practitioners, like everyone else, were voided of their capacity to act and speak publicly (Jackson 2002, 51; Kleinman 2000), and poetry's metaphors show that in the shift from orienting itself in opposition to an oppressor, be that colonial powers or the state, to an onlooker in a fractured world, forced to inhabit. The focus is now on a world in which action is experienced as impossible, the forces behind that stripping of agency are in the periphery, decentered, and largely unaddressed and unmentioned. This can be observed in the passive statements quoted previously describing expanses to be closing and spaces to be getting smaller.

This shift brings forth Stoler's metaphor of 'imperial debris and ruination', centering "what people are 'left *with*'" (2016, 348), and echoes the pre-Islamic poetic practice of *al boka' 'ala al 'atlal*, weeping over ruins. Ruination as a central metaphor rather than one of trauma or catastrophe, which are still in play, "emphasizes a critical positioning of the present within

violent structures" (Nassar 2020, 510; Stoler 2016), and follows poetry's lead in breaking out of the oppressor/ oppressed dialectic which is experienced as having synthesised into absolute domination. Resistance is thus replaced with inhabiting a world never to be whole once more, piecing together its 'fragments', to make a life there in the devastation, not in an effort to recover but to recuperate (Das 2007; Guyer 2017).

Ruination is the aftermath of violence, the devastation of which lies in its capacity to destroy the intersubjective space between public and private realms (Jackson 2002, 81). Not only an obliteration of the public, closing off any possibility there, but also a defamiliarization of home, an invasion of the private, creating an intimacy that is diasporic, "not opposed to uprootedness and defamiliarization but is constituted by it" (Boym 2001, 253). Violence isolates and privatizes, forcibly reducing a person's possibilities for connections and relationships (Jackson 2002). It casts out or drives in, or in some cases both, creating an experience of claustrophobic homelessness, and "durable, if sometimes intangible constraints and confinements" that mark 'duress' as developed by Stoler (2016, 7).

Duress, Stoler argues, is a "relationship of actualized and anticipated violence" (8), that is marked by a protracted temporality, an enduring pressure rather than a rupture. It is violence seeped through the fabric of the world and the everyday, becoming a feature of the system. It is possibilities shrunken, choices absented, and silence enforced. It is stuckedness as conceived of by Hage as the condition of an era marked by crisis permanentized the way Armbrust argues it was in post 2013 Egypt (Armbrust 2019; Hage 2009; Jackson 2002; Stoler 2016). It is loss, and to live under duress, to stand amongst the ruins in its wake, is to inhabit the world "in a gesture of mourning" (Das 2007, 5), but a mourning impaired by constraint, by a diminished ability to voice, or act out, the grief over what is being mourned, a loss of agency that compounds the loss

of home and world. This breeds a melancholia which “doesn't pass with the labor of grief and has less connection to the outside world” (Boym 2001) and its kin like depression where “subjectivity may be said to collapse in upon itself” (Jackson 2002, 62).

The Lay of the Land

Apart from Abu-Lughod’s seminal ethnography on Awlad Ali in the Western deserts of Egypt in the 80s, with its probing of oral lyric poetry, there has been a dearth of anthropological attention to Egyptian colloquial poetry. Abu-Lughod’s work insightfully highlights the ways in which tribal poetry functions as a discourse of intimacy, beyond the predominant conception of it as a political instrument. The poetry at the center of that work, however, is rather distinct from the poetry at the center of this one. The *ghinnawas* of Awlad Ali are a genre of tribal poetry, a ubiquitous tradition of an insulated community whose identity was constructed as separate from, if not independent of, Egyptianness. This is quite distinct from the colloquial poetry that dwells in Egypt’s urban centers, and that were historically constituted into literary genres that took shape in and around the modern nation-state.

There is significant historical scholarship on Egyptian colloquial poetry, especially the popularization of Zajal (colloquial poetry in the strophic form), in the second half of the nineteenth century with the rise of the Egyptian nationalist press (Benin 1994; Radwan 2012, Dayf 1962). The larger nationalising movement, one of the cornerstones of which was the use of the vernacular as a way to draw in wider audiences and promote a nationalist Egyptian patriotism, continued in paper a rich history of poetry written in the Egyptian colloquial, which was until then a primarily oral form. By the turn of the century, the movement’s colloquial poetry developed a predominantly irreverent, satirical tone and was mainly concerned with providing

critique and commentary on social and political issues of the time publishing in their journals and newspapers what proprietors were calling *fukahi islah'i*, *humorous reform-oriented* (Booth 1992), or what Bayram Al-Tunsi, one of Zajal's biggest names then, introduced as *adab il-is'af*, the literature of rescue (Radwan 2012).

The poetry we identify today as *"Shi'r al 'ammiyya"*, or 'the Colloquial Poetry', took form only around the late 1950s. In her book *Egyptian Colloquial Poetry in the Modern Arabic Canon: New Readings of Shi'r Al-'ammiyya*, Noha Radwan (2012) argues that Egyptian colloquial poetry as we now know it cannot be considered an extension of any of colloquial poetry's earlier forms. She argues a difference not only in motivations but also in the "sensibilities about poetic expression and its place in society" (5) expressed in the poetry to justify that claim. The poets and practitioners however, seem to disagree. From its earliest works in the 1950s, the poetry she designates as this new separate form has been insistent on tying itself to earlier traditions of colloquial poetry. Not only are many of the most widely appreciated texts of the genre rewritings of folkloric songs, routinely mimicking the forms and meters and quoting at least the first lines, such as Naguib Surur's *'Il bah'r byedh'ak lih'* and Ahmed Fu'ad Nigm's *'atshan ya sabaya'* to name a few, but they are also riddled with invocations of practitioners of Zajal as founding fathers, chief among whom Al-Tunsi (Booth 2001, 259).

The 'ammiyya poets of the fifties and sixties inherited, more or less consciously, a lot from their chosen predecessors: their tone, irreverence, concern with the social and the political, and the 'popular' nature of their poetry, "in both senses of the popular: as the broadcast to the largest possible audience in a society, and as an oppositional potential" (Booth 2001). First and foremost, however, they inherited, and cemented, an understanding of the colloquial poet as an activist, a voice of political commitment. The mantle of Al-Tunsi writing literature to rescue the

nation in his *adab il-is'af* was taken on by poets like Haddad waking up the complacent with his *al-misahharati*, and Negm speaking truth to power and inciting revolution with his *al-'adib al-'odabaty*. Through their lives of activism as well as their poetry, these poets offered an alternative formulation to the Egyptian committed intellectual (Aboubakr 2015).

That is not to argue that the 'ammiyya poets' position as oppositional figures of refusal was an uncomplicated one. The state's control over publications and broadcasting venues made for a paradoxical relationship between it and the poets, and the cultural field at large, for whom the state was "at once their patron and persecutor (Mehrez 2008, 6). That is not to deny, however, what is emphasized by these various historiographies: that a lot of the most iconic works of the genre are explicitly radical and in clear opposition to regimes of power, that many of the poets were political activists that were incarcerated and persecuted by those regimes for their activism and their poetry, and, most importantly, that those poets came to perceive of their roles as poets in those terms: refusal, resistance, activism, and political commitment.

Scholarly interest in Egyptian colloquial poetry peters off in the last decades of the 20th century, perhaps reflecting a wider crisis for the genre. Marilyn Booth chronicles that crisis, and its peak with the rise of the prose poem in the 1990s (2001). Aside from the still alive major figures of the 60s, like Negm and al-Abnudi, 'ammiyya poetry was abandoning everything the tradition stood for with its shift to "the cerebral and the abstract", seen as a betrayal of its popular nature and a refusal to engage with the political present. As the poetry turned away from collectivist concerns inwards, the 'ammiyya seemed to be losing its 'popular'ity: not only its mass appeal but also its oppositional nature, the political commitment of its poets, and its ties to national or social causes (Booth 2001; Shalaby 1992).

What seemed like a radical break, turned out to be but a fleeting aberration. when the latter half of the 2000s witnessed the emergence of poets such as Iman Al-Bakri and Hisham Al-Gakh. Both poets were popular performers, able to garner relatively large audience and wide circulation for their works. Also, both of their works, especially Al-Bakri's, had political undertones and addressed national collectivist concerns, as well as personal ones. Obvious influences of canonical figures of al-'ammiyya such as Negm and 'Abd al-Rahman al-Abnudi in their poetry and the way they viewed and presented their projects as poets signaled a return to tradition. But the scholarly disinterest remained, with a marked lack of literature about the genre and its figures that took a revolution to change.

Scholarly attention to poetry truly surged in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution, which was hailed as a "triumph of poetry" (Saad 2012), and a "revival of the poetry of dissent" (Botros 2015). Work on poetry focused on the way protest slogans were poetic (Colla 2011; Colla 2012; Radwan 2012), and on the revived interest in the political poetry of the 50s and 60s (Botros 2015; Colla 2011; Radwan 2012; Schielke 2016). There was a comparative dearth in work concerned with poems, not just collectively authored slogans, that were actually written anew in the midst of and the immediate aftermath of 2011, let alone the decade after, with only Casini (2014) tackling how colloquial poetry changed discursive order in revolutionary Egypt, and Samuli Schielke and Mukhtar Saad Shehata's *The Writing of Lives*, an ethnography of writers, poets accounted for under that category, in Alexandria immediately following the revolution (2016).

There is a bit more work if we go beyond *Shi'r il 'ammiyya* as a genre and a tradition to include poetry written in the Egyptian colloquial more generally, particularly lyric poetry written to be sung. That inclusion of songs under the purview of poetry is not an innovation but a mere

acknowledging of the status quo. Not only does it follow the strong, pre-original, intertwining of poetry and song in the Arab tradition of poetry (Furani 2012; Schielke 2016), it also reflects how in Egypt, the two never truly separated - there is no term reserved for song lyricists, far and wide they are called and considered poets, and the poets move between the two sites with no sense of having crossed over in or out of poetry. With that inclusion of songs in mind, Gilman's ethnography of pop music is a surprising intervention in the field (2014). As the fieldwork went until 2013, it takes into consideration the events of the revolution and its aftermath, and frames how the songs being produced and their reception transformed in the wake of those events. As part of that discussion, Gilman notes poetry on the revolution as possibly more resonant and registering as sincerer than pop music, with an allusion that this might be caused by the capitalist considerations of the music industry. There was also Sprengel's work with what she calls 'DIY' or 'do it yourself' musicians and their post-2011 avoidance of the political (2019). Included in the DIY label, is *mahraganat,* a genre of music rooted in the *sha'bi* or popular music's sounds but is electronically self-produced, and one that has received significant interest as "music of protest" (Abou Zeid 2019; Benchouia 2015; Swedenburg 2012; Swedenburg 2019).

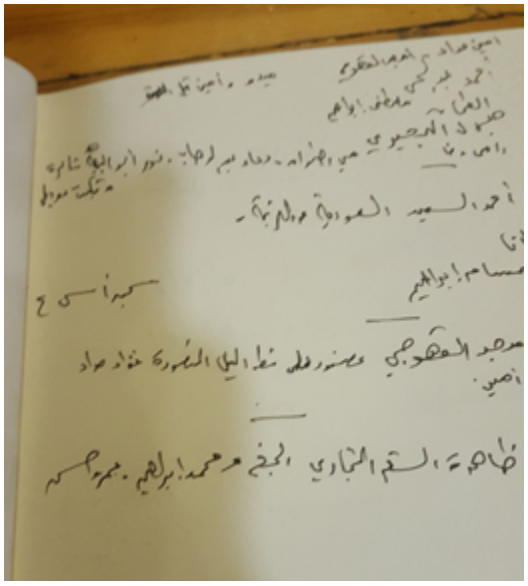
In general, the literature on Egyptian poetry, with its focus on protest and dissent, views poetry primarily through the lens of resistance, and in the context of "the kind of politics that is visible in a revolutionary event that attracts the attention of new observers" (Bush 2015), though Sprengel's work is a timely exploration of the internal disavowal of that model (2019) and Schielke provides an insightful critique of the adoption of 'an ethics of rejection' inherent in it (2016). It also largely absents the present in its inquiries into poetry, either focusing on histories of poetry rather than its contemporary practices, or even when attending to current practices like

in the case of mahraganat, treats them primarily as extension of older traditions of protests. This falls in line with the body of anthropological literature on poetry in the region more broadly.

Ethnographies of poetry in the region started off predominantly concerned with oral tribal poetry, from Abu-Lughod's *Veiled Sentiments* (1988) to the self-proclaimed seminal ethnography on poetry, *Peaks of Yemen I Summon* (1990). More recent works move into contexts of modern nation states, but still carry the affinity for poetry that duels in relatively insulated, marginalized communities as in the case of Zuzanna Olszewska's *The Pearl of Dari* about the poetry of a group of Afghan refugees in Iran (2015), or are interested in following how tribal poetry copes with assimilation into a state context as with Flagg Miller's *The Moral Resonance of Arab Media* (2007). Even when they center a poetic tradition that has been institutionalized as a literary genre as in the case of Khaled Furani's ethnography, *Silencing the Sea,* about Arabic poetry in Palestinian society, it remains an investigation of poetry that is situated within a community subjected to domination, in opposition to power (2012). Like Bush notes in his intervention to that body of work, politics always ends up at the heart of ethnographies of poetry, and there is always the idea of poetry as "inert matter waiting to be instrumentalized by whatever 'political' entity" tinging it (2015, 189). Here I want to take his compelling argument that these anthropologies of poetry can allow us to emerge from a narrow conceptualization of politics, to multiply accounts of it, even further, beyond this dichotomy of complicity and subversion altogether.

Given the dearth of sources on the contemporary state of poetry in the Egyptian colloquial, I have pieced together an ethnographic account of the field as it stands. There are the poets who consider themselves an extension of *Shi'r il 'ammiyya* as a tradition. I have attached below a photograph of an accounting of some of the biggest names of that strand, offered to me

by one of the poets as his guide to the field. As the page shows, not only are the non-controversially significant names in the tradition few enough to fit on a page, they can also be traced by poetic ancestry so to speak to one of the founding fathers of the 60s, the way he traces Amgad al Qahwagy to Fu'ad Haddad in one of the lines. In that page he also notes what he terms 'the phenomena of commercial poetry', a group of poets who started off within the tradition of 'ammiyya but have developed a style centered on performance, and shifted their topics and themes to appeal to social media audiences in particular. Usually condemned as pandering to adolescence, and producing generally vapid shallow poetry within the tradition, this strand of poetry enjoys great popularity and commercial success that reflects not only in book sales but also, more significantly, in ticket sales to 'poetry concerts', also a relatively novel phenomena. The 'ammiyya poets, commercial and otherwise, overlap with pop poets, or poets who write lyrics for pop music, as well as poets who write for the 'independent' music artists and bands.



There are also the unaffiliated poets, for lack of a better word. This is a small collection of poets whose introduction to poetry happened isolated from 'ammiyya as a community of

practice. They usually narrate having developed an interest in the poetry they were introduced to in the educational curricula, and then came across poetry performances online that they then tried to emulate and write. Worth noting that all of my unaffiliated poets came of age, and became poets, after 2011 and that they are all bilingual. In fact the poetry they were exposed to virtually was mostly the North American 'spoken word' poetry, and a lot of their writing fluidly moves between English, 'ammiyya, and fusha, the Arabic standard language. They are not influenced by 'ammiyya as a tradition, however, or its figures, and though unaffiliated there has been online initiatives for poetry collectives, like "Egypt's Poets' Society" and "The Word Project" that have managed to create online communities to host these poets where they can share their work with peers, and also organize events where they can perform for an audience.

Then there are the genres of Egyptian music unpopulated by 'ammiyya poets, primarily *mahraganat* and rap. Mahraganat, like pop, usually contracts poets to write lyrics for the performers, but rappers exclusively write for themselves. There is a lot of overlap between the two genres, with similar techniques for musical production, and figures moving between both genres, or operating in between them, quite frequently especially in recent years. I have chosen to focus in this ethnography on rap, in addition to 'ammiyya and unaffiliated poetry, rather than *mahraganat*. Part of that choice was due to accessibility, the lockdown in that latter part of my fieldwork meant that accessing interlocutors has become harder. I had already by then established contact with other poets as well as rappers, but not any of the mahraganat poets. Additionally, Egyptian rap has a vibrant online presence, with rappers interacting with audiences on online live streams and as part of fan interviews as well as through their work, making a partially virtual ethnography more viable. More than that though, while *mahraganat* has had 10 years of scholarly inspection, Egyptian rap has had virtually none, aside from Nicholas

Mangialardi's essay on the practice of 'ciphering', "verbal jam session in which rappers take turns trading lyrics over a beat" (2019, 68).

As there are no sources on rap's history in Egypt, I have compiled a brief overview based on interlocutors' narratives. There is a general consensus that rap's emergence as a genre in Egyptian music took place in the 1990s. It happened as globalized youth, affluent enough to have travelled overseas with their families, encountered hip hop culture and brought back with them, usually in the form of cassettes. The youth back home fell in love with the music. They adopted the 'style' and started to experiment with rapping. A lot of the earlier attempts were in English and French. But soon rap made it into the street, attracting youth, primarily males, across classes with varying degrees of bilingual mastery. Egyptian rap officially became a thing.

In those early years rap was not unlike a lot of 'independent' genres in Egypt, and established itself as significantly publicly and politically engaged. Topics of tracks from the 2000s featured things like Arab-Israeli relations, unemployment, immigration, and gender relations, along with the ever-present disputes between rappers manifesting in the explosive disses and pokes. The music happened primarily on the street, but could also be found on the internet, and when it came to Y Crew for instance, in cassettes that circulated for a short while before they fell out with the production company. It was a vibrant youth culture that was quite invisible to mainstream Egypt.

In the mid-2000s MTM made it into mainstream recognition with their hit Omy Mesafra W ha'mel hafla, 'my mother is away and I'm throwing a party', which was ground breaking in two significant ways: it introduced the possible commercial viability of rap, and also the possibility that rap can be fun, stupid, and nonsensical, less serious and aggressive than what it mostly was. Their success was short-lived however, and rap remained niche and largely not

commercially successful. Even when 2011 came and with it a boom for independent musicians in general, rap was mostly undisturbed. There was the mainstream incorporation of the rare rapper like Zap Tharwat, who was quite unlike the scene - mellow, 'respectable', conservative, but not the genre as a whole. It was not until the late 2010s that rap truly became popular, breaking out into mainstream success.

Rap's timeliness makes it a particularly interesting site of inquiry for this project, as it has taken its latest form, and prospered, in this moment of duress, making its practices of inhabiting the world particularly generative.

Methodology

My field was constructed across these three 'sites' so to speak: 'ammiyya, unaffiliated poets, and rap. At times I emphasize that genre distinction, in an attempt to reflect when that takes place in the poetry or by my interlocutors, but other times that distinction disappears into irrelevance. My field was also constructed across three urban cities: Cairo, Alexandria, and Mansoura. This happened quite unintentionally as I had treated my field from the onset as the poetry itself. It just so happened that in the process of following my social network into that field, I found my interlocutors there. Besides virtual participant observation, where I sat in on poets' live streams and online readings, as well as utilizing online cultural artefacts such as social media posts, commentaries, and interviews, I use traditional ethnographic practices- I have attended poetry readings, signings, concerts, and recording sessions, as well as held casual conversations with poets and practitioners both virtually, and in person. A large part of the fieldwork I have conducted, however, has been interacting with the poetry itself.

What's (in) a poem?

As we sat in a crowded café in Garden City, I asked Rana, a poet in her early twenties, about a poem she had posted on her Facebook page. The poem, first posted in 2017, then re-shared three years later, days before our conversation, starts with a line that says: "Dedicated to Ahmed El Tahan". It is also the only poem on Rana's page signed by another woman's name as well as hers. These things intrigued me. I wondered how a seemingly intimate poem such as this one, that was written in the first person and seems to portray a very personal lived experience, could be written by two people. I was also curious about the reasons behind the dedication to Tahan, a poet who amassed an audience online in the wake of the 2011 revolution.

> "I wrote this with my friend Shiko" [nickname for her friend she had tagged], she told me. "Me and Shiko, our relationship goes back to school, 20 years or so, but ever since we came to know Tahan he has become a key *element* in our friendship. There are other writers too but not like him… I don't know Tahan personally really. Like I have him on Facebook but we never talked. I don't even think he saw this poem. But Tahan to me, and to a lot of my friends, especially after Zeynab.. You know, I had followed him before Zeynab of course. But after Zeynab, it was a whole other thing. He became *the voice*… [in English]".

My initial interest in Rana and Shiko's poem stemmed from a desire to assert the anthropological validity of this project. Throughout I was concerned that if I was not vigilant enough, I would slip out of ethnography and into literary critique. So, as a safeguarding measure,

I was always occupied with treating poems as "social facts", as Barber calls texts. In her *Anthropology of Texts, Persons, and Publics,* Barber asserts social relations as the fundamental matter of anthropology, and that an anthropology of texts should be interested in them as products of those relations that in turn helps shape them (2007). In that light, the two women's poem is an exemplary site of an anthropology of poetry. It is quite evidently at the node of multiple active social relationships: the women with each other and each of them with Tahan for instance. What was surprising was how Rana glossed over both of these and in turn the conversation centered Zeynab, Tahan's magnus opus.

The transformative encounter Rana fixates on, and talks about, is with Zeynab not with any of the people involved, and I was left trying to make sense of that encounter because Barber social study of texts, whereby a text is "one of the things societies produce, that people do", just did not seem capable of doing that (Barber 2007, 4). Barber likens texts in that sense to other social behaviors like agriculture and marriage, but you cannot exactly encounter any other social behavior the way Rana talks about encountering Zeynab. Her approach to accounting for that difference is to argue that that sense of encounter stems from the way texts are structured to demand a higher form of attention, they invite interpretation and thus a unique form of attention that results in that sense of encounter.

It is worth noting that Rana was far from the only one of my interlocutors who brought Zeynab up seemingly out of nowhere. Released as a 25 minute long sound track on SoundCloud, Zeynab was one of the poems that came up over and over again throughout my fieldwork. Noura, another interlocutor, was talking about another poet when she turned to her friend who was sitting with us but knew nothing about poetry and promised to play Zeynab for her. "The most beautiful poetry ever written to a girl that's what it is", she said. "And his voice, I think *he was*

high. It isn't the voice of someone trying to convey something to you. It's the voice of someone who's truly lost".

A critic once posted a long discussion of the status of Zeynab in this generation of Egyptian poetry on Facebook, noting how for years after young poets would be so influenced by Tahan's magnus opus they would mimic its structure, its vocabulary, its aesthetics, even the dull breaking monotone of his recitation.

A friend of mine Sara told me that Zeynab transformed her relationship to poetry. It made her feel new feelings, things she had never felt before. "It was so full of things that I never knew could be poetic before", she said. "So mundane that you never think it will make you feel something but oh it does".

Why does Zeynab keep coming up for my interlocutors, for me, often unprompted? Why this text and not others?

The question being asked is the age old question about how literature comes to have the impact it does. If we were to follow Barber's proposition then it will either come down to the way the text is set up, which leads to a very formalist approach that ironically takes the social completely out of it. Or, if we resist the formalist answer of the way the text is built, then we are left with context, which is a rather appealing answer and it follows the spirit of Barber's undertaking. In that direction we can think of Derek Attridge's singularity of literature. Singularity of a work, can be thought of as "the *demand* that this specific collection of words, allusions, and cultural references makes on me in the event of my reading, here and now, as a member of the culture to whom these codes are familiar" (2017, 67). It is not a property of a work but an event, he argues, and it does not exist outside of its reception. "It does not occur outside the responses of those who encounter and thereby constitute it" (Attridge 2017, 64). A

work's impact is thus contingent on the historical and cultural contexts of it being read/ received. Thus, in line with Barber's conception, the impact of a poem can be understood as illuminating the social realities of the people impacted by it.

When Sara sent me Zeynab for the first time, waxing about how beautifully heartbreaking it is, I felt nothing. I played the first few minutes of it and then got bored. When I told Sara that she acted as if it was sacrilegious. A few days later as I laid down on my bed to sleep I played it again, I do not know why. I listened to all 25 minutes of Zeynab twice, crying the entire time. The same poem, Zeynab, was received by the same person, me, within a span of days and left widely different impacts both times. Now Attridge acknowledges that this happens: "Because it happens as an event, singularity is not fixed; if I read the poem tomorrow, I will experience its singularity differently", he says of a William Blake point (2017, 70). He posits that this change might be a result of additional information about the poet, the circumstances of his writing the poem, or the cultural traditions he was drawing from. That does not work in my case as I have gained no concrete additional knowledge about Tahan or Zeynab in the days between my first and second listen. There has to be something more. "Though literature certainly acts in the ways Attridge and Gadamer describe, it does not just address readers on levels involving ever-shifting historical and cultural contexts", as Wehrs put it (2019, 1).

As Rita Felski notes in her critique of context *Context Stinks*, conventional ways of contextualizing literature fails to account for a work's affective resonance (2011, 574). Attridge himself identifies that. "..that difference cannot be explained, nor that singularity exhausted, by an exposition, however full, of the dissimilarities and similarities that constitute its uniqueness and richness as a cultural object. The experience of singularity involves an apprehension of

otherness, registered in the event of its apprehension, that is to say, in the mental and emotional opening that it produces", he interjects before refocusing his lens on context (2017, 67).

So it is quite evident that a solely contextual reading, while possibly illuminating, fails to capture all what a poem is, and all it can do. As an alternative, Felski proposes using Latour's idea of a nonhuman actor (2015, 11). In that sense we can think of poems as things that make a difference through their social embeddedness into networks of relationships with other human and nonhuman actors. Art survives, Felski stresses, through its ability to form social connections, attachments, with those who receive it (2015, 12). This conceptualization definitely allows us to acknowledge the emotional and affective in the impact poems have on us beyond rational contexts and structures, but it does not provide us with the tools to investigate how it has the capacity to do that differently from a speedbump or a string. It allows us to chalk down the variance in my reception of Zeynab those two times to the networks I, and the poem, were part of in these moments, including the affective state surrounding my listening, but it does not attend to the singularity of literature, and does not really allow us to investigate why texts like Zeynab can be encountered the way it has been by my interlocutors. As Wehrs notes, works cannot be reduced to "*participants* in the course of action waiting to be given a figuration" [emphasis in original] (Latour 2005, 71) (quoted in Wehrs).

My first instinct was to introduce the concept of charisma into the equation, so that texts are nonhuman actors in the Felski/ Latour sense, with nonhuman charisma. I was inspired by Hansen and Verkaaik's conceptualization of 'urban charisma', which they break down into two types of charisma: charisma *of* the city, and charisma *in* the city. The first, they propose, is mythical acting as "a reservoir of myth and narrative that can be re-interpreted, re-invented, and re-enacted" by those laying claim to the second type of charisma, which is performative (2009,

9). I moved to develop an analogous 'poetic charisma' whereby there will be the charisma of the poem, nonhuman mythical charisma like that of the city, that can then be accessed and tapped into by the poets like those in the city do. Both types of charisma are evidently, as Hansen and Verkaaik note, are mutually dependent and co-constitutive.

This works, nonhuman charisma provides a framework that, combined with singularity, can help us tackle poems like Zeynab and the encounters that take place with them. Also, there are precedents for charisma as a quality of a work of art (Jaeger 2011; Gumbrecht 2007). The poet can then tap into that charisma through her connectedness with the poem, her knowledge of it and ability to make it legible, and the reinterpretation and re-embodiment of it via performance. We can definitely argue that this took place with Tahan, where Zeynab had this mythical charisma that acts as a site for myth and narrative that can then be performed out as performative charisma by Tahan, acting out in the world by attracting this charismatic attachement to him by readers like Rana, Shiko and Noura, and imitation and fakery as it is wont to do as in the drives of poets attempting to mimic his cadence and style the critic points to (Jaeger 2011).

The thing is this dichotomy of charisma of and in the poem, nonhuman and human, mythical and performative, simply does not hold up. On occasion, these charismas are so reversed as to obliterate any meaningfulness of them as distinct concepts as is the case with Marwan Pablo.

Pablo is an Egyptian rapper, self-proclaimed and widely recognized as 'the godfather of Egyptian trap'. In the early days of his music career, Pablo, then a teenager, was known as Dama. He pumped out broody tracks, with experimental music he produced himself on his laptop, that he posted on SoundCloud. He amassed a modest following within the then niche rap scene in

Egypt before declaring Dama dead and reinventing himself as Marwan Pablo, referencing Picasso and not Escobar, he insists on noting. Pablo's more defined voice, well produced and less experimental sound, and overall transformed direction pushed him into mainstream recognition, and almost legendary status in less than three years.

As Pablo, Marwan was much more deliberate and less experimental with his releases, and the audience got to see him in highly inventive and engaging music videos that accompanied most of his releases. With a handful of songs, he managed to be recognizable far wider than in the rap scene, and amassed a large loyal following so that when he announced that he was retiring, abandoning his music career, in 2020 it created a frenzy. His disappearance at the height of his popularity, not only with stopping music but with deactivating all of his social media accounts and even his Youtube channel where all of his work was hosted, pushed Pablo into the status of a legend.

The year after would be populated with routine rumors about Pablo's return to making music. His Instagram account being reactivated for two hours without even a single post added would spur days of wild speculation and trending hashtags saying "Pablo *ragi'* ", or "Pablo is coming back". Every single post or song that is even loosely related to Egyptian trap or rap would be populated with comments comparing the artist to Pablo, often disparagingly, and saying "Pablo is coming back". Any live went on by any artist would be inundated with questions about Pablo, whether they know if he's returning, to the point where the artists would get frustrated, asking followers to ask them about themselves and their work and not other people, as happened with a live DJ Totti went on. There are a plethora of fan-made documentaries and video essays on Pablo's career and his retirement, and many posts and commentary videos reflecting on him and analyzing every rumor or interaction.

Pablo's popularity has been analyzed to death. Modix, a relatively well known rap commentator on Youtube, heavily emphasizes that Pablo's major fame is not about his talent. He is talented, he says, but he is not the most talented there is. His writing is not the best, the music is not the best. He attributes it instead to 'novelty', the relatability of his themes and messages, and most of all to his 'character', his presence. In a video essay titled "*The Stupidest Things Ever Said in Love of Marwan Pablo*", another commentator, ‘Oraby, who brands himself as less of an expert like Modix does and more of a fan/ appreciator of rap, argues that Pablo's songs are nothing exceptional, but that *he* is. "If he were selling sweet potatoes in the street he would be just as popular", he argues, because to him Pablo's appeal isn’t the songs, though those are enjoyable, but him, his presence. He plays a clip of Pablo in the Maadi Cypher with the sound turned off and states: "your eye will go to him no matter what, doesn’t matter what he's saying". What becomes evident quite easily is that the charismatic reservoir in that equation is Pablo, not any of his poems. Pablo is the site of myth and narrative, his persona and character are what get inhabited and re-enacted by his poems, which take on his charisma, not vice versa. The 'nonhuman' poems in this case have the performative charisma, while the human poet has the mythical one.

Chris Lindholm makes the case that charismatic involvement is spurred on by the human desire to escape the limits of the self (1993, 193). Secular society, he argues, is filled with weaker experiences of selflessness that for the most part satisfy those desires like celebrity and intimate relationships do that. Poetry, I add, can also do that. A successful poem is an inhabitable one, where the reader or even the performer can escape from themselves into. Waleed once told me that he "looks for himself in the poems he reads", when asked to expand on that he expressed that he is touched most by poetry he can project himself into. Nadine talks of poems that can

transport her from the bed she is lying on into other worlds and beings by their sheer influence. Noura talks of writing poetry as acting, adopting different characters that can have emotions and experiences inaccessible to her. Rana talks of writing poetry that allows her to experience herself in ways she cannot do in actuality, a truer version of herself. This aspect of poetry is worth further exploration, but for my purpose here I want to make the argument that the charisma of poetry is not in any way categorically different from the human charisma of Pablo or of Lindholm's cult leaders. It is not a distinct nonhuman charisma like that of a city, or of the ecology. More and more this human nonhuman distinction when it comes to poetry sits uneasily. It seems less and less productive as I go forward. Poems are unlike any other nonhuman actor. Not only do they act through discourse, but they also resist possession. These two distinctions push us to acknowledge poems as interlocutors, as ethical others in the Levinas sense, as Wehrs proposes. "What distinguishes thought aiming at an object from the tie with a person", Levinas argues, "is that the latter is articulated in the vocative: what is named is at the same time that which is called". Unlike an object, you cannot comprehend an other without speaking to them (1996, 8). More than that, others defy any attempt of ours to possess them.

"Everything which comes to me from the other (autrui) starting from being in general certainly offers itself to my comprehension and possession. I understand him in the framework of his history, his surroundings and habits. That which escapes comprehension in the other (autrui) is him, a being." (Levinas 1996, 9).

This is exactly what Attridge argues when it comes to the singularity of literature, and what he touches upon when he talks about it as an 'apprehension of otherness'. Poems are other because they are in excess, they cannot be reduced to actors, tools, outcomes, possessions. What spills over is more than object charisma, it is *being*, a presence. Thus they should be, and will be

for the purposes of this project, taken on as interlocutors, just as much as any of the poets or practitioners I have met throughout my fieldwork. In a very practical sense what that would mean is that when talking about the poetry I will attempt to speak to them, encounter them as a 'face', rather than about them.

Chapter 1:

إحنا الجنود إحنا العرق

إحنا الكتابة على الورق

إحنا اللي بنمشي الزمن

فؤاد حداد

برافووو
طلع الشاعر عالمسرح
نزل الشاعر مالمسرح
طلع الشارع بيصرح
خاف الشاعر على لقبه قام بروز ذاته وسبح
كان ممكن ترفض كدبه
بس الشاعر لن يسمح

أنا ممكن أبص في عينك وأقولك شعر جميل
فتقومي أكيد مبتسمة وطبيعي الحلوة تميل
لو غاوية أماكن عالية فأنا لسه كتافي تشيل

لأ
لا يجد من يساعده
ولا يساعد من يجده
هو بيدعي هزيمته
والناس بتدعي مجده
لو فيه حقيقة واحدة أكيدة كانوا الجميع سجدوا

خليكي حلوة أمال
أنا مش كلام بطال
أنا مش إمام طبال
أنا مش بصيص الأمل
أنا بس شاعر خول

أحمد الطحان - أنا بس شاعر خول

Vignette: On Trivial Nonsense

Ahmed shifted in his wooden chair, where he sat hunched onto himself looking down at his phone. “I did not think he was this shy”, Alaa, my friend, whispered in my ear. We were sitting on the floor waiting for the mini poetry reading/ music concert to begin. The official title was ‘*shi’r w ma’na*’, ‘poetry and music’, and it was advertised as a combination of Ahmed reading his poetry, and signing his new diwan at the end, and two young independent musicians playing covers of some of the Egyptian classics as a duet of vocals and oud. There we sat, along with no more than three dozen people, facing the line of three wooden chairs occupied by the performing artists.

The songs were sandwiched between Ahmed’s poems, read from the phone he held in his hand. With each poem, Ahmed gradually shed his awkwardness. His head lifted and his voice grew clearer. Near the end his friends in the front started requesting certain unpublished poems. He looked around the room, told us to not record or videotape the next poem, and complied. As the poem ended with a jab at the security police, we understood the rationale for his directive.

As the night wrapped up, and we stood up to leave, Alaa pushed me to go and ask him to sign my copy of the diwan. I was hesitant, memories of our awkward first meeting a few weeks prior swimming around in my head, but after a few nudges took the book out of the bag and went up to his chair.

“Could I ask you to sign this for me?”, I said. “Gladly”, he responded, “Do you have a pen?”.

I fished through my backpack for the pen and handed it to him. “Reem, right?”, he asked as he took the lid off. I nodded.

He smirked a bit as he wrote something down and apologized as he handed me the book and the pen back. I thanked him and left.

The minute we walked out of the door, before we started to go down the stairs of the building, we moved to read what he had written, driven over with curiosity at his mysterious smug smirk.

"To Ms. Reem, I never thought someone would be doing their Masters on such trivial nonsense", was written above his signature. We laughed out loud as we stared at his beautiful handwriting.

Unexpected as it was, Ahmed's dedication was part of a pattern that emerged almost immediately: a pattern of absence where Egyptian colloquial poetry used to be.

I am Just a Khawal Poet

Khawal is a word that underwent multiple transformations in the Egyptian linguistic register. Starting off as servant or slave, the word evolved as a term for cross-dressing male performers before it reached its current iteration as a derogatory slur aimed at gay men equivalent to 'faggot' (Jacob 2011). Ahmed el Tahan's *Ana bas sha'ir khawal*, *I'm just a khawal poet*, is an exploration of the current impasse of 'ammiyya poetry[3].

What can poetry do with the world? The poem starts with pomp and grandeur - a poet heaped with praise and a respected platform. But no sooner is he introduced than he is exposed to us as nothing but a performance. Not only is poetry performed, but being a poet itself is here a performance of truth and dignity that cannot be held up to scrutiny. In reality, he could and would

[3] The poem was first published on Tahan's Facebook page, which has since been deleted and with it the date of that first publication and numerous other poems. The earliest online record of the poem is a recording posted on SoundCloud in November of 2016 by an unknown user. The poem has since been published in Tahan's first anthology *il-Dariba 40%* in 2018.

not write True, unafraid, uncompromising poetry, and to convince himself that he could, would require a level of self-worship that amounts to delusion.

Poetry is unable to stand up to power, speak truth to it, so the poet turns to the personal. Here his poetry could sway his lover at least. Emboldened by that power he feels capable of moving the world and moving in it: “If you’re into heights, my shoulders can still carry your weight”. Intense alienation overpowers it however, taking away that fleeting mobility.

The poem lulls in that space of alienation: he is alienated from himself, from those he could help, from those who could help him. So isolated in the reflected glory of his poetry his proclamation of defeat, his cries of help, go unseen and unanswered.

He ends with refusal. Stuck within his self, from his self, he refuses every poetic possibility, every archetype of a poet there existed. He will not be the subversive heretic, the ascetic sufi, the kiss up to the monarch, the inspiring artist, or even the romantic hero. What does that leave? A Khawal: emasculated, powerless, ineffectual, and shameful.

Whenever I looked for ‘ammiyya poetry in the places where it was meant to be, places of resistance, of relevance, of movement, It just was not there. Only shadows were left, gaping holes where it should have been.

‘Ammiyya poetry was meant to be popular, the word itself translates to ‘of the public’. Yet whenever I had a conversation with anyone outside of the genre about poetry they resorted to the classical fusha poems they learned in school. When I mentioned I was working on colloquial poetry specifically they were either flabbergasted into silence or wondered out loud if that was even a thing, or if it was any good, if it can possibly live up to the mantle of poetry. Occasionally

I'll get someone who'll say something like: "oh ‘ammiyya, like Salah Jahin and Ahmed Fouad Negm , they were great. Why don't we have poets like that anymore".

Even amongst the contemporary poets and readers/ listeners of poetry, the practitioners I interacted with before and after I have begun my fieldwork, the conversation about poetry is always overwhelmingly a nostalgic conversation. Favorite poems are older poems, favorite poets older ones, innovations were something that used to happen, and now is a dim shadow of what was. Noura, a young poet in her twenties, would tell me her mission is to "bring poetry back" into relevance. Salma, a slightly older poet in her thirties, would talk about a general lack of interest in poetry, claiming it was part of a disappearance of a reading culture (a lament echoed by that of Palestinian poets more than 2 decades earlier as noted by Furani).

More than that ‘ammiyya poetry was meant to do something in the word in a very real sense. Fu’ad Haddad, one of Egypt’s first ‘ammiyya poets of the fifties and sixties, famously said that he had wanted to be a knight and free the world. When he realized he would not be a knight, he became a poet instead. Haddad had proclaimed himself in his poetry as ‘the father of poets’, a proclamation taken to heart by the following generations up to the current one. Ahmed for instance constantly evokes that lineage, explicitly in and around his poems. What has happened to poetry in the four decades since Haddad’s death? How did ‘ammiyya go from a genre bursting with belief in its own self-importance, its ability to change the world and right its wrongs, to one unable or unwilling to justify its own existence? From Haddad claiming poetry as a sword against injustice and himself a freedom fighter, to his self proclaimed decibels and descendants declaring their poetry trivial nonsense, and themselves emasculated and powerless?

Poetry's Self is a Political Self

‘Ammiyya as a genre developed a conceptualization of the poet as an activist/ public intellectual, as a figure of resistance and opposition (see introduction). This squarely places poetry in this inter-subjective space where the intimate and the public are confused (Mbembe 2015) . This is by no means unique to poetry, the Egyptian cultural field with all its different sites is in the same position. Part of that is its ambivalent relationship with the state, particularly since Nasser, where the state acted as both “patron and persecutor” (Mehrez 2008). This founding relationship, as she argues, meant that “the cultural is the handmaiden of the political and must always abide by its rules (Mehrez 2008, 16), and the state under Nasser, in the early days of the ‘ammiyya, was invested in cultural fields as projects of ‘culturing’, educating, and promoting patriotic, nationalist, and ‘revolutionary’ sentiments. Add to that ‘ammiyya’s self proclaimed roots in Al Tunsi’s poetry, which was constituent of the early Egyptian nationalizing project in the aftermath of the Orabi revolutions, and you get a poetic tradition heavily meshed with the Politics of the nation. This confused space widens with colloquial poetry in particular though because of the nature of poetry itself.

The underlying premise of poetry in the Egyptian, and perhaps the wider Arab, tradition is that it is ‘*zat*-y’ and not ‘*mawdo’*-y’, of the self and not of the topic, or as would be put in the Western context subjective and not objective though that would be reductive (Dayf 1961). Being of the *zat* is more than an antonym of objective, or simply denoting that something is affected by personal feelings or failings. Being of the *zat* is more an assertion on the site of poetry: internally rather than externally. Whereas philosophy involves an extension of consciousness outward into the world, the shared space of humanity, poetry involves a taking of the world, the shared, inwards into the self. That is why poetry is infinite: there are many poetries of the same shared

experience or feeling as there are selves to take them in and then send them out into the world as poems (Haddad 2006). Even the same experience can be turned into infinite poetic iterations when going through the same self because the self is ever moving, ever evolving (Dayf 1961; Haddad 2006). Simply put the public realm of shared experiences enters the self of the poet, where it is uniquely translated into poetry, then pushed back out as that. That is why, as Haddad would argue, poetry precedes language, the way water precedes matter. Poetry enters the world exactly when the self does.

Thus, for the ‘ammiyya poets to ascribe to the model of a publicly committed, politically engaged poet, they have to allow, though how much conscious intention is involved is far from settled, the Political to enter their selves, their *zat* s. Their very selves become Political in that sense. Basically, if poetry is of the self, and poetry is Political, or ought to be, then the poetic self is Political. Any intimate experiences of the self are thus also necessarily Political .

The trope of recasting the nation as woman in the poet’s domestic realm comes into focus here: from Ahmed Fu’ad Negm’s iconic *Masr Yama ya Baheya*, a call to revolution painting Egypt as a mother who stays beautiful regardless of time and the oppressive forces it brings, to Abdelrahman Al-Abnudi’s *’ada elnahar*, a poem written in the aftermath of the 67 defeat which paints the nation as a woman washing her hair in the stream and forsaken by the light as it could not afford her dowry. As well as the traditions tendency to tie emotional states and psychic experiences to those of the nation as can be observed with Haddad’s *Nabd* tying his ailment, depression, and sense of personal failure, with the practical dissolution of Arab Nationalism in the 80s, exemplified by the Lebanese civil war, and Negm’s *Nawwara* tying the victory of Egypt in the 73 war with the jubilation of the birth of his daughter who he named *Nawaret il intesar*, the light of victory.

Read with conventions of the genre it is safe to assume that every love poem is about the nation, and every feeling is part of a shared public affect, echoed throughout its public body. Every poet shares his bed with the nation, his body as well.

I have been deliberately referencing the poet as a he throughout this section, because of course he would be. A Political self is necessarily a male self. This is not to absent the numerous female poets of ‘ammiyya over the years, but to make a note of the masculinity of the model of the poet under ‘ammiyya, and the perseverance of that model, in line with what Farha Ghannam describes as a ‘disembodiment’ of men, “the tendency to equate men with mind (‘aql), culture, reason, honor, and public life” (2013, 10), and an accompanying ‘over embodiment’ of women, fixating on their bodily practices, and equating them with the private and the emotional, while absenting them from the public and especially the Political.

The Work of Revolution: The Political Self of Poetry in the contemporary

It took me more than three hours to make it from the affluent bubble of Tagamoa’ on one side of Cairo to the affluent bubble of Sheikh Zayed on the other side of it. As I got off the microbus in front of the overwhelmingly large ‘mall of Arabia’ , I vowed to never do this to myself again. There are few things more stupid than deciding to traverse the length of the city in the post work traffic. I ordered an uber, setting the location to the gated compound Waleed lives in.

A couple of missed exits and eerily unlit streets later we made it to the gate. I paid the driver and got out of the car, walking through the beautiful gardens looking for the correct

building. As I waited for the elevator I smoothed down flyaway hairs in the gleaming mirror by the entrance, trying to cover traces of the trip.

Waleed opened the door, and guided me to the stairs. I glimpsed a plush gray rug and photos of him with a large Golden Retriever before we entered a room that opened up into the roof. Salma came out of another room, his office, and greeted me. She looked as she did in the televised interview I had seen of her on the way there, except for the absence of a veil. Her black hair fell straight almost to her waist, matching her black sweater, with a white collar peeking from underneath it.

We all sat on the two couches opposite the large flat TV screen, which Waleed had turned on with the volume muted, as he awaited a segment where he was interviewed about the last series he had written to air.

After the customary introductions and small talk we started to talk about Salma's trajectory as a poet. A few anecdotes from her childhood forays into songwriting, and the enduring influence of Salah Jahin's poetry the discussion turns to the current state of poetry. Waleed argues that there is a recognizable poetic language unique to the contemporary generation of poetry. Salma agrees.

"We all look alike", she told me, "We were all shaped by the same events and speak the same language and are going through the same stage so we sound the same".

"By the events you mean the revolution?", I ask with a bit of caution.

She visibly inhales, "Very clearly, yes".

Every single one of my 'ammiyya interlocutors started their careers as poets in or around 2011. Salma was no exception. Some had started writing in the lead up to it, but it was not really

until the revolution and its vibrant aftermath that they really amassed audiences and developed their poetic voices and projects in general. Needless to say they carried on ‘ammiyya’s Political baggage.

Part of that is their initiations to the field: the canonical ‘fathers’ of ‘ammiyya, the big names they would have, and have in fact confirmed, been introduced to poetry through all had this Political self all throughout - none of the rogue 90s presumably ‘apolitical’ poets made it even close to mainstream recognition let alone near canonical status (Booth 2001). More than that though, the timing of their formation as poets coinciding, and being completely overtaken, with the revolution truly cinched their fates.

The revolution rekindled interest in those canonical texts of the genre on such a wide scale - ‘the poetry of the revolution’ at least in its peak early days was not of the present but past ‘classical’ texts. It also created a true desire and interest in creating, and reading, poetry of the moment that was so characterized by excess. As Waleed told me, “those days between 2012 and 2014 you would open facebook and find fifty thousand poets, everyone wanted to be a poet even if they weren’t talented”. He himself started to write poetry around that time, only to discover years later that he just was not talented as a poet, in his estimation, and focused his energies into becoming a scriptwriter and enjoying poetry as just a reader.

The nature of the revolution as liminal (Ambrust 2019), as a space where people were so personally and intimately invested in the collective and the public, in a way that was very emphatically Political, meant that the poetry it called forth was created in its image that much more so. The tradition’s inheritance of Political poetry and Political poetic selves was taken and ran with, reinforced and affirmed.

البر عينك يا جميلة
رسيني في بر
مضطر أقولك يا جميلة
ومين مش مضطر؟
**
السكة سد .. مافيش وصلة
ماعرفش مين سرق البوصلة
شعرِك طويل مِديلي خصلة
يمكن ف اخر الخصلة مفر
مضطر أكمل يا جميلة
ومين مش مضطر؟
*
حاصل في أوقات مش حاصلة
سلسال هزايم متواصلة
قضيتها احزان ومراسلة
ورسايل بحر
مضطر اراسلك يا جميلة
ومين مش مضطر
**
أنا ندل بس الحزن وَفي
الحيل ضعيف والحبل عَفي
الأزمة أهي ... ليه اللطف خَفي؟
ماقصدش كُفر كفاالله الشر
مضطر أصدّق يا جميلة
ومين مش مضطر؟
*
على بالي لكن لا أبالي
سارح في ملكوت في خيالي
ومفيش اجابة على سؤالي
مطرح ما يمر
مضطر أهرب يا جميلة
ومين مش مضطر

**
خايب ومبسوط بالخيبة
عجزت بس بدون شيبة
مش سجن لأ .. ده أنا تخشيبة
أوضة ضلمة وحَر
مضطر أصارحك يا جميلة
ومين مش مضطر؟
*
استني انا عندي مزايا
بسهولة تجتنبي أذايا
عامليني على اني مراية
وواقفين في ممر
مضطر أغازلك يا جميلة
ومين مش مضطر؟
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أبوخ قصيدة رومانسية
ممكن تتحول سياسية
وتجيب سوكسيه
وأنا رغم إنك عاجباني
ف عليا أقساط
مضطر أغير موضوعك
وأعمل إسقاط
في ظل الوضع الإقليمي
و الحرب العالمية الجاية
أمريكا هتضرب يا خميني
عايز أسلحة خد من كوريا
والجيش الباسل يتواطئ
ع الجيش الحر اللي ف سوريا
و مناطق تضرب ف مناطق
حساسة و نشطة و حيوية
و الشيعة تدب ف السنة
و السنة يدبوا ف بعضيهم
و مجاهل أفريقيا النايمة
تصحى من الجوع تضرب فيهم
و العالم يقلب ل حريقة
و يتهاوى ب البورصة بتاعته
و دي تبقى صحيح خطوة جريئة
أو طوق من فوق ربنا باعته

و لو كنا عايشين يا جميلة
أو كانلنا عمر
نضطر نرجع يا جميلة
و مين مش مضطر

البر عينك يا جميلة - أحمد الطحان وعمرو أبو زيد

Vignette: Sha'et garden City

I stare intently at my phone, watching as the bright blue line guiding me to my destination gets shorter and shorter. Where would I be without GPS?

As the streets get narrower and narrower I stop the taxi and get out preferring to walk the rest of the way there. I pay the driver and get off as I press the button that changes the bright blue line into bright blue dots and the gray car avatar on my phone's screen to a gray man avatar marking my change in circumstance from passenger to pedestrian. My marvel at technology's convenience quickly turns to betrayed aggravation when the phone flashes that I have arrived when I so clearly haven't. I try to rely on the written address and directions to the place instead but am immediately confronted with my glaring incompetence and the results of my over reliance on evil and invasive but unbearably convenient technology. I keep going up and down and around the same two blocks switching between trying to logic my way around the labyrinth that is Garden City and reopening the GPS hoping that following its directions for the umpteenth time will lead me somewhere. I start worrying about doormen suspiciously looking at me. Do they think I am a thief, or even a spy? As the minutes stretch my anxiety riddled brain feels that would be a perfectly valid conclusion for them to make. My paranoia is fueled further with the parked police van with its officers following me with their eyes and their weapons glinting in the dimly lit streets.

I eventually give up my valiant attempts and call Sherif telling him of my predicament. He tries to guide me over the phone before giving it up as a lost cause and coming down to get me from the street himself.

Sherif is tall with stylishly curly dark gray hair. The understated but dashing navy blue pullover combined with the black plastic headband in his hair for an image of a dignified but 'free-spirited' man befitting the engineer/ poet in his 40s. We go up the stairs of the old discrete building till we reach the place. *Sha'et Garden City*, or 'the Apartment in Garden City', is written by hand on the wall over the wooden door, painted blue.

Sherif guides me through the hallway with its sparse antique furniture, past the 'Fu'ad Haddad Room, the room of poets, and into the 'Ahmed Zaki Room'[4], the room of films, straight ahead. He seats us on a table with two wooden chairs, similar to the ones found in the old-school baladi cafes, and asks me what I want to drink, expressing his surprise when I ask for tea. "I'll have tea as well. Rare for someone young like you to like tea", he notes. I do not tell him I was eying the cappuccino on the menu but ordered the tea because it was the cheapest option, anticipating he might insist on paying for my drink, which he did end up doing.

I eye the room as he calls over the waiter to order. Opposite us are a couple, their heads together apparently viewing something together on a phone. The table next to us has a girl with jet black hair and dark eyeliner, chatting with two young men. The walls are lined with memorable quotes from Zaki's movies, hand painted in beautiful calligraphy, accompanied by framed shots of him.

[4] Ahmed Zaki was a famous film star of Egyptian cinema in the late 1900s, considered an exceptionally talented actor who starred in many of the iconic and critically valued films of the era.

We chat about how he came to be a poet, his philosophy on poetry, and his views on his contemporaries while we sip our tea. As I was leaving Sherif invited me to meet him at the place at any time. He's usually there as he runs and co-owns the place, he assures me. "You can even come to study or write or anything. It's a nice place in the mornings", he tells me.

I texted him a few days later to set up a followup meeting we had agreed upon. He never responded.

The next time I come, a few weeks later, I am meeting Ahmed. The sun is still up and I arrive without a hassle this time. I look around for Ahmed, hoping I will recognize him from his Facebook photo, and seeing he has not arrived yet I look around a bit more. The Fu'ad Haddad room has bookshelves filled with poetry anthologies. The walls have photos of the 'fathers' of colloquial poetry, and famous lines from their famous poems. There is an antique black typewriter in a corner and a window that opens into a balcony that people are not allowed to hang out per security instructions, as it looks over the Saudi Embassy.
I settle for sitting in the Ahmed Zaki Room again as it is right opposite the door, so I'll see when Ahmed walks in.

Diametrically opposed to Sherif's carefully put together appearance and demeanor, Ahmed walks in about 40 minutes late haphazardly dressed in a khaki sweatshirt and jeans. He walks into the room right past me and joins a group of his friends near the window, challenging one of them to a chess game. I had recognized him the moment he walked in from the photos but now I was having second thoughts. Surely he would be looking for the person he was late to an appointment with if that was the case and not go straight to playing with his friends.

He notices me staring at him and sharply wonders '*Feh haga?*', 'Is there something you need?'. I shake my head no in a fluster. He walks out of the room then walks back in. I take a deep breath and walk up to him, asking him if he is Ahmed. He replies in the affirmative. "I am Reem", I say, "You told me to meet you at 5?". "Ah, Reem, why didn't you say so?", was his casual reply.

He joins me at my table and we chat for a bit about his anthologies and the poets of the generation. He does not order me a drink and after a while excuses himself for a game with his friends. He leaves the table before I could get the chance to do more than nod.
The last time I came to *Sha'et Garden City* was mid March 2020, to attend the poetry/ music night where Ahmed signed my copy of his diwan. I had an interview with another poet in Garden City earlier in the day and sat there, sipping coffee and reading as I waited for it to start. As I went up to go to the bathroom I discovered there was a third room, the 'Om Kalthoum Room'. It had large pillow-like seats on the ground, pictures of Om Kalthoum and lines from her songs as well as musical notations all over the wall. Old music was playing in the room as people sat around and chatted.

Less than two weeks after that night the coronavirus pandemic hit, and with it a lockdown that included all cafes and restaurants. The *sha'a* did not survive it. By the time the cafes were allowed to reopen they had already gone out of business.

Sha'et Garden City was started by four poets, all of whom amassed followings online, particularly on Facebook, in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution. They befriended each other and in 2014 floated around the idea of starting a business together. "It could have been a car wash", one of the poets stated in an interview once, "but we wanted something we enjoyed

working in and that we knew about". The initial idea was for a cultural space that could host poetry readings, concerts, art exhibitions, and things of that sort, but they settled for a 'book cafe'- a cafe with books available for patrons and whose theme was culture: art, music, and film, each with a dedicated room, where they could on occasion hold small scale versions of those things.

In 2016 they opened their doors, quoting the title of Ahmed Khan's famous movie *Fe Sha'et Masr El Gedida*, 'In the apartment in Masr El Gedida', and thus *Sha'et Garden City* was born. It was in the very early days of the place, four years before I set foot in it, that Ahmed and Amr, another of the four owners, co-improvised *El Bar 'enek ya Gameela*, *'Beautiful, your eyes are the shore'*.

Your Eyes are the Shore

'*El Bar*' starts off as a love poem: "Beautiful, your eyes are the shore. Anchor me". The flirtation quickly develops into a confession of defeat and loss, a sense of being cast adrift. Then, the Political, the shared state of the wider nation, slowly creeps in. A parallel is drawn between the poet and the states detention areas, the *takhsheeba*, the line between his individual despair and the wider state of things drawn, before the full-blown admission that no feelings he has towards the object of his romantic interest will stop him from turning this into a 'political' poem. After all, he "has bills to pay".

With the large final section of the poem, by stringing in together every 'macro' regional political issue in a vague litany, Tahan makes explicit what he and Abu Zeid have been slowly and subtly building up to, flooding the love poem with Politics when before they had just added a few drops. Not only does he spell out the primacy of the Political in the

tradition of colloquial poetry, and the financial and critical incentives there are to upholding that primacy, he also exposes how that is done by opening up the personal to the Political, treating the intimate as always a micro reflection of the Political, onto which it can be projected and over which it can be drawn.

He does so particularly by playing on the long-held tradition of depicting Egypt, the nation, as a woman with which the poet is intimately involved as outlined in the last section. He shows the hidden mechanics of the enduring trope, before standing on the rubble of the Political burnt to bits and going back to his flirtation.

The theme of coercion running through the poem, with every stanza punctuated by things the poet feels he "has to do", and that everybody else has to too, also highlights how the poetic conventions of the traditions not only forces the Political onto all but also forces a certain relationship with the nation: "I have to call you beautiful, and who doesn't have to?" The nation has to be framed as the repository of everything good and noble even when addressing the defeat and oppression that is living within it. As a woman she is the epitome of the virtuous and desirable.

'El Bar' is a poem written in 2016 right at the moment when the model of colloquial poetry as poetry personally involved with the Political has been exposed for what it is, no longer taken as default, and its cracks are there for all to see -the moment of Political failure in post-revolutionary Egypt. The poem seems to be saying: 'where has 'political' poetry-where the personal is always wide open for the invasion of the public, and any engagement with the macro has to be caveated by the assurance to its 'beauty'- gotten any of us?'

The Failure of the Political

Mostafa Ibrahim is a ‘ammiyya poet of that moment if there ever was one.

His first diwan, or poetry collection, "Western Union, the Haram Branch", was about immigration and displacement. It talked about Ibrahim's experience of going to the US after graduating from engineering school, the soul crushing reality of being uprooted, and the cruel attachment to Egypt that eventually brought him back, vowing never to leave no matter what. "The sneakers that fell apart from roaming your streets are as of now forbidden from stepping on any another ground than yours; and the cloth heart that was ironed by your deeds, still wafts with your scent", he tells the country at the end of the diwan, drawing squarely between the lines of ‘ammiyya as he did throughout. The country responded the very next day.

'Western Union" was published on the 24th of January 2011, the eve of the Egyptian revolution. He happened as the revolution happened and his poetry, and himself as a poet, were marked by it and shaped in its image. In May of 2011, on one of his first televised appearances, on Ibrahim Eissa’s show *il midan,* the square, on the short-lived channel *il Tahrir*, Mostafa makes a passing comment on the two and a half days he spent detained on the 25th before reciting from the anthology. 24 years old, in a white t-shirt and incredibly short hair, he is the archetype of the ‘revolutionary’, and he lived as one, finding his way to the streets for every major, and minor, milestone over the next three years. His second collection "The Manifesto", published in 2013, cemented his place as 'the poet of the revolution', a title he shies away from. As the revolution died down, so did Ibrahim's poetic presence. The previously prolific poet posted less than a handful of poems in 7 years, and disappeared into rumored depression, only to come back in 2020 with "Time".

Sitting opposite Eissa once more to read from it, in a pressed black blazer, his receding hair-line accentuated by the way his hair is pulled back into a neat ponytail, you cannot help but take note of the 9 years that went by.

"Time" is a markedly different collection from the first two, Ibrahim acknowledges that. "Every poet wants poetry to change the world, but that's impossible," he states in an interview about it. "Time" is a repository of defeat, and of letting go of the possibility of collective dreams. "The first anthology came out of the experience of immigration, of how the country is shit but we can't leave it behind. The second came from the revolution, which was a roller coaster of

feelings and events. The third I can't say came out of a particular experience, just the passing of time of someone who went through these things" (Al Masry Al Yom 2020). Whereas the first two were about experiences we had, the third is about one person's singular experience of the non-event, the passage of time.

It is an anthology about the breakdown of the collective. In the latest appearance with Eissa he reads from his poem *al ahlam, the Dreams* with steady dullness: "Upset? Don't be. We have become a thousand different teams, and if we add one to our ranks, we would have added a drowning to a team of drowners" (Eissa 2020).

"Cruel", Eissa comments when he finishes. "Cruel, yes", is Mostafa's response.

The Political failed , the new status quo of post revolutionary Egypt set in, and the 'ammiyya poets forged in the revolutionary frames were there when it did. The only spaces left are in the *zat*, in the personal, which is automatically dismissed, deemed irrelevant and inconsequential when it can no longer be tied to the 'bigger' picture. What happens to a Political self when the Political is no longer a viable option? What happens to poetry when the established poetic self is insolvable, stuck in only part of itself, barred from the rest?

Post-Politics - Under Duress

One of my interlocutors, a 'ammiyya poetry enthusiast, Hussein, argues that the genre is in crisis because all of the current practitioners are attempting to emulate the model of dead geniuses, recreating their poetry, when they just do not have the same kind of experiences, and are writing under totally different conditions. I feel Hussein is truly onto something. Not necessarily that the poets are trying to recreate an out of date mode, but that that is the model that has been handed to them, and the one that their careers were shaped into and molded by - the

activist public intellectual revolutionary poet- and in the current post-revolutionary moment of political failure and dissolution that model suddenly is just not working. Everything a ‘ammiyya poet is and should be is suddenly inaccessible and the poetry is left floundering .

‘Ammiyya, I argue, is a genre under duress. Duress, as conceived of by Stoler, is "a relationship of actualized and anticipated violence" (2016, 8). As such, it is quite straightforward to argue that many, if not all, of my interlocutors have been under duress at least since the revolution, and that the genre, by virtue of hosting and being constituted by them, is thus under duress as well. Gamal, one of the poets I have met, was jailed for 5 years after getting in the middle of a man beating a woman on his public university's campus. The man turned out to be a police officer in civilian clothes who arrested Gamal and added him to the case opened for Islamist protestors earlier that day. He was 19 at the time. Ahmed lost multiple friends to the revolution and its aftermath, repeatedly found himself in confrontations with the police, is a recovering alcoholic who underwent multiple hospitalizations as a result, and has been unemployed for years. The café, which has been his sole source of income, has closed, affecting him and many others. These are explicit and physical manifestations of these relationships of violence Stoler discusses. I argue it is more than that though. To be under duress, is to "admit a culpability—a condition induced by illegitimate pressure. But it is productive, too, of a diminished, burned-out will not to succumb, when one is stripped of the wherewithal to have acted differently or better" (2016, 8). These poets wherewithal to act have definitely been stripped. Their primary mode of not even just acting but of being as poets is no longer viable, and they are stuck with the ruins of their Political/ poetic project, and parts of a self, but they are definitely enduring, refusing to succumb. They are still writing poetry, after all. But the poetry they write, I will argue, bears the marks of that duress, and is shaped by it.

What does poetry under duress look like? How can we understand what happened to ‘ammiyya given the trajectory I have been attempting to sketch out throughout the chapter?

This inquiry is temporal, or rather I chose to centre the temporal aspect of it, for three reasons. First is the fact that it is an inquiry of genre, and genres are temporal objects where relations are condensed and mapped as webs of protentions and retentions. Following Gell's appropriation of Husserl's model of internal time-consciousness, they act as nodes, hinges between past and future creations, and again the born and condensed social relations in these creations (Barber 2007; Born 2015; Gell 2013).

Second is the nature of the genre itself, where these temporal dynamics are particularly evident. From the onset, the genre established itself as continuously referential, the poems reference other poems: older ones, contemporary ones, and even ones yet to be written. Borrowing, tweaking, or completely upending, a form, a line, an image, or the title from a poem, responding to a poem as if in dialogue, and referencing other poets in various ways are in no way exceptional practices but a stable of the genre, making the anticipations and retentions quite visible and easily traceable.

Finally are my field observations. My field notes from my 'ammiyya interlocutors are overwhelmingly overrun with narratives in a way that is distinct from interlocutors practicing within the other genres. Moreover, the narratives echoed each other in rather particular ways, suggesting a shared experience of their time as inhabitants of the genre, a collective doing on time that manifests itself in these resonating narratives and my observations beyond them (Rapport and Overing 2002).

Retreating to the past I: Coming of Age as a 'ammiyya Poet

Not only were narratives of beginnings, tales of becoming a poet or falling in love with poetry, abundant in my field interactions with 'ammiyya practitioners, they were also quite linearly structured. Inevitably, the conversation will get to the story of 'how they became poets', that story is always a neat sequential retelling. I predict it is one they are asked to tell rather frequently, and hone with every retelling.

The beginnings often feature a patriarch, though they do not necessarily involve poetry: Salma's father loved Salah Jahin, Rana's loved Jahin and many other canonical poets, Sherif's older brother introduced him to science fiction novels, Ahmed's older brother to classical Arabic literature. This initial introduction to literature, involving biological fathers and recognized fathers of the genre often simultaneously, always sparks an interest, though it is not always un-ambivalent[5]. The poet-to-be gets pulled by the textual. They want to recreate what they love to read. So, they write. Some write poetry straight away, like Salma, Rana, and Ahmed. Others traipse around different genres, until they settle down in the land of 'ammiyya. "The writing is what's there at the core, what you know is there. The desire to write. What kind of writing takes a bit to figure out. Some can write novels, some short stories, and so on. It took me a while to figure out poetry was it for me, but when I did it was obvious", as Sherif told me.

The climax came with 2011. By that time most of our interlocutors were in their twenties, with the occasional teen, and most have been writing colloquial poetry for a bit of time, though often without showing their work or publishing it by any means. The revolution centered poetry (Colla 2012; Saad 2012). As discussed in previous sections, it rekindled interest in the old classics of the genre, like those of Ahmed Fu'ad Negm whose tone matched that of the moment,

[5] Waleed's father for instance also loved Jahin, and was Waleed's introduction to him. For years Waleed loved many poets, but adamantly resisted Jahin's pull precisely because of his connection to his father.

and ignited an appetite for contemporary engaged poetry. During and in the wake of the revolution, those of my interlocutors who had not written poetry before started to, and those who have been writing already were doing so with more fervor, publishing and posting their poems on their social media platforms, and amassing often large followings. There were poetry readings, anthologies getting published, and poems getting picked up by the also flourishing underground music bands who turned them into songs, some of them became hits. There were also collectives and communities of these poets getting together as in the case of a Facebook group by 'established poets' that recruited young talents. Rana told me how she was recruited into the group as a novice poet, and how the senior poets would organize virtual workshops, assign exercises, and even hold improvisation sessions where they start with a line and require them to build on it in real time in impromptu improvisation sessions.

The narratives usually go no further. Often it is the introduction, the early attempts, the posting and 'making it', indicated by amassing a following and having bands ask to sing your words, or in Sherif's case sing them thinking they were somebody else's so you have to contact them and set the record straight, and then nothing. The narrative ends there. The present is rarely there in the stories.

Most of my interlocutors now hold jobs as writers, though rarely as poets. Sherif is starting a career as a scriptwriter besides his main one as a software engineer. Waleed's scriptwriting career is much more established, his poetry writing days left behind. Salma writes commercials, and songs for bands on the side. Ahmed is trying, and failing, to land a job doing the same. He has since deactivated his Facebook page which had more than 30,000 followers and where he published his poems.

There is no present in the narratives of their making as poets because poetry has vacated the present for many of them. Actually, not quite. Poetry has not exactly vacated the present, it is just that whatever poetry still populates it reeks of the past, and pales in comparison. Whatever takes place now, is either a homage to a time that was, or so inconsequential as to not deserve even a byline in their own stories.

Retreating to the past II: The Golden Age and the Genre with the Frozen Neck

When I claim that poetry has vacated the present for the 'ammiyya genre and its practitioners, I am talking about a hinge that only allows movement in one direction, a frozen neck that only allows one to look backwards. Rather than being populated with retentions and protentions, the genre has become overrun with retentions. It has become a genre obsessed with its own past, perhaps as a refusal of the present, or at the very least a statement to its uninhabitability.

This is quite evident not only in the poetry itself, as I discuss later, but also in the interlocutors' narratives of the genre itself. Many of the poets I meet are keen on giving me a history of the tradition, and encouraging me to shift my research in that direction, focusing on the past as a richer, and more important site from which to understand poetry. These narratives, like the personal ones, are also eerily similar.

These beginnings also feature patriarchs. Many begin with the original canonical figure of Bayram Al-Tunsi, in a continuation of the practices of the earlier generations. The earlier evocations of Al-Tunsi can be read as a conscious consistent tying of the tradition, and thus its practitioners, to his model of political commitment and social activism (Abou-Bakr 2015; Booth 2001), as well as a legitimizing practice, as he is widely considered to have brought

respectability to what was viewed as ‘low’ art meant for the uneducated masses (Benin 1994; Booth 2001). For the contemporary ones however, this does not hold. Al-Tunsi is evoked because he has always been evoked. In their narratives, he exists as outside of the actual arc of the story, a figure before beginnings. He is the figure their figures asserted a lineage to, a great grandfather mentioned to allude to deep roots, but who plays a minor role, if any, in the actual plot.

Others begin with Fu'ad Haddad, who is afforded an almost mystical status. They gladly take on his characterization of himself as the 'father', and take seriously his status as 'the' rather than 'a' patriarch, keenly tracing his influence in their poetry, and recounting their first interactions with his own. Often though, he is joined by a group of fellow fathers who have made it into the canon. Salah Jahin, Ahmed Fu'ad Negm, and Abdulrahman Al-Abnudy are among those cited most often.

These narratives differ from the personal ones, in that they climax at the beginning. The 50s and 60s were when poetry as it stands started, and peaked. After that the 'greats' started to die off. Those who stayed alive produced rarely and patchily, or they produced pale replicas of their earlier works. Hussein, for instance, derided Al-Abnudy as having kept writing the same poem over and over again since his hay days in the 60s and 70s. And it did not get better from there. The 90s came with a new generation that seemingly refused everything the tradition stands for. They threw away the musicality and the popular ties of the genre, and adopted en masse the prose poem. Their poetry intentionally broke rhyme and measures, abandoned the genre's tradition of political engagement, and was often so abstract and philosophical as to be inaccessible outside of intellectual circles (Booth 2001; Shalaby 1992). 'Ammiyya poetry as a recognizable genre was barren except for a few notable exceptions. The most prominent of

whom are actual biological descendants of the canonical fathers: Baha' Jahin and Amin Haddad. Then, the current generation. Again, the present is absent from these narratives.

These narratives are incomplete and harbor a lot of erasures that I will come back to in upcoming sections, but I want to follow how they, as they stand, cement and fit into a pattern of pastness and pasting of the genre.

Life in an Aging Genre - Out of Time

In Catherine Degnen's ethnography on the ageing self, she observes particular narrative styles used by old people (2007). One of the things she notes is the inclusion of 'irrelevant information' in narratives. She gives an anecdote from one of her interlocutors, Olive. I can just as easily replace that anecdote with a discussion of 'Zeynab', Ahmed's most famous poem. A eulogy to Zeynab El-Mahdy, a rights activist and friend of his, who committed suicide in 2014, 'Zeynab' is an almost 30 minute long recorded poem. In a sorrowful monotone, Ahmed takes us all over the place. Amidst the longing remembrances, the poem suddenly meanders to one of Ahmed's uncles: his routine visits to his mum, the money he gives Ahmed, Ahmed's refusal to smoke in front of him even though they all know he will use the money to buy cigarettes. This rather perplexing episode is by no means the only one in the poem, only the most jarring, and is far from the only one in Ahmed's corpus let alone the entire genre's body of work, which is littered with 'irrelevant information'.

Degnen frames Olive's irrelevant information as her "seeking refuge in the reassuring narration of details of ordinary life", as a response to mounting pressure. "These details", she argues, "provide a sort of soothing framework, even if from the outside it seems jarring and irrelevant" (2007, 229). Given that 'Zeynab' was not written per se, but likely mostly recorded as

an audio with some improvisation, as were many of Ahmed's other poems written at the same time, Degnen's analysis seems quite convincing for him just as much as for Olive.

Degnen also observed that in their narratives, old people tend to refer to details that have not been contextualized in the conversation, not noting, or not caring, that the other person does not share the same background knowledge. Many of Ahmed's poems do that as well. In fact one of his poems, *Matgelesh Shareb*, *Don't come to me when you're drunk*, does that in its entirety. It's a one sided conversation he is having with someone, likely himself, riddled with inside references. There are calls to not retell the same old story of 'ras ghareb', for instance, and absolutely no hints before or after of what that story is, or even why it ought not be retold. Contextualizing his conversation to me, as a listener, is not a priority for Ahmed, just as it was not a priority for Emma, Degnen's interlocutor.

The poetry’s response to living under duress, to inhabiting a genre stuck in time, is to use 'aging' narrative styles, assenting to the diminished possibilities for movement in the present by abandoning it, and with it history with all the potentialities of action in and on it, for inhabiting time, merely marking its past (Hallam and Ingold 2007, 10). The poems age to match an ageing tradition.

A neighbouring genre responded differently.

الدهب في الرملة

الباور في الايد

جبت ارقامنا

بتحور اكيد

ثانبة.. هنصور قتيل

بامية بأور البيت

كلوس علي الواي

دا اخراج ميستر يوسف محمد الطاي

اسمي انا اليوزر في البيس ليا تايب

رابر بروديوسر مش بكتب قصايد

باشا اعتمد - أبيوسف

The Refusal of poetry

Ahmed Nasser, or El Joker, started off as a 'ammiyya poet. Feeling that his poetry is not reaching people the way he wants it to, he decided to become a rapper instead. El Joker entered the Egyptian rap scene in the early 2000s and established himself quickly within it through a few masterfully aggressive 'disses'[6]. His dominance firmly in place, he turned to his real project, turning his poetry into raps in the hope that they will be able to reach a wider audience that way. He succeeded. Over the next few years he became one of the first rap artists to amass a large audience approaching mainstream relevance. As his popularity grew he abandoned the explicit 'disses' vowing to stick to 'clean' rap, and he even retired altogether for a while to the dismay of fans, citing religious and moral concerns regarding his involvement with music, before returning, expressing the hope that his work is *hadif*[7] enough, with a good enough message, for it to be not sinful.

"Even though music is *haram,* prohibited, I am convinced I am getting a message out to people", he said in a 2014 interview. After his announced retirement there was a social media campaign by his fans asking him to reconsider. When the host commented on that, asking whether that was the reason he returned, he responded: "they returned my faith that I am actually changing society, making a difference" (Set il Hosn 2014).

Nasser approached his purpose as a rapper from the lens of traditional 'ammiyya poetry: his role was to culture, to educate, to critique the social and Political ills he witnessed, and his poetry has a strong ethical and moral presence and imperative. He stayed on the top of the scene,

[6] Disses are short for disrespects. They are tracks solely dedicated to attacking another rapper, taking away his 'respect', and his fans, in the scene for your own. They usually involve 'punch lines': witty insults, and 'real-life bars' explaining the reasons behind the dispute and how they were wronged by the 'dissed' party.

[7] *Hadif* translates to purposeful. '*Hadif* art' has come to mean art that aims to communicate a moral or ethical message, art meant to educate and culture.

if the top is measured by sheer reach and numbers, for years before he was slowly overthrown by Abyusif.

As one of the online rap commentators Pinocchio Awy introduced Abyusif in one of his video essays: “In an age filled with puffing, *tarbeya wataneya*[8] lessons, social reform, and rap with a message that will make you a better person, emerged the person who changed the rap scene in egypt forever. The person who, as people were talking about unemployment and drugs and social ills, was talking about his spat with his lover on Valentine” (2021).

Originally a drummer in a rock band, Abyusif made a name for himself in the rap scene by creating decidedly bizarre tracks, and creating lots and lots of them. In a few years he had released over 500 tracks, and created a plethora of personae with a variety of personalities and perspectives that the tracks were written from their point of view. There was Mazen El Mo’zy, Ra’d, Pinnochio, and Tamer, to name a few. One thing was a stable of Abyusif's oeuvre no matter the persona or the 'era', it was intentionally nonsensical. Abyusif firmly believed that music was for entertainment, and it was for self expression and exploration. It was *not* a vehicle through which to transmit ethical or moral messages, it was not supposed to function as social or political critique. Abyusif was the antithesis of everything Nasser stood for and was.

Things came to a head in 2019 with Abyusif's first true hit, a collaboration with a mentee of his Abo El Anwar, *Basha e'temed*[9]. In the true to form vestigially nonsensical track Abyusif he pokes at Nasser in what is termed *naksh*[10] by declaring himself "a rapper and producer who does

[8] *Tarbeya Wataneya, Patriotic Education*, is a subject under the Egyptian educational curriculum, proclaimed to teach citizenship and patriotism.
[9] *E’temed* literally means to rely on. It is used in contexts of professional accreditation and certifications but have come to be appropriated colloquially in recent years to mean: give a carte blanche. To call on someone ‘*e’temed*’ is to assert your presence as the end all be all, the absolute guarantee for whatever you promise to do.
[10] *Naksh*, poking, is the practice of including a targeted line or two at an opponent within an otherwise unrelated rap song. Naksh usually relies on subtle digs, leaving listeners to speculate on whether it was actually meant at someone in particular or not, and can be either a part of a friendly ‘rap game’ or a sign of an actual real life conflict.

not write poetry". Rap heads and commentators identified the clear shot thrown at Nasser, who repeatedly reminded us that he was a poet first, and that he writes meaningful purposeful poetry not mere rap, and were validated when Nasser responded in his next track *Qaseeda*, or *Poem* saying: "the stupidity of the response you come up with. I write poems and that's an honour you could never claim. The '*gamed rewesh*'[11] is the best you can hope to be called. Your film is cheap and I'm bowing out as its star". Abyusif quickly returned with *Qaseera*, *Short* by highlighting Nasser's use of stock type beats in contrast to the artistry of the producer Abyusif collaborates with Lil baba, and the "blindness of your director", as an indication to the low quality of the clips and visuals.

The interaction adeptly marked the end of an era. Abyusif's vision for bizarre lyrics, entertaining music, and rap that was decidedly 'anti – topic' took over, and Nasser's outlook and direction faded into obscurity. The major names that came out of the rap scene pushing it sharply into the mainstream, are mostly considered decibels of the 'Abyusif school' and his influence can be easily identified in their varying trajectories.

When the neo rappers declare themselves not poets, and what they do as decisively not poetry, they are not debating semantic or technical classifications. They would never argue that what they do is not measured and rhymed very carefully, or is not music inscribed with vocabulary and meaning as Amin Haddad might define poetry to be, but they are attempting to divorce themselves from a certain image of an artist, and the constraints that come with them. They are refusing a model of the committed intellectual with a 'culturing' message, which has attached itself to poetry as a concept, and replacing it with an artist with a creative vision whose main aim is to express himself and entertain others, and establish his prowess over other rappers. Rap's refusal of poetry is first and foremost a refusal of Politics, and a redefinition of what they

[11] *Gamed* translates to solid, and like *rewesh*, is colloquially used to mean cool.

do as '*zaty*' not only in that it comes from the self but that it is quite divorced from the shared public reality, particularly the Political parts of it.

Whereas 'ammiyya's response to the vacation of the Political from the present was to look back to the past, to times where their poetic logic was still viable, where their poetry and selves could be what they have always been told they are and ought to be, rap simply walked away. If the Political was no longer an option, they will reimagine a poetics without it, one that dwelled in the private, the personal. They will not dismiss inhabiting the space of the self as a diminishment of the capacities of their poetry. Instead, they will rewrite the story they tell about the genre and what it is meant to do, and infuse this move, which amounts to a depoliticization of the poetic self par excellence with meaning and agency.

In an online interview with old school rapper Yassin Zahran, the then new face Marwan Pablo was asked about whether tracks have to have a topic.

"Once you write things down, 4 bars 16 bars, you have a message, you have said something. The people who are like 'you should write about drugs or about politics', those I don't see them", he responded (Zahran 2018). And the poetry speaks of this understanding of poetry in its own right. In one of his first tracks under his new name titles *al gholaf*, *the cover*, he starts with "I once tried to find myself". The song is basically him taking us on that journey of self- discovery.

Modix, an online commentator and veteran in the scene, insists over and over again that rap is about self-expression above all else. "What differentiates rap from any other genre of music is that we have to write for ourselves. We can't just have someone write for us. Because what we do is about expressing ourselves, our issues, our backgrounds", which, the implication is, is necessarily something *other* than the political.

Retreat, a Conclusion

Mbembe has argued that colonial violence is marked by the way it confuses the public and the private, creating a space which muddles the political and the personal (2015, 28). Stoler extends that observation for imperial governance (2016, 311), and I argue it also extends to the Egyptian state. Poetry in the Egyptian colloquial, across genres, bears the mark of that violence, and reflects it, by the way it mirrors that confusion, infusing the most intimate of spaces, the self, with Politics, and the most public of spaces, the nation, with the self.

When the aftermath of the revolution set in, and with it the authoritarian crackdown on any remotely Political action, poetry as it was practiced, as it was conceived of, was made unviable, putting it and its practitioners under duress.

What happens to a Political self when the Political is no longer a viable option? What happens to poetry when the established poetic self is insolvable, stuck in only part of itself, barred from the rest?, were the questions posed by that political failure. Throughout that chapter I had attempted to explore them by following the responses of two genres: ‘ammiyya poetry and rap.

‘Ammiyya retreated to the past, choosing to abandon an uninhabitable present for a time where its model still seemed to work, privileging marking time over the potential to be part of the making of history, giving up its capacity to change, to move, to act, for a self experienced as whole, as having all of its pieces, political and private alike, intact. Rap, on the other hand, refused to vacate the present, electing to abandon the newly unfeasible model of poetry, with all of its confusion, for one that can inhabit the moment, and move within it. It abandoned Politics altogether, in its project and its selves, retreating to the personal and the domestic.

Chapter 2:

Attending to the Absences

‘Ammiyya’s retreat to the past involved having these meta-narrative of the genre I discussed in the previous chapter . Not only did many of my interlocutors narrate versions of it to me over time, but it was constantly being alluded to as the known agreed upon historical background. The emphasis on the 'founding fathers', and their golden age is rather persistent as well, referenced in casual conversation, TV interviews, anthology discussions and signings, and in the poems themselves. It is worth noting here that this dominant narrative leaves out a lot. It completely ignores the long history of factory workers publishing 'ammiyya poetry in the decades between Al-Tunsi in the late 1800s and Haddad in the 50s (Benin 1994); It glosses over the revolution as an event that changed the terrain of the genre, and completely ignores the resurgence of 'popular', political poetry prior to 2011 such as that of Iman Bakry, for instance; and it completely erases the strand of performance commercial poetry pioneered by Hisham Al-Gakh, and taken up by some poets like Amr Hassan. Also as is the case for many canonical accounts, it completely erases any account of poetry that is not heteronormatively male. I was conscious in my overview of the history and the model of the poetry/ poet that 'ammiyya made up for itself to talk about the poet as a he: his poetry, his aims, the archetypes available for him, because the genre has failed to make room to the numerable women that inhabited it and formed it. The obsession with 'fathers' is emblematic enough.

Some of these absences are easy to account for: the worker poets were a true counterculture, even within a tradition long considered counter cultural itself. Dominant discourses of history easily skipped them over, time gradually occluding the erasure. The glossing over of 2011 is also no great mystery, though I argue it is not a true occlusion. It is the

present absence, the elephant in the room. Even when they do not explicitly speak of it, as it is too painful a remembrance, or as an act of refusal to acknowledge what might have been, it comes through quite clearly from between the lines, and in the poetry. The overwhelming patriarchy is also self-explanatory within the wider overtly patriarchal and misogynist cultural and political context.. What's rather perplexing is the erasure of an entire strand of commercial poetry within 'ammiyya, a rather popular one as well.

The Unpopular Popular Poetry of the Present

In the mid-2000s, Iman Bakri rose to fame with her overtly political sarcastic poetry that fell squarely in the vein of Negm's work. Bakri was hosted on a plethora of talk shows, would hold popular readings, and published multiple anthologies. She was perhaps the only 'new' 'ammiyya poet to make into mainstream consciousness in more than a decade, even if she did not stay there for long. As her star waned, Hisham Al-Gakh's star was on the rise. With a distinct upper Egyptian accent, occasionally derided as faked or as an attempt to copy Al-Abnudy's success, he was all about performance. He hosted concerts, not readings but concerts, that sold out hundreds of tickets, made the TV talk show rounds for years, and built up quite a fan base. I remember in middle school, schoolmates would recite his poetry, attempting to match the accent, and wrote their own after him. In the last couple of years Al-Gakh has faded from the scene, but his strand of poetry, ‘commercial poetry’ as Gamal and many of my interlocutors call it, and its emphasis on performance and theatricality, was adopted by other poets like Amr Hassan and Amira El-Bialy. Not only do the narratives completely absent this strand of poetry, my exploration of the genre has made no room for it so far.

Hassan in particular is an interesting case. He started off as a typical 'ammiyya poet, just like Sherif, Ahmed, Gamal, and the others. He would post his poems on Facebook, like his

contemporaries, and started gaining followers left and right writing poetry primarily about the revolution and politics. As the revolution died down, his poetry shifted. The politics disappeared, replaced with commercially popular poetry centered on romantic relationships. He got more and more popular, his anthologies selling out edition after edition, till he came to host concerts, not unlike Al-Gakh's, but even more theatrical. To this day, he has almost monthly concerts, usually two back to back ones in the course of a day, that always sell out days if not weeks before the date.

Part of the basis of my argument for the state of 'ammiyya as an aging genre, a genre under duress, is the fact that it is a genre premised on being popular, that is no longer so. No 'popular' poems are contemporary, I argued. If we take into account this strand of discredited poets and poetry, this argument falls apart because these poets are truly popular, at least in the sense of them reaching a wide audience. Hassan's success exemplifies that.

The thing is Hassan, and his cohort, was not absent from my interlocutors' narratives in the sense of not being mentioned, and thus I could note his dismissal and correct and move on. Rather he was disqualified from being a poet at all; despite his mass success, or perhaps because of it, many of my interlocutors assert that he is not a real poet. Like Schielke's interlocutors dismissing Al-Gakh as a second rate poet who panders to the public (2016), so do my interlocutors today to Hassan. When I mentioned him to Hussein, for instance, he waved his hand dismissively. "Those are not poets", he responded. When Waleed mentioned the large readership Hassan’s anthologies attract in response to Salma claiming there were no longer readers interested in poetry, she immediately responded: “Amr’s readers are not readers of poetry, they are readers of Amr”. Her message was clear, poetry and Hassan’s oeuvre were two mutually exclusive things.

Hassan and his fellow 'commercial' poets definitely inhabit the 'ammiyya genre: they share the style, the references, even the stories of origin. Why, then, are the only popular poets of the contemporary moment so unpopular amongst their peers? Why are they absented from the genre?

Well, they are out of its time, out of sync with it and its temporality. Whereas the genre is stuck in the past, this strand of ‘discredited ‘ammiyya poets’ are firmly planted in the present.

The disdain directed at these poets might be partially a typical condemnation of the popular. These poets are widely considered to pander to adolescent audiences, and thus their poetry compromises artistry and value for marketability and cheesiness. The other part, I argue, is mobility envy (Hage 2009). These poets have managed material mobility in a very real sense: their poetry makes them significant money, something quite out of reach for most other poets, not to mention the mobility between genres they freely exercise. More than that they seem to have managed a temporal mobility, to have been able to move beyond 2011 and the political baggage of the genre. To those quite literally stuck, unable to do more than refuse to succumb, this mobility must seem like quite the transgression.

The Political was voided from the present, making it suddenly inhospitable to ‘ammiyya poetry, and its selves. Its response was to step out of it altogether, take itself into the past where it was last viable. This strand of poetry defected. Rather than follow along, it contorted, cut the Politics out and moved on, not whole but mobile, viable, current.

Duress, as Stoler argues, is “a mute condition of constraint” (2016, 7). It is a pressure to contort as a prerequisite for being. For those unwilling, or unable, to contort, like traditional ‘ammiyya practitioners, the way to respond to that pressure is to endure, “asserting some agency over the very fact that one has no agency by not succumbing and becoming a mere victim and an

object in circumstances that are conspiring to make a total agentless victim and object out of you" (Hage 2009, 101). But this agency does not alleviate the pressure; it does not provide relief; it does not stop the envy that comes along when confronted with those who are no longer constrained as you are, even if they are constrained differently. Hage traces white racism and anti-migrant sentiments as a manifestation of that envy, of being faced with that mobility as one inhabits an ethos of endurance. I argue 'ammiyya's disavowal of this errant strand can be read in the same light, and that it manifests itself as a tendency to police the genre from within.

This policing extends beyond this exclusion and occlusion of this group of poets, to one they subject their own work to.

Writing Air: the Nothingness in the Present

As we sat in Waleed's place, talking about poetic language and the revolution, Salma was telling me about the poetry she started off writing: the 'patriotic' poetry. "You could call it political or whatever", she said. First they were sarcastic social commentaries, influenced by Al-Tunsi. Then, the revolution came and "there was no room for comedy". "Things were happening" she said, "and I needed to write about them". Then it was over. "People started getting depressed and feeling desolate and I started to feel that my role and my duty was to play on hope and optimism. That no matter what as long as I could get off the chair I can do something. Anything whatever it was". This was when she crafted a persona for herself as a radical optimist, writing things like *Matkhafsh men khofak*, or *don't fear your fear*.

"Did that stage last?", I asked her.

"No, it didn't really stick", was her reply. "What I write now is either something very personal *'zateya* gdn' or something because of work. Nothing happens so I have nothing to say.

Mostafa (here she was referencing Mostafa Ibrahim) stayed silent for so long because he had nothing to say and when he finally said something he went into the space of philosophical meditation or whatever you would call it . Our reality is concrete and doesn't move much, doesn't have much give, so we have nothing to say".

"The spaces we work in got smaller and smaller till we got stuck in this area", was how she put it. The world turned into concrete and the poetry was stuck along with it.

Salma really speaks to the duress of the moment, this condition of constraint poetry is under. By asserting the intractability of the moment, she is asserting her own, and the poetry's, endurance. As she does so, though, she simultaneously speaks of writing and not writing, of poetry as there and not. "We have nothing to say", she says, even as she starts the sentence talking about what she writes now, effectively consigning her own contemporary writings to the same space as those of the discredited 'ammiyya's. They are not poetry, not relevant, not important, not of consequence in the present, without the ability to make a difference. The fact that they are personal, of the *zat*, not speaking to an imagined larger social, means they are nothing.

This resonates with the sentiments that I have traced in the previous chapter about the obsoleteness of the genre, and its link to this perceived inwards direction of the poetry can be observed all over the poetry.

"Sometimes, I wish I could write something worth anything", Ahmed El-Tahan writes in his poem *'Alam ma'bool, Tolerable Pain*, as he is literally writing, not to overstate the point. When these poets absent the present from the genre and from poetry, they are not only absenting other poets they want to distance themselves from, they are also absenting themselves, policing themselves out of their space. At its core, this insistence on voiding present writings is an

assertion of wholeness. It is a stance of endurance, or refusing to contort of fragment, even if it means having to construct and police a genre that is necessarily immobile and ineffectual. To write something 'worth something' is equated as a betrayal, a compromise, a mutation of the poetry, because the moment is experienced as inevitable inhospitable to worthy effectual poetry, and worthy effectual selves.

Rap's Impasse

I was sipping tea and reading when Bassiony called me. "Hi Reem. I know this is short notice but we are recording today, if you want to tag along". I looked at my watch, it was noon.

"When and where?", I ask.

"…now, in Maadi", was his reply.

"I can be there in an hour, would that work?" "Yes, absolutely. I'll send you the location on Whatsapp".

I gulp my tea and jump in the shower. As I attempt to tame my wet hair, I reach for a plain blue t-shirt, thinking it was a safe enough choice for Maadi[1] .

Forty minutes later, I am doing my usual staring intently at my phone screen as I attempt to follow the GPS to wherever it was I was meant to be. As I reach the correct street, I realize the studio must be inside one of these residential villas, in this quaint idyllic, empty, street. My mother would definitely not approve of what I was going to be doing: going into one of these villas to meet strange men I did not really know.

I hesitate a second, her voice in my ears, but decide to forge ahead, comforting myself with the webs of mutual acquaintances connecting me and Bassiony. They know him, he knows I

know them. It will be fine, I assure myself. I call him and he walks outside one of the villas to get me.

We chatter as we cross the black gate, over the small yard, and into the building.

“Moataz has just opened this place, it is still a work in progress”, he comments, explaining the bare entrance, the lack of furniture, and the lingering smell of fresh paint. Moataz is apparently the music producer, and the owner of the studio.

He guides me into the only ‘finished’ room: Moataz’s office, a large square room with windows overlooking the yard, a large desk opposite the door, holding a PC and a piano-like keyboard, three chairs, and a bean bag. Moataz was sitting on the desk, with large headphones over his ears, and Abdul, whom Bassiony was collaborating with on the song, on the chair by the window. I sat on the chair by the door, a hard wooden one, and Bassiony took the other one, in the only empty corner.

My anxiety made a reappearance at being alone with three men in a practically unfurnished villa, but was quickly put at ease with Bassiony’s incessant chatter, and the other men’s occupation with the beat they were working on.

After introductions and a stuttering attempt to explain anthropology to three musicians, we got into a rhythm. Bassiony would talk to me about Egyptian rap, in general as a genre and as an underground scene he was entangled with in different ways since his adolescence in Alexandria, as Moataz had his headphones on and worked on the beat. Suddenly he will take the headphones off and play the beat out loud. The three men will comment on it, trying out different flows, suggest tweaks, brainstorm ideas, and Moataz will get back to work, and Bassiony will get back to whatever we were talking about. Abdul will be walking around, randomly entering our conversation, or intently whispering with Moataz.

As this cycle repeated, the original beat was discarded, a new one replacing it, but my conversation with Bassiony kept circling back to what he viewed as the 'issues' facing the rap scene.

"The first issue is the fans", he told me. "Let's say Abdul makes a track today. Great track where he raps. They'll come up and be like 'Who the fuck are you?'", he voices the supposed fan as aggressive, and slurred.

"Because they have not seen you rapping from your beginnings, you are not allowed to be there. You cannot be a Youtuber, or a mahraganat singer, or an influencer, or a pop artist, or anyone. Rap is for those who were seen when they were small and unknown rapping, and are now large and well known, still rapping. See Wegz. The guy is a rapper, started off as a rapper, no two ways about it. But just because he went online and said he would not just be doing rap, and wanted to experiment with different music, it's open season. Go into any of the rap groups now and see the most violent dirty comments *'shteema weskha*' being thrown at him".

Bassiony here is talking about another form aggressive policing over a genre, this time undertaken by the original 'hard core' rap fans as he named them, which in his view is a real hurdle to the ability of the genre to break into the mainstream, as it stifles the artists, and forces them into narrow boxes when it comes to their music if they want to avoid the attacks of the fans. This mirrors 'ammiyya's policing over itself, though directed from fans to poets not poets to themselves. Additionally, whereas 'ammiyya's is experienced as an admonishing dismissal, a turning up of the nose, rap's policing is spoken of as a volatile conflict that threatens to burn the genre to the ground.

This policing is always an exercise of power (Barber 2007), but in the particular case of rap it's about knowability and apprehension. There is an anxious insistence on a very rigid

definition, a very narrow adherence, and panicked resistance to a blurring of the lines that extends far beyond the genres and poetry.

Even Bassiony notes it within other genres. One of his best friends, a blues musician, was quite hostile to Bassiony's new musical direction, which is more rap heavy, and '*hals*', chaotic and nonsensical.

Bassiony's response was simple: "*absher khayr*, 'rejoice'", he told him ceremonially in *fusha*, "You'll be forever broke".

رغم اني دفيندر ما دفعتش غير فلوس
علاء الدين لو في مصر كان باع الفانوس
قمر الدين يا مصباح هيبقي juice
لسه زي مانتي يا ياسمين بتحبي اللصوص
لسه بكتبلك نصوص خَلِت كلّها السوس
عرق الجدعنة اللي بتحبيه اتحول بقي عرق سوس
مش هندوس ماتقوليش أوستا إحنا مش مجوس
هل يجوز شرب الريدبول بعد لبن الجاموس

عياري اللي صاب بلا سين بلا صاد
مسا عالفخاد كلاسين بوكسرات
لسه لازقين بوسترات في المطار
تحصل مستوايا ٣٠ مليار دولار

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عارف مشكلتك تتلخص فيك
واخد الراب صنعه مش بتبدع فيه
انت تابع يا صاحبي - رابر مزيف و بتنصحني
تجري ورا الماركت و بتشرحلي؟

Nigga I have my own market
براب اللي بحب اسمعه بالنسباله لي هو ده التارجت

أغنية أولد سكول جديدة - أحمد سانتا

Brave New Rap: a genre in perplexity

Rap's strategy for navigating the present is a reimagining of poetry as personal, as something that can inhabit a space shut out from the social, and especially the political, as I argued in the previous chapter. That is the foundation upon which the current generation of Egyptian rap rests. Which is why its increasing commercial viability is perceived as an existential threat, and why its policing looks the way it does.

Rap started out as a true underground culture, a street culture. As Nasr, who was involved with the scene in its early days as an adolescent in Alexandria, said: "there were almost daily circles in the street in an empty lot near San Stefano. Many other places too". He also mentioned Y crew, one of the earliest rap groups, who created what they called 'the Y Crew Family', allowing their audiences to perform alongside them, and become artists in their own right". From the onset the line between audiences and performers was more than blurred. It was a single community of practice where people start off listening before inevitably moving into the production side, as rappers or music producers, and it was quite invisible to mainstream Egypt.

As the late 2010s set in, the new school of 'entertaining' personal rap led by Abyusif and his descendants took over the scene (see chapter 1). And herein came the dilemma: for the first time in its life rap had the capacity to truly enter the market. Not only because of its transformation, allowing it to reach a wider audience, but also because of the changing modes of music productions. No longer was the industry completely overrun with the production companies, the gulf-funded ones in particular in the last decade. The internet has made it possible for young musicians to make their own music at home, provided they have a working computer, a mic, and an internet connection, and publish it for the entire world. This ease of

access attracted a much more varied cadre of musicians, who had direct access to audiences, no intermediary needed. By 2020, rap had officially made it into popular culture.

It was far from a smooth transition. The growing pains made themselves known almost immediately though, and they have yet to stop. Multiple points of contention emerged, all of them around the boundaries of the genre.

First was the old school/ new school debate. The new generation of rappers have introduced 'new school' styles into the genre, most prominently 'trap music', which allowed for more room for melodic performances and a move away from the *ras*, or the stacking of words in rapid succession, so characteristic of rap. The words got fewer, the music more elaborate and more central, and with that the move from 'topic' and aggressive rap to tamer 'personal' playful rap. Central to this conflict is of course the Political climate: the old rap was no longer viable nor was it viewed as productive in any way for the new artists as I discussed in the previous sections. More prominently, however, was the market. The new school could sell in a way the old school just could not. What first seemed to be an advantage, providing the musicians with a road to actually profit from their art, or at least fund it, soon turned into an existential threat. The commercialization attracted a wider fan base who were detached from the culture. They did not understand, nor respect, many of its valued elements and technicalities. The original 'hardcore' fans developed intense anxiety that rap will be diluted, transform into pop and lose all they love about it. Their anxiety has yet to abate, only mounting further and further as the scene got bigger and bigger.

The second conflict, an offshoot of the first, was the '*trap shar'y*' dilemma, the issue of 'oriental trap'.

In 2019, Marwan Pablo released his song *el-gemeza*[12], musically produced by Molotof. One of rap's first true hits, the track is usually pointed to as the first trap one that used elements of mahraganat. Since then this has become a popular direction for trap musicians. Molotof made a name for himself in this cross-genre space of innovation, and many other rap and trap musicians started experimenting with incorporating more 'oriental' sounds.

When *Dorak Gai*[13], starring Wegz and Molotof again as a music producer, was released in 2020, the controversy over this hybridization practice exploded. If a song truly catapulted the scene into national consciousness, it was *Dorak Gai.* The number of views it had was unprecedented, as was its ubiquitous presence on the street and online. With that, came in the largest influx of new rap fans. The rap pages started sharing the success of the song, tracking the numbers and its position on Youtube's trending pages, calling it '*trap shar'y*' or '*trap sha'by*'; and they were ripped to shreds over it.

Batistuta, one of the relatively big names in the scene went on a now infamous Instagram Live in a vibrant Public Service Announcement of sorts. The live starts typically, with Batistuta blowing smoke at the screen from his cigarette, waiting for people to 'come in'. He expresses his aggravation: "this is pissing me off. People seem to have put their ears in the fridge".

"Where are we going?", he continues. "I was so happy a large audience was now listening to rap".

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[12] *Marwan Pablo X Molotof - El Gemeza* . 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMiKNqBaX44&ab_channel=Alef3ein%D8%A3%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B9%D9%8A%D9%86.

[13] *Wegz - Dorak Gai*. 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEhSs5Uemsk&ab_channel=Wegz%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AC%D8%B2.

He starts off by emphasizing that he does not want to talk about individuals. He was talking about music, about genre. Then he goes on a 40-minute rant[14].

His thesis is simple: trap is a genre with certain *khamat*, or sonic textures, foundational to it. The kick, snare, high hats, are sounds that have to be there for something to be called trap. If they are there, and you then add a melody using sha'by or shar'y sounds, you get trap sha'by. But what is now being termed trap sha'by is not trap at all, he emphasized. It's mahraganat. It does not have the trap *khamat,* the sounds, or the instruments, so it is not trap. Period. He feels his point is so obvious he punctuates with constant repetitions of "*kossom el sohola". Kossom* literally translates to 'mother's vagina'. His repeated mantra can idiomatically translate to "the motherfucking ease of it".

Batistuta is particularly aggravated with the rap pages on social media, who share *Dorak Gai* as a rap track: "Don't come to a mahragan and call it trap. I'll fuck you myself. Anything but the music *ya wlad el weshkha*[15]".

"These rap pages have a motherfucking responsibility. Fuck the reach. *Kossom* the reach. You put the reach on the knowledge, how come? Are you stupid? Make a page and call it 'mahragant scene' but don't keep making things up, I'll fuck you", he goes on, accusing the pages of prioritizing the number of clicks they get online to the 'knowledge' of rap they have the responsibility to preserve.

Many of the same lines from the old/ new school debate can be found here: the fear of dilution, of losing the niche art to the mass market. But there are new things in play as well. First there is the question of authenticity, which interestingly here is being claimed by both sides of the issue. Batistuta and the *mahraganat* opposition claim this genre crossing as undermining the integrity

[14] *Live Batistuta, Il Far' Bin Il Trap Wl Trap Shar'y w Dorak Gai Mahragan*. 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKzwTWdeUmE&t=768s&ab_channel=TechnoRap.
[15] Literally translates to 'sons of the dirty woman'. A more fitting translation would be 'sons of a bitch'.

of the genre, which should be preserved in its authentic form, the form it was imported in. The other camp claims that this new hybrid is the one truly Egyptian innovation in the rap scene. It is the first truly authentic sound to come up in the genre. Marwan Moussa, one of those rappers, stated that rap used to be a house Egyptian rappers rented off the west to live in. Now they are building their own, with the trap shar'y. There is a wider discussion on authenticity and colonial subjectivities to be had here, but relevant to my purposes in this discussion is a second element to this conflict, which was only alluded to and not stated explicitly.

In the same live Batistuta passionately states: "rap is what allows us to live well, what gives us status amongst people. It should burn in your heart to see someone talk about rap badly. Rap, motherfuckers, is the only art who if anyone, be that Hani Shaker, Hani Potter, or any piece of shit son of a bitch, comes and put his hand like this", he puts his hand on his mouth in a gagging motion, "if anyone does that, you'll bite his hand off as you rap. You won't be going like 'so sorry. So sorry Mr. Hani, won't do it again. Won't write the bad words anymore'. No, there will be none of that in rap".

Hani Shaker is an Egyptian singer who started his career as a child, making early appearances with some of the biggest names of music in the nation like Abdelhalim Hafez. Considered one of the most prominent faces of the 'middle generation', the generation that came up under the wing of music's giants, and who were the last 'classical' artists before music was overtaken by pop, Shaker's persona is that of a last point of resistance in the battle of 'high' traditional music against debased intruders, and it is with that positionality that he took up the role of the head of the musicians' union.

Here, Batistuta is referencing the prolonged conflict between Shaker, in that capacity, and the mahraganat singers. After *Bint al Giran*, a mahragan song, had become massively popular, its

two singers were invited to perform in a state sponsored concert held in Cairo Stadium. Reportedly an edited version of the song was supposed to be playing, where the line saying: “if you leave me, I’ll hate my life and my years, and I’ll drink alcohol and hashish”. The original played instead, with the offending line loud and clear. Despite the singers’ claim that it was an accident due to technical malfunctions, Shaker announced a widespread crackdown on all *mahraganat* singers in Egypt, banning them from performing in any public venues, including hotels, night clubs, and wedding celebrations. When Batistuta declares a rapper will never apologize to Shaker, he is mocking the mahraganat singers, who issued public apologies to him in hopes that will appease him and he will revoke the ban.

Mahraganat ’s issue was settled, though it is unclear how exactly or to what end. They have generally returned to performing, the pandemic lockdown notwithstanding. Batistuta’s evocation of this incident shows another layer to the genre conflict, one involving the state, and dignity. Intuitively, he knows that they are as open to Shaker’s whims as the mahraganat musicians. Their musical talents do not involve mastering an instrument or learning music theory, which they would be required to pass exams on to be admitted as members of the musicians’ union, and no longer need clearances for every public performance. Add to that a penchant for explicitness, which he himself aptly demonstrates in the live, that might offend Shaker’s conservative ear so much more than the mentions of alcohol and hashish and his anxieties prove to have significant weight behind them.

Batistuta’s response is simple: ‘If we stick to the technicalities, legitimize ourselves by staying true to the ‘knowledge’, as he put it, to the authentic version of the genre as we imported it, we will be safe from Shaker and his ilk. We’ll bite any hand that attempts to mute us’. Rap, and the fact that it is Western, globally recognized as a genre in a way that is institutionally

legible, spares its inhabitants from the indignities of having to grovel, or to watch what they write, in his mind. Needless to say, I am skeptical .

The last years have shown that the state's violence and censorship of what it considers 'immoral', outside of 'Egyptian family values', will not be assuaged by technical appeals to genre and art conventions. I just cannot see Batistuta's 'knowledge' protecting him from the eyes of the state or allowing him to go on rolling joints on live streams and going on stage with alcohol in his hands, as he proudly does, as the genre grows in popularity. His protection comes from anonymity, flying under the radar. Now that that is changing, I worry it is only a matter of time, and I believe Batistuta himself is becoming aware of that. Upon mentioning that same live, he declared that he was going to maintain decorum from then on, avoiding expletives and *shatayem*. "The scene, the music is getting bigger. The impulsive *shatayem* thing isn't good for work", he declared.

The final conflict is about audience interactions. On December 24th 2020, a heavily anticipated concert was scheduled to take place. The line-up was unprecedentedly rap heavy for such a large scale concert: DJ Totti, one of the biggest music producers in the scene was going to open, then Omar Kamal, a *mahraganat* singer no one in the rap scene cared about, Afroto, a young rapper who has just been amassing significant popularity after more than 7 years of making rap music, and Abyusif, one of the biggest name in rap at the moment, and the true star power. The audience, made up mostly of teenage boys, started coming in a little after noon. Totti opened as planned, though perhaps slightly late, and then nothing. For hours none of the scheduled acts went on stage: no Omar Kamal, no Afroto, no Abyusif. A DJ on attendance volunteered to play some music until the organizers could get their ducks in order but was soon

booed off the stage by the antsy fans. Around midnight Afroto came on stage. He performed his set, with an unplanned cameo from one of his friends in attendance, Batistuta, and was by all accounts enjoyed by the audience. The concert went up in flames after that when it became apparent that no one else was going to be performing: not Omar Kamal, who again by all accounts no one was particularly disturbed by his absence, and no Abyusif, which was the real kicker for most people there, whose main purpose of attending was to see him perform. The angry fans started to physically damage the sound and stage equipment in protest, and were involved in physical altercations with security and the organizers.

Afroto went on Instagram shortly after, shouting at the camera that he went on stage when he only received less than half of his agreed fees, when others refused to even go on even when they had received their full contracts. "Why am I being attacked? For what??…I valued those who came for me. Money can go, I don't care. A man makes the money not the other way around", he stated.

Afroto's statement were read to be referencing Abyusif, and a frenzy of speculations and condemnation regarding his absence grew. He promptly responded stating it was by no means his choice not to go on stage, and that he was barred from doing so for legal reasons. According to him, there were *tasrehat*, clearances, that needed to be issued by the state for non-union musicians to perform, and they were supposed to be handled by the concert organizers. They neglected to file the proper paperwork and he thus could not legally go on stage no matter how much he might have wanted to. He promised to pursue legal action against the organizers, and pressure them to refund the tickets.

Afroto shot back with another Instagram appearance, basically accusing Abyusif of lying. He stated rumours that circulated the day of the concert that Abyusif was refusing to go on

because the organizers would not accommodate the 25 people he had brought along with him in the hotel. Then declared that these were unsubstantiated rumours so he would not believe them. What was relevant, he said, was that he called Abyusif's manager before he went on stage, telling him he was going to perform. The manager inquired about the clearances to which Afroto responded that they were taken care off and had been issued. "Things are now in order, come on to perform", he reportedly told him. The manager's response was that it was already too late and a lot of people had already left. There were too few people for Abyusif to perform now.

Abyusif responded restating his earlier apology, and repeating that he had wanted to perform but could not, accusing Afroto of 'fishing around'. Afroto then released a video of the phone call with the manager he had mentioned, to provide proof of his claims. Consistent with Afroto's retelling, the call started off about the clearances, then when Afroto declared that the issue had been resolved, the manager started talking about people already leaving, and the time it would take for Abyusif to drive back to the concert. "We were scheduled for 10:30. When they come to me at 11:30 telling me we settled things...", he starts before getting interrupted by Afroto shouting: "All of that is 'formal', what you're talking about is 'formal'. I am talking to you about 'fans' who have been standing there all day and I was telling you let's make it up to them" [16].

Here were two competing ethics: Abyusif's manager's professional 'formality', and Afroto's ethos of street appreciation and respect to those who support your work.

[16] The words formal and fans were used in the original English. Fans is the standard term for audiences in Egyptian rap circles, but the english use of 'formal' here is significant. English, as a language is associated with formality, professionalism, and of course cultural capital. By accusing Abyusif of formality, Afroto is accusing him of abandoning his informal obligations to his fans, supported by a street ethic of sociality, in favor of a bureaucratized formalized interaction, of basically turning community relations into a transaction.

Rap in all of these conflicts is dealing with multiple, often contradictory, fields of power: the market and the state chief amongst which. It is a genre being shaped by perplexity as "the meeting point where multiple ideologies that constitute the subject—cultural practices, temporalities, and place— conjoin and diverge", following Ramamurthy (2003, 525). This perplexity is only compounded by the way the logic which the genre adopted was being undermined. In order to adjust, to be able to inhabit the present moment, rap developed a logic of a poetry that is personal, that dwells in those spaces removed from the political and the social. Now it is being intruded upon into that realm but those same social forces it has sought to retreat from, forced to reckon with them all the while conceiving of itself as insulated from it.

Rap's perplexity is a reflection of its inhabitants. Rap and its practitioners cannot help but be socially embedded. No matter how hard they might try to carve out a private personal realm to dwell in, the social seeps in regardless. Ahmed Santa's 2020 *oghneya old school gededa, 'a new old school song',* stands witness to that.

The song starts with Santa smoking shisha in his home's balcony: "From my balcony in Zaytoun[17], take a seat". Throughout we follow him to a car, a bus, his street, and a 'cyber'[18], surrounded by friends. As we traipse along with him between domestic and public spaces, so does the song itself.

Presumably this is a poem about the market's intrusion onto the genre, and Santa's stance on that: "I have my own 'market'. I rap what I want to hear, for me this is the 'target'". But throughout it shows us how entangled with the genre's predicament are things simultaneously more and less personal. There's the intimate life of the rapper being intruded on, like the lover he

[17] Zaytoun is a neighborhood in Cairo.
[18] An internet cafe where playstations and videogames are usually also available. Cybers are known as spaces where teenage boys and young men socialize.

had lost because he did not have the money. But that cannot be separated from the economic realities of not only the genre, but the nation. “If Aladdin was in Egypt, he would have sold his lamp.. Still as I have left you, Jasmine, in love with thieves”.

There is no truly domestic sphere untouched by the macro, in this case capital, and the rappers are all in constant contact with that reality, and quite cognizant of it, no matter how ‘personal’ they try to make their work and their lives . In an online interview with Santa[19], he is asked what he would have been doing if he were not doing rap. He pauses for a while before shrugging and answering: “I would have been working in a call center, the best thing there is for someone like me”. The interviewer laughs from behind the camera, and the camera pans out to show the crew. “All the guys here are in call centers”. Murmurs of young men announcing their work at various call centers fills the space as the camera stays on Santa’s face.

No matter if it walks out of time and erases its own present like ‘ammiyya, or it rewrites its own narrative and walks into the personal like ‘ammiyya’s stragglers and genres like rap, poetry cannot escape the moment, it cannot be taken out of social and economic contexts, and it shapes and is shaped by the power relationships entangling its inhabitants. These narratives of escape might serve to fuel endurance, imbue agency in a condition of constraint, but they constantly break at the seams, sparking tendencies of policing and redress to attempt to hold them together where they part ways with reality. Poetry is stuck in the duress of the moment.

زميلي جيب فلوس جيب فلوس

[19] *The Scene #6: Microscope with Ahmed Santa, Part 2*. 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=llRLNPwZGQ0&ab_channel=RapScene-%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%86.

روحت لشيخ قالي انا ملبوس
هنا محبوس انا هنا محبوس
الشيخ بيقول
جيب فلوس جيب فلوس
شيطاني بيقولي
جيب فلوس جيب فلوس
الناس بتقول
جيب فلوس جيب فلوس

زميلي روح جيب فلوس جيب فلوس
سكتي معروفه و فيها كلاب
عمري ما قريت في حياتي كتاب
فتحت الصفحة قفلت الباب
انا هنا محروس محروس محروس
انا هنا محبوس انا هنا محدوف
في خانة فاضية اتحطتلي شروط
هنا معروف معروف معروف
انا هنا محبوس انا هنا محبوس

هنا معروف معروف معروف
محدش مهتم بايه الظروف
محدش مهتم بايه في القلوب
كله في قلبي و كله هيدوب
سرحان مع حالي لحد المساء
انا مش فاضي لو انت مستاء
جاي و ماشي مفيش انتماء
مش حاسس بالذنب مفيش اتهام

محطوطين عالماب
اتعمل لينا هنا حساب
مالين الجاب
لو عندك بيف اتغطي و انساه

جيب فلوس – مروان بابلو

Stuckedness

If there is an anthem to the moment, it is Marwan Pablo's *Geb Floos*[20]. If there is a face to the moment, it is Pablo himself.

In February 2020, after an extraordinarily rapid success in Egyptian rap, Pablo suddenly declared that he was going to stop making music. A few days later he went on an Instagram 'live', a video streamed in real time[21].

The live starts with him outside, seemingly on a roof or a balcony, then he moves into a house, securing the shutters shut behind him. As he sits down on a desk, does a sound check, and settles for the live, he has a cigarette in his hand and fidgets agitatedly as he blows smoke into the screen.

"I wish I had died", was one of the first things he said, in response to the rumors of his death following his 'retirement'. Then he yells at someone, supposedly a follower who had sent him something: "Do not call me the godfather of trap if you do not know what trap is"[22].

"Trap means *masyada*, a snare. Do not know where that came from? Look it up", he continues, slightly heaving.

He sways in his seat, as if to a beat only he can hear, as he asks the followers for questions.

"Why am I pissed?, you ask me", he suddenly says, "because I go on the internet and find news of my death, wouldn't you be pissed off?"

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[20] *Official Audio | PABLO x MOLOTOF - GEB FELOS*. 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_53K63A5TE&ab_channel=Molotof.
[21] *Marwan Pablo Live after Retirement*. 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1SRySS5d6Q&ab_channel=3ashwa2eyatElRapScene.
[22] Trap is a subgenre of hihop that Pablo was credited as having introduced it to Egyptian rap. He is often referred to as 'The Godfather of Egyptian Trap', see Vice Asia. 2019. *Marwan Pablo: Egypt's Godfather of Trap*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wYKEREfQ3S0&t=1s&ab_channel=VICEAsia.

He goes on to explain the reasons for his choice to leave music behind: “People were expecting so much of me. Every song was better than the one before. People started trying to put me in a box”.

“I don’t like to be put in a box. I don’t like boundaries. No one gets to put me in a frame”, he said as he held his fingers in a rectangle around his face.

The live continued for almost fifty minutes after that. A couple of times, he exclaims: “I don’t know why I am in this live”. There is a real sense of claustrophobia throughout.

Released almost a year earlier, *Geb Flos* is steeped in that same sense of entrapment. Not only with the explicit announcement: “I’m here trapped, I’m here trapped”, but also in the incessantly loopy beat and Pablo’s repeated mantra: “Geb Flos Geb Flos Geb Flos” “Get money Get money Get Money” sonically closing in on the listener.

“The lyrics in Egypt were changed by my hands - the lyrics of everyone in this new generation, everyone”, Pablo heatedly claimed in that same live. “After I came along, rappers started talking about themselves more. They started talking about money, about things they had not talked about before. Before that it was *Disses* and *naksh, disses* and *naksh.* It was a vicious cycle and someone had to come in and change the patterns. Things took a different direction once I came along. If you deny that, you’re a liar”, he stated.

He is right. Whether he single-handedly changed the direction is for the fans to argue about online, but there is no denying that Pablo stirred the pot. Over the year following his disappearance from the scene there emerged a genre of videos talking about his short career, analysing his unlikely success. ‘Oraby, one of many online commentators, argued in his video

The Stupidest of what was Said in Live of Marwan Pablo[23]*,* that Pablo's appeal is twofold. On one hand he is so, well there is no better way to put it than cool. You cannot help but want to be him. On the other hand he is so relatable, his dreams so ordinary you cannot help but identify with him. "We want to make thousands, I want a life that's clean, I want to date the flight attendant", Pablo earnestly declares in *el Gemeza*. In a scene so saturated with rappers bragging about wearing Rolex watches, driving unimaginably expensive sports cars, and having millions in the bank, all of which everyone watching knows is just not true for a single one of them, it is so refreshing to see Pablo's aspirations, so middle-class, so understated, yet so hard, so out of reach, as Pablo himself acknowledges. As Schielke notes in his ethnography of Egypt, Egyptian class aspirations are predominantly middle-class ones, not an extravagant one (2015, 155), yet that seems to be the most difficult to attain.

Pablo's commitment to a personal that is true - "I sing only what I live", he declares in his song *Free*[24]- came with an inevitable detachment from the fancy fantasies of rap, often appropriated from the Western genre's indigenous tropes, and a new orientation towards the lived experience, and thus, a recognition of power, of money.

Geb Flos, and Pablo, show that stuckedness transcends genre's policed boundaries into the lived realities of these genre's inhabitants. I do not need to cite statistics, or quote interlocutors, to confidently state that there is an overwhelming sense of stuckedness in Egypt's post-revolutionary moment, particularly economical (Pettit and Ruijtenberg 2019; Schielke 2015). The post neoliberal moment comes with 'reforms' and austerity, worsening an already

[23] *Yalla Nefty #3 - 'Aghba Ma Qil Fi Hob Marwan Pablo*. 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WH98yGw5Edo&t=198s&ab_channel=RapScene-%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%86.
[24] *MARWAN PABLO - FREE*. 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jy7JQKBdaA&ab_channel=MARWANPABLO.

bleak situation, as well as narratives of prosperity, centering the lone successful entrepreneur. A trope in Egyptian media has become the 'self-made' business owner who does not wait for a desk job and takes matters into his own hands, with stories of college graduates selling snacks in the streets a recurrent staple.

The neoliberal subject knows what to do, 'geb flos'. Everyone tells him so. As *Geb Flos* tells us, there is no escaping that: "in an empty column, the rules were set for me". But while the road might be known, it is not clear, the rules are not realistic: "My path is known but has dogs in the middle".

Even for those who beat the odds, who 'make it, they are as stuck as everyone else. Aside from a handful of the biggest names, the successful rappers average a hundred thousand views on Youtube, their largest source of income after concerts which are few and far between, and made fewer with the pandemic. The ad revenue for 100,000 views in Egypt will at best get you 400 dollars, according to one of the online commentators. Even if the costs of production were nonexistent, that is far from prosperous, it is barely the 'clean life', Pablo talks about. Even for these handful of names who get millions of views, and the supposedly lucrative ad deals, how far does that take you truly? Bassiony expressed his empathy towards Wegz, whose break out song *Dorak Gai* made him an overnight national star and had more than 40 million views in the time of our conversation. "The song is great but a month from now you'll be done with it. You won't want to hear it anymore", he told me. "Wegz have been put in the position of having a million pounds in his pockets. He has become a mega star but he still only has a million pounds, he isn't suddenly able to move to *Rehab*[25] or anything. For his life to change he will need to make a lot more".

[25] Rehab is a gated compound in Cairo.

Not only that but ‘making it’ comes with its own exposure. A common phrasing for it is used in *geb flos: ‘mahtoten ‘ala el map’,* being put on the map, rooted in a place where you are easily reached. There is an instinctive understanding that that is inherently dangerous, even when it is being flaunted as a marker of success. “I’m known, I’m known, I’m known”, is followed by “I’m imprisoned, I’m exiled”. To be reachable is to be vulnerable; to be visible is to be assailable, knowledge is power as anyone who has skimmed Foucault will let you know. Even in his live, Pablo expresses distress over “what happened to the people in mahraganat”, referencing back to their dispute with the union.

Pablo, like Batistuta before him, got the message that has been sent quite clearly: those musicians who are not traditionally in line with Shaker’s traditional model better beware. In the live, as Pablo puts it: “also upsetting what has happened to these people. They seemed to have settled matters, but still. These are still people who helped *put us on the map*”.

نجّينا م الشرّير
ارحمنا م التجربة.
المعركة المرّادي
مش هيّنة..
المعركة غايمة..
غربال ورا غربال
وف صفنّا الجنرال..
المعركة مرعبة.
ووقفنا زيّ الجثث..
باصين على المدبحة.
الدم على صدرنا..
بننتصر؟ ولّا..
فـ طابور الدبح؟
هل دا سؤال العار
ولا السكوت أقبح؟
.
.
خرّجنا م المحنة
لما الغيلان صرخت
غارزين في بعض الناب.
فجأة اكتشفنا ف صوتنا
ريحة الدم..
وف وشنا أنياب.
وان الغيلان احنا
نجّينا م المحنة..
وم الهذيان..
وم النشيد العظيم
ع المارش..بالتعظيم..
بترده الجماهير
بصريخ جماعي عنيف
يكبت صريخ الخوف..
واللي بيرفض يهتف
يبقى شق الصفّ..
خاين..فـ صف الوحدة
مش مصفوف..
نجينا م الوحدة
والصف ماتوحّدش..
لكن بيتوحّش
نجينا من رؤية
واضحة وضوح الجبل..

بين العمى والشوف
لكنها الأوهام..
خرّجنا منها سُلام..
أكتاف على أقدام..
خرّجنا منها نضاف
الدم مش ع الكفّ..
خرّجنا منها ألف..
أو ميّة..
أو واحد
.
.
خرّجنا منها عرايا
زي ما دخلنا..
لا وزرا ولا حاشية
لا نلبس النياشين..
خرجنا منها جُداد
زي ما نزلنا
عيال كتير ماشية
من حدّ مش خايفين..
خرّجنا منها الآن..
نجّينا م التجربة..
المعركة مرعبة
نجينا م التجربة..
المعركة مرعبة.

صلاة الخوف – محمود عزت

Stuckedness I *: The Weight of Witnessing*

"Let's make it Zamalek, keep away from Downtown right now", was what Nasr told me when we were setting up a meeting. It was the 26th of September 2020. A year earlier completely unexpected, and rather short-lived, protests erupted, followed by a security crackdown. These were the first protests of this kind likely since the last Muslim Brotherhood

protests were squashed almost half a decade before. As the first Friday since the anniversary, the state was on edge, amping up their presence, and their aggression, in preparation.

It made sense to avoid Downtown of course but I was still surprised. I have come to expect that 'sense' from some of my 'ammiyya interlocutors, those who still dwelled in the centre and had not managed to migrate to the affluent outskirts, but not from my rap interlocutors.

Rather than take the bus to downtown, and a taxi from there, as I usually would, I ordered an Uber. I debated logging into fake social media accounts in case they stop me to 'search' my phone but decided that was unlikely to happen outside of downtown. I was satisfied with just removing the Facebook app altogether, keeping my benign Instagram one instead.

The traffic was heavier than usual. I glanced at the GPS I had open and it put my time of arrival at 9:35, five minutes behind. 'Not too bad', I thought. I fidget as I remember my mother's comment as I left the house: "I worry one of those poets you meet will rape you". I do not know how serious she was but she definitely was not completely joking. She made no attempt to talk me into cancelling or rescheduling, however so she must not have been *that* concerned. Maybe I should not have agreed to such a late meeting? But Nasr was only in Cairo for two days, both of which he would be shooting all day, so really there were no earlier possibilities. I declare my mother melodramatic in my own head and resolve to put her out of mind. I do pull my unusually straightened hair up in a ponytail and wipe away the purple lipstick I had from earlier in the day.

I arrived in front of the cafe almost 10 minutes late. I pay the driver then enter. The place is two stories, large, and rather generic, befitting a Western franchise of coffee shops. I sit on a table by the window on the second floor and wait. More than twenty minutes later, Nasr arrived.

He wore a plain black t-shirt, blue jeans, and a bracelet made of large plain beads. His hair was long, thick, and incredibly dark, thick perfectly defined long curls framing his face.

He orders a cappuccino and asks me what to drink. I nod at my half-full latte saying "thanks, could not do more than one right now". We get to chatting.

I learned that Nasr grew up in Alexandria, and lives there now when he does not have to be in Cairo for work but he still keeps his apartment in Agouza. As a teenager he was heavily involved in the rap scene in Alexandria. "It was a true underground scene then. Street circles all over. Don't know how it is now".

He was a musician. In 2011 he was a drummer for a band that did covers of Sheikh Imam and Sayid Darwish[26] songs. He was also an active 'revolutionary'.

"This generation managed what we couldn't", he was talking about this current generation of rappers compared to his generation of independent musicians.

When I asked him why, he told me: "We were much more radical. Too radical to enter the market, and have any mainstream reach. This new generation, it's all very personal. When they talk they talk about themselves, about things from where they stand. This gives them the space to move without being cordoned off the way we would be". Nasr here is adopting rap's perspective on the personal as a space of refuge, as a way to move in the face of a closed off political space.

He sipped his coffee and then continued: "actually it's more than that. They weren't there for the revolution so they don't have to carry it around. They don't walk around with the trauma. They don't have it in their heads. They don't carry it in their memories. So, if they want to do something, they just do it".

[26] Both men followed the same musical school of 'the Sheikhs', with the oud as the main instrument. They both were associated with heavily political popular 'resistance' songs: Darwish in the 1919 revolution and Imam and the 60s and the 70s especially through his partnership with Ahmed Fu'ad Negm.

He tells me of walking across Tahrir Square after the new 'renovations'. There, he saw a group of teenagers skateboarding in the square and videotaping themselves doing it. When my eyes widen in response, he tells me: "See. You get it. We *know* not to hold a camera in downtown, let alone Tahrir. We see that and automatically the images come. The things that can happen, that can be done to us. They don't have that. They have no images. They never *saw* it".

Violence annihilates the world, as Veena Das tells us (2007, 7). She evokes fragments "as a particular way of inhabiting the world…in a gesture of mourning" (2007, 5). The fragment marks the impossibility of imagining a whole. To Nasr, those who have seen experience the world in this state of annihilation, experience themselves as fragments. "In witnessing", Dave echoes him, "something of the person ceases to exist after the event is over. The fiction of the self is blown apart" (2017, 157). What ceases to exist to a witness in his eyes is an imaginary of the world as a place where you can move unimpeded, an imagination of Tahrir square as a place you can hold a camera. They are immobilized by the weight of what they saw. *Salat al Khof*[27]*,* the Prayer of Fear, agrees with him.

Salat al Khof was written after and about the Rab'aa massacre, arguably the last nail in the revolution's coffin, its moment of demise. It starts with an act of witnessing: "we stood like corpses, looking at the massacre, blood on our chests", and follows it with ambivalence and confusion.

What have we become?, the prayer wonders. Monsters, the prayer answers. The collective have not only become impossible but monstrous.

[27] *Prayer of Fear*. 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vIXAFkXHHRs&ab_channel=TheMosireenCollective.

The line *twahash*, which comes from the root *wahsh*, or monster. That same root also gives us *wahsha*, intense aloneness, the colloquial *wehesh*, meaning ugly, and *wahashteeny*, or I have missed you. The moment the shared collapses into a monstrous mutation, is the moment of intense alienation, and the moment of absolute longing. And Because we can never be severed from that which we share, we fragment rather than break down into perfect puzzle pieces, its monstrosity is our monstrosity. "We suddenly realized in our voices, the smell of blood, fangs in our faces, and that the trolls are us".

What has been seen can never be unseen, never again will what has fragmented be whole. All we can do is pray for deliverance, for an exit, even if we escape fragment by tiny fragment: "Deliver us a thousand, or a hundred, or one".

It is no wonder poetry's stuckendess is the way it is.

As Nasr talks, a 'we' emerges. The we of the generation who have seen, of the 'revolutionaries'. I cannot tell when or how exactly that happens, but I become part of that we. When he says what *we* have seen, he points his fingers across the table, at the two of us.

As I go through my field notes I linger on that development. After all, I am much closer to this 'new' generation than I am to Nasr's. I did not exactly see the way he did, or did I?

Later in the conversation he tells me if time could go back, he never would have done it. He never would have gone out, been a 'revolutionary'. "There was no sense to any of it. What did we get from it? Nothing. Revolutions do nothing. He'll learn from the youth", he tells me.

He then asks me: "would you do it again?"

"I don't know if I have done it at all", I say. "I was fourteen. I was hardly doing anything".

I tried to explain that I might have read the stories, the poetry. I watched the live footage, glued myself to the TV. I might have wanted the same things, felt the echoes of whatever they did. But I did not really *see.* My body bears no traces of the violence. I had not seen blood except on screen. If anything I am more or this 'new generation' than anything else.

"No", he replies. "You might not have seen everything, but you are not like them. You're 'cautious' in a way they never even think to be".

"You know", he continues, "the only one of them who have seen it is Molotof, and it shows. Look at the way he carries himself, the way he hides in his hoodies, the hunched hiding away".

Nasr posits that while we might share a context, a general stuckedness that binds us, our mobilities still vary. We all want out. But while some of us, those who have seen are weighed down, more hesitant to move, do not necessarily believe a way out that is short of divine intervention, others, those who entered the world after it fell apart are just not. Their stuckedness fidgets, runs in place, circles itself, believes in its own fallibility.

Stuckedness II*: Weeping over Ruins*

Amr Hassan saw. "My luck was to walk in a protest and not be written down as murdered", he says in his poem *Ma'ad Monaseb ll'eyama, A Time Fit For The Apocalypse*[28].

Yet it seemed that he could move, depart from the Political, from 2011 with all its baggage, and write intimate poetry he did not have to dismiss as nothing.

It makes a poem like *Gheyabek Tal* quite the dilemma. For those versed in 'ammiyya poetry and its interpretive tradition, 'Ghyabek tal' can be convincingly read as obliquely about

[28] Amr Hassan - Ma'Ad Monaseb Ll'Eyama. 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOJU0qEXom8&ab_channel=ElSakiaTVConcerts.

the nation. The poet expresses the profound loss he feels at its absence these last five years, since 2014, the start of the post-revolutionary moment. But because this poem was written by Hassan in 2019, whose oeuvre has been nothing if not aPolitical for some years now and whose reputation is cemented as the poet of adolescent romance and heartache, no one would be making that reading.

I am not bringing the poem up to argue that it is in fact secretly Political, that it should be read along the grain of traditional 'ammiyya, but to note that its roots are showing. That Hassan has not moved that far. What he does here, and in his poetry at large is a classical *boka' 'ala al atlal,* weeping over the ruins.

To weep over the ruins is a trope of pre-Islamic poetry that endures across the contemporary Arabic poetic traditions. Classically the poet would start the poem standing over the ruins of a lost home, lamenting the loss of loved ones, of past times. It is nostalgia par excellence, longing for a home that has seized to exist, or perhaps never did (Boym 14). Hassan's work fits so well in the confused space of 'ammiyya exactly because it is nostalgic; nostalgia occupies that space between the individual and the collective (Boym 97).

Despite the seemingly different temporal positions of both strands of 'ammiyya, they are tied together in this nostalgic entanglement. After all, what is '*Sha'et Garden City*' but a monument to an irretrievable past? Their slogan was literally '*bnbe'el haneen*', 'we sell longing'. The narratives fixated on fathers, on beginnings, are nostalgic longings to be not where they were, the present of stuckedness and immobility.

But whereas they build monuments and fossilize the ruins, mourning the lost possibilities, Hassan and his cohort absent the object of loss, spreading out their longing over their world, painting their point in a melancholia that is unending, and unattached.

Shahyn's Exceptional Stuckedness

Shahyn started to rap when he was 14, in the mid 2000s. He was mentored by one of the earliest rappers in the scene, Omar Boflot, and later joined his 'Y Crew'. Egyptian rap was almost unrecognizable from what it has come to be, before the refusal of poetry and Politics.

In the 2010 film, Microphone[29] , Shahyn and Y crew feature prominently. One of the very first scenes is them performing in front of a state official in his office, trying to get a spot in a 'youth music concert'.

He cuts them off mid performance and tells them not to forget that this was the 'national' center, (the Arabic word for national, *watany*, also means patriotic), and thus cannot exactly have people performing such explicit, government-critical, things. He then promises them a spot but they have to choose a song that is tame.

In a later scene, they are driving an old car, listening to their own songs, when they see a police checkpoint in the distance. They take out the CD and hide it underneath one of the car seats, just like they would have had they had drugs.

It is safe to say that Shahyn belongs to this generation of the 'revolutionaries'. I do not know whether he would claim that political subjectivity for himself, but there is no denying that his musical project, as the rap scene of the 2000s, was heavily publicly committed and at least somewhat Politically engaged.

In 2016, Shahyn's father died. "Life stopped", Shahyn said in a documentary style video on his Youtube channel[30]. "It felt like everything was over. I had come to the last level of the game in Egypt. There was nothing more".

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[29] Abdalla, Ahmad, dir. 2011. *Microphone*.
[30] *SHAHYN - THE RETURN OF THE FIERCEST TYPES OF HAWKS*. 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FAHbG9Wk_04&t=1s&ab_channel=Shahyn.

“I could not write. I did not want to go on stage. I did not answer calls”, he continued.

He felt he had no choice but to go to Dubai, he said, and become a salaried employee, abandoning his music career, a move he foreshadows not only in Microphone, when he talks about migrating and joining his father in the US , but also in many songs like the 2013 *mashy,* or ‘*leaving*’[31] in which he states:

‘‘ماشي وهربان من الفقر

ماشي وبأتمنى ماأرجعش غير بعد ألف شهر

بعد ماأكون عملت أسرة

وأكون عملت ثروة

وبعد ماأكون زرعت جدور وعملت لنفسي أرض صلبة

ماشي علشان شفت اللي قعد فيكي ماعملش

مهما راح وجه وتعب في الآخر مابيوصلش’’

Shahyn did leave, but it did not take him long for the disillusionment to set in. In Dubai, he felt even more stifled. “You have to wake up at 6 and stay till however long”, he describes, “This is not what God put me on this earth to do”[32].

“I couldn’t blend in”, he said in another online interview, stressing his words by pounding the back of his right fist into his left palm. “I couldn’t”. Pound. “get a call”. Pound. “From a customer”. Pound. “ Who can take me left and right.., and I only say ‘*hader, hadretak, w ya fandem*’[33]”.

[31] *Shahyn - Mashy*. 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dkuQk-nDdtk&ab_channel=Shahyn.
[32] *Shahyn Interview*. 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wwZtn0qUZAs&ab_channel=RapNews
[33] All terms denoting extreme deference, respect, acquiescence, and in this context, submission.

"I would tell myself in my head to toughen up", he continues, "you're not the first one to have to do these things. People get trampled, and you got here *metshal 'ala kfof el raha*, '*carried over the palms of comfort*'[34]".

"'Toughen up', 'what's the matter?', I would tell myself", he says. "Then I just looked at the clock, it was a quarter to noon or something, and I decided I'll finish what I have in my hands and go home. I stood up, got my things and my bag and left. Not a single word".

"Then I went home, packed everything I had, and by 2 am I was in Alexandria", he ends.

In 2019, Shahyn returned to Egyptian rap.[4]

Shahyn's stuckedness does not look like that of either 'generations' of poets. Having done the moving, the running in circles, having *seen* the situation for what it is , Shahyn is done moving. He is not going anywhere and he knows it:

"لسة بسيط لسة

اوضتي كلها كراكيب لسة

مفيش تكيف لسة

هموت م العرق و التلزيق لسة

لسة باقف طوابير

معنديش اولوية

لسة باركب مشاريع

عشان مفيش عربية"[35]

[34] Colloquial expression indicating comfort, a lack of struggle, and privilege
[35] *Shahyn - Elvaranda (Feat. L5VAV)*. 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5LYZDxD4nUY&ab_channel=Shahyn

He does not experience his stuckedness as defeat, however. In *Elvaranda*, one of his first releases since returning to music, Shahyn upends the common trope of flexing and showing off wealth on its head. His brag is that he has not moved an inch: his room is the same, no air-conditioning, no car, no money. He is as we left him, but that is still worth something. "You wish you were a star, but I don't. Because I am already a star", he says later in that same song.

Shahyn's triumph over his stuckedness is not mobility, it is not to get unstuck - he already tried that it did not work. It is endurance. It is true 'heroism of the stuck' as Hage conceives of it: "With this form of heroism, it is not what you actively or creatively achieve that makes you a hero but your capacity to stick it out and 'get stuck well', so to speak" (2009, 100).

Shahyn in his newest iteration, post return, is all about getting stuck well. In *Sout Baga'*[36] he confronts his losses- the job, the girl, the father, the possibilities- with a masculine toughness that just grinds its teeth and endures:

"مافيش مكان للمسكنة

لسه الحديد بيتنى

مهما ضهري بيتحنى

هنا مافيش مرتبة

هنا النوم في الخلا

هنا العضم دا إستوى

هنا الدنيا فهلوة

هنا غرز غرز غير قابله للإلتئام"

[36] *Shahyn - Sout Baga3 (Prod. by L5VAV)*. 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydZJqnJ3otU&ab_channel=Shahyn

Denial, a Conclusion

In the last chapter, I had traced how the poetry that was inherently Political, responded to a present where Politics was not an option, a present made uninhabitable for it. I argued that a retreat was experienced as inevitable, either a retreat to a hospitable past abandoning the hostile present altogether, or a retreat to the personal in poetry, abandoning the Political and the poetic project built around it. In this chapter I have attempted to show how neither retreat has proven to be actually fully possible, how it can be maintained only as a fiction on the back of denials and omissions.

'Ammiyya's retreat to the past, whole and unscathed, necessitates a denial of the poetry that continues to be written, and of whole strands of poetry, particularly commercial ones that have declared themselves personal and aPolitical. The maintenance of that glaring omission, necessitates an ongoing and incessant policing of the poetry, via the creation of narratives on what can count as poetry, and who can count as a poet, that can write off anything and anyone present as unworthy and outside of poetic bounds. Rap's retreat to the personal on the other hand necessitates a denial of all of the constant intrusions on this supposed personal from the outside, and the political, primarily the state and the market, and how any intimate expression is necessarily subject and in constant contact with that outside. This denial also requires a heavy, and in this case, aggressive policing of the genre.

In both cases, I argue, these fictions of clean retreats fall apart, and expose the impossibility of a hard boundary. There can never be a past untouched by the violence of the present, nor can there be a pristine personal realm where institutionalized power cannot enter or act on. Likewise, there can never be a poetry, or even a poetic genre, so absolutely defined as to ward itself off from the social, all of it.

The need for these narratives of retreat for continuing to inhabit the world, even as their failure is inevitable, leads poetry to a state of stuckedness that, I claim, reflects that of the wider Egyptian present.

Chapter 3:

Vignette: My Father, the Conqueror

If there was ever someone for whom poetry was truly part of their everyday, it was my father. He did not have to call for poetry for it to come, it seemed. It flowed out of him, just the right lines at the right moment, unraveling the world so that it could be re-weaved in slightly brighter colors.

When I was a teenager, I accompanied my father to one of *al masalah al hokomeyah,* 'the governmental interests', as the state's various bureaucratic offices are called. I have no recollection of what the exact mission was but I remember walking down the brown narrow street headed towards the building when my father stopped and started searching his pockets for change. He fished out a twenty pound note and put it in his shirt pocket, separate from everything else, and resumed walking. "Is that a bribe?", I asked, rather aghast. He laughed a bit and told me:

"شعث مفارقنا،تغلو مراجلنا نأسو بأموالنا آثار أيدينا"

"Dusty are the roots of our hair, boiling our cauldrons We soothe with our money what our hands have left behind"

I asked him to translate the fusha words I did not understand. He did, and then he told me that this line was from a pre-islamic, Jahili poem. It is a classical pride poem, he explained. The poet was boasting about his fierceness in war, that led his hair to gather dust at its root, and about his generosity, that showed with the unending cooking that took place at his home, ready to feed whomever comes. With his generosity, he will heal whatever his skill at battle had wounded. Whatever office we went in my father introduced himself as 'Professor of Neurosurgery'. This got him an automatic reaction, with employees describing various ailments and medical histories

and him providing consultations on spot, and inviting them over to his clinic for more in depth ones. One official even put him on the phone with a relative for her to describe the surgery she had had done on her back, and the pains she was still feeling. Between the medical advice and the crumpled money he discretely pressed into palms stretched over the ancient desks, we got the paperwork done that day. All throughout I kept hearing the line of poetry in my head, my father, in his rumpled suit jacket and gray shirt secretly an ancient Arab tribal warrior, conquering the bureaucracy, healing with one hand what was necessarily damaged by the other for him to emerge victorious.

Father Fever

The poetry my father loved has always been foreign to my ears. He would always have to interpret for me the ancient fusha words he uttered so seamlessly before I could fully comprehend it, let alone appreciate it.

At some point during my childhood, my father discovered that he could download songs from the internet, curating his own playlists on CDs and flash drives. One day, on a long family car ride, he played one of his recent collections, dozens of Sheikh Imam songs and Ahmed Fu'ad Negm poems. As my mother complained about the scratchy poor quality of the audio recordings (some of which were recorded over smuggled cassette tapes in prisons decades ago as my father told her) and Imam's choppy vocals, I was mesmerized. A poem would play and my father would narrate stories of the political and social background: this was written after the 67 defeat, this one when Nixon was visiting Egypt, that one when Negm was arrested after political protests in the 1970s. He would repeat lines he found particularly poetic, explaining a word or image when applied.

I pestered him with questions all throughout, but I did not truly need interpretations. As soon as I heard the poems I felt something about them. The commentary would add to it; it would help me understand. Yet, I could access these ‘ammiyya poems on my own in a way I never could with the others.

After that ride I made my own Imam/ Negm playlist and listened to it long enough that whenever I was in my father’s car I could sing along, and we would talk about our favourites. His was *al mamnou’at*:

“Forbidden from travel
Forbidden from Speech
Forbidden from song
Forbidden from longing
Forbidden from resentment
Forbidden from smiles
And everyday, as I love you,
the things I am forbidden from grow more and more;
and everyday I love you
even more and more than the day before”.

My favorite was *Iza al Shams*:

“If the sun drowned in a sea of clouds,
and a wave of darkness crashed over the world,
and sight died in eyes and foresight,
and the road disappeared in lines and circles

.

.

there is no guide for you but the eyes of the words".

I want to revisit poetry's obsession with fathers. In the first chapter I noted traditional 'ammiyya's preoccupation with patriarchs. How both canonical fathers of the genre and actual familial patriarchs, be they fathers or older brothers, were central to most of my interlocutors' poetic beginnings, as they were for mine, and how they are still central to narratives and practices of the genre to this day. The founding fathers are constantly being evoked in conversations, interviews, and narratives about the genre; they are constantly cited and referenced in discourses as well as the poetry itself; their faces and words find their way onto new anthology covers, and on walls of homes and commercial spaces of the poets as with *Sha'et Garden City;* and they are repeatedly claimed as kin.

In last year's book fair, three of the fours anthologies I bought had acknowledgments dedicated to Fu'ad Haddad, amongst which was Ahmed's which starts with the lines: "We are all brothers in Fu'ad Haddad, regardless of the people and lands between us". Gamal noted to me that for poetry it was as it was with novels. "After Naguib Mahfouz , everyone was influenced by him. They were either trying to be him, or the anti-him. Poetry is a bit like that too. You can see this with Fu'ad Haddad, where people are trying to be him or assert their difference from him. He is a central figure of sorts. But there are other figures too like Jahin and Negm", he stated. There is a true insistence throughout to assert a lineage, a bond beyond that of an influential predecessor and that is as poignant as that of blood, of actual paternity with all the moral and symbolic weight that comes with it.

I have argued that this was a manifestation of the genre's temporal stuckedness in the past, its nostalgia for a time of actual poetic possibilities that do not seem present in the contemporary. Here, I want to push that a bit further, starting with the observation that the patriarchs so obsessed over are never actually there.

"When we are at home, we do not need to talk about it", Boym astutely noted (2001, 38). Likewise, when a father is there, in every sense of the word there, there is no need to talk about him. Nostalgia is a longing for that which is not there. This poetry's experience of a father is of that which is felt through its absence. The fathers are central because they are not there, at least not in the ways they are needed to be.

The most frequently evoked fathers are the ones who are dead. There is a thriving subgenre of odes to dead fathers, and of course all the canonical poets are gone. There is even a marked refusal to allow any influential role in the genre to living poets. When asked about poets of this generation who have added to the genre, not merely followed the set trajectories, no one would answer. "There is no one now", I would hear over and over again. It was not until the latter half of my fieldwork when a couple of people would mention Mido Zoheir who had passed away that spring. Zoheir was never brought up, even by the people who eventually did, until he had died. It is as if the patriarch is necessarily never fully present. The father is felt as a phantom pain is felt through a limb that has been cut off, a constant pang reminding of what might have been but never can be.

This narrativization of the father as the absent presence means that despite the reverence and glorification afforded to him, it is always tinged by disappointment, by desires unfulfilled and a never-ending let-down. In a dedication to Haddad, Ahmed claims him as a father: "To Fu'ad, or as he called himself, the father of poets", but he follows it up with a vacation of that

role: “I do not know why exactly… To my father as he himself put it, because I am done and there is no one left except him”. Haddad’s fatherhood is perpetually unfulfilled. It has been claimed but never realized, leaving it nothing more than a tantalizing fixture that does not truly do anything. Later in the same poem *Kanet ‘eny wag’any*, or *My eye was hurting*[37], he unceremoniously declares: “Damn my father, because he would not wait for a minute”. It is unclear which father he is referring to but it does not truly matter. They are both dead, damn whichever one or both for leaving.

In a poem titled *Ibny al habib, My Dear Son,* Mostafa Ibrahim (2020, 101) adopted the voice of his own father, talking to him. “I am everyone who has died, and you by now, must be the biggest thing to ever come along in my dreams. And about your letter, and your questions, I am the one awaiting your answers”, the father ends, unable or unwilling to answer, to guide, to protect, to help, all a father is expected to.

This sense of betrayal, of being let down, by fathers goes beyond genre. Shahyn’s storyline in *Microphone,* centers around his father's looming absence. His migration and the accompanying abandonment of his son as a result (see chapter 2). Shahyn’s fraught relationship with his father features throughout his oeuvre, most prominently in *Ana Mesamhak, I forgive you*, which he performs at the end of the film. “You have made me carry far above what I could handle…. I don’t know you… you don’t know me either. Whose fault is that?… I wish to lie on your chest and hear your heartbeat. Believe me, I don’t know how I feel about you”, the weighty accusations and the immense resentment belie the poem’s chorus assuring forgiveness no matter what.

When Shahyn’s father reappears as a central figure in his work, it is after his death, a death that pushed him into a deep depression and quitting music for years. Only then does the

[37] *Ahmed El Tahan - Kanet ‘eny wag’any.* https://soundcloud.com/eltahanmusic/xlkjg4zk1xvg

reverence afforded to a father come in, where he is talked about as a grieved for larger than life figure.

When it comes to 'the father of the genre' in rap, *Baba il magal,* there are many contenders, the old-school die-hards originators of the genre in Egypt. But there is a dismissive almost derisive tone when they are brought up. They are accused of having stayed stuck in the rap of the early 2000s, their newer attempts deemed mediocre at best. The only one who has maintained relevance is Shahyn, but he has resoundly refused to be cast in that role. When asked during a live if a novice rapper could send him his tracks so that he could give him feedback, he sat up in his seat and responded: "Look guys, with all due respect, I am sorry. But I can't play this 'godfather' role now. Give advice and all. I just cannot do this now. I'm sorry".

The only one with a real legitimate claim to the position is Abyusif. Despite his late entrance compared to someone like Shahyn, he is largely accredited as the canonical figure in the current wave of Egyptian rap and considered reigning patriarch . But even he has faced a recent rebellion.

In a feud that played out in a string of nearly a dozen 'diss tracks ', and that involved him, his most prominent mentees Marwan Moussa, and a few other prominent rappers like Wegz and Afroto, the theme featured most all around was Abyusif's fatherhood.

"You're the elder of this scene? What a loss for the scene!… You were my role model but the paint has faded away", Moussa throws at Abyusif in *Mesh Okay*[38]. "You were good but now I am better can't help it… sad to tell you *ya 'alamy enta shatabt*, big shot you are done with", Afroto mirrors in *Gaw Sa'b*[39].

[38] *MARWAN MOUSSA - MSH OKAY.* 2021. https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=%D9%85%D8%B4+%D8%A3%D9%88%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%87

[39] *AFROTO - GAW SA3B*. 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-VkPt_g_88M&ab_channel=AfrotoOfficial-%D8%B9%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%88

"*Nata'tak rap",* Abyusif throws back at Marwan Moussa. *Nata'tak* lays a claim to much more than teaching him music. It implies a bequest of language itself, of speech. "The track people knew you for was a feature with Daddy", Abyusif goes on referring to himself as 'daddy' and crediting himself with Moussa's success.

All throughout, Abyusif was being acknowledged as the father figure, the mentor, the pioneer, even and especially by his adversaries, and thus the grievances of the other parties were portrayed as a fall from grace, a father falling short of what a father should be and what a father should do.

"But what I saw from you was not what I had expected", Afroto voices his disappointment in *Gaw Sa'b*. In conversation with me he told me: "He's Abyusif, you know, *baba il magal*, the father of the scene. That is not what you would expect the *baba* to do". He was talking about Abyusif's no show at the concert (see chapter 2).

Despite an absence of the reverence and nostalgic glorification 'ammiyya reserves for its founders, rap's handling of its fathers exhibits the same experience of absence and disappointment.

هذا الحنين يحيي ويميت

هذا الكمين مخلوق جديد

متيتمين ولا لينا بيت

ومتيمين ببعضنا

كل الحاجات ليه مستحيلة؟

رغم إن كل الحاجات من حقنا

هذا الحنين - أحمد الطحان

On Diasporic Intimacy

Poetry has retreated to the private, the intimate. Some view that retreat as erasure, others as an expansion of possibilities. In both cases, where does that intimate dwell?

Intimacy, Arendt tells us, is a loss of the world, an experience of deprivation, a shrinking of the horizon, a tethering to a home instead of the world (Arendt 2018; Boym 2001). But what if rather than imprisonment in the domestic, it is a dispossession of home and haven altogether? If it is not subjection to the absolute rule of the patriarch over the home but to his failure and absence?

That is, I argue, the intimacy poetry dwells in at the moment, a 'diasporic intimacy', an intimacy "not opposed to uprootedness and defamiliarization but is constituted by it" (Boym 2001, 382). In *Haza al Hanin, This Longing,* there is this copresence between the "longing that gives and takes life" and the new checkpoint; between orphanhood and homelessness alongside the intense intimacy of being madly in love, and the 'we' the poetry is infused with; and between being denied every possibility you know you are entitled to. A checkpoint is a claim laid on a space as not your own, where you have to justify your very existence. To be homeless is to be devoid of

the only space exempted from the possibility of a checkpoint. There and only there your presence just is. To be homeless is to go through the world unjustified, an illegitimate self.

This dispossession and alienation seeps through warping the familiar.

This happens quite visibly with the city. The 'visual'[40] to *'esabat, Gangs*[41]*,* starts in the driver's seat of a moving car, we can see the landscape swirling past in the rearview mirror as the car moves. Over it we hear Zuksh's voice with the first lines: "*et'afelet. Kol elsekak el'odamy 'it'afelet", "Closed off. All the paths I can see have closed off".* The rest of the visual is mundane footage of Cairo streets, cars passing by puddles, a mechanic working on a white taxi. But these ordinary scenes are heavily manipulated, hazed, swerving, doubled, overlayed with each other. The result is a double sense of familiarity and estrangement, recognition and disorientation.

The city, and the larger nation, transforms into a haunted, deformed, version of itself. "*Amshy wana ma'bood min il share', wl 'ard soda wl hari' tahty… el watan byen'as haga delwa'ty. Elwatan byen'as kol yom share', wbyzed mor", "I walk, dreading the street, the land black and the fire beneath me…the homeland is losing something right now. The homeland loses a street everyday, and gets more bitter",* as Mostafa Ibrahim puts in *al Tari', the road* (2020, 19).

It also happens with the collective, the shared world, in the way it turns monstrous in *Salat al Khof* (see chapter 2), and in Ibrahim's *al mawaqi' il zar'a, The Blue Sites, "he who leaves the flock, we leave behind, or stampede over. Here. Finally. We will not be alone"* (2020, 46).

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[40] Edited graphics and looping recordings attached to a song as a cheaper alternative to a music video.

[41] *Molotof & Zuksh & Young Zuka - 3esabat.* 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FzEwpymwHlU&list=TLPQMjYwNDIwMjF84WXogI6ljw&index=2&ab_channel=Molotof

Most of all, it happens with the self which becomes unrecognizable, and unrecognizing. "This is not real, I do not know who I am. I fear going to sleep and finding him there, or waking up and finding me having drowned", Afroto swerves through *'la ba'dy, On Top of Myself*[42]. "Homeless, broken, broke…you might turn out to be the serial killer, you might turn out to be the murderous killer… when have you strayed from the purpose, the meaning, and the human?", Tahan asks himself in *alam ma'bol, tolerable pain.* "I talk to you, and my voice is as if it is not my voice, and my face in the mirror is as if it is not my face", Ibrahim again tells us in *al Tari'*. The self, as the space of ultimate intimacy, the personal taken to the extreme, is experienced as fractured, as hostile, and the world is experienced as a checkpoint, a *kameen*, a place where one's presence is perpetually suspect, where there is no possibility for home.

In the House of Raya and Skina

"I was as good at it as I am in music", Afroto told me as he held up his mobile phone for me . On it a video of him in a uniform, deftly spinning a tray with drinks around his fingers before setting it on a table in front of patrons. He had spent years working as a waiter in various cafes and qahwas over Alexandria.

"I only stopped really recently. I was still doing it even when I was known and people would come up to me to take photos", he told me as I tried to appear sufficiently impressed with his skills, which I was. He put the phone back in his pocket as he continued, laughing a bit: "It was weird. For years I would be taking orders from people only to have them recognize me and ask to take photos with me, declaring they loved the music. Nowhere near as it happens now of course but it was still a regular occurrence".

[42] *AFROTO - 3ALA BA3DY Ft MARWAN MOUSSA*. 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=inxH03yLOjQ&ab_channel=AfrotoOfficial-%D8%B9%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%88

He settled back perched on the arm of the sofa we were sitting on, despite the empty seat by me. My frustration rekindled with Ahmed, the friend who was there with me, or whom I was there with really. He had settled on the edge of the sofa, leaving me to sit in the middle, unaware of the tough spot that would put the rest of the men in in the tight room. After all it would not be appropriate for any of them to sit next to me when I was 'with him'. I thought about telling him it was ok to sit, or getting my friend to switch seats with me to solve the dilemma, but feared embarrassing everyone involved no matter what. I stayed silent.

"When did you decide it was time to stop waitering?", Ahmed asked him.

"In 2017 I was very down", he responded. "Things were happening. I was getting known. I even won best artist in a competition organized by Goethe Institute[43] in the Alexandria Bibliotheque. They had chosen me as the best one there and they were going to fund a long trip abroad where there will be workshops with artists from all over. Then I couldn't get the clearance to travel. I'm still in university, and the military conscription is still unresolved till I graduate so they wouldn't let me travel".

The Goethe people were rather understanding, Afroto told us, promising him the offer stands till he could get the papers in order. But he felt defeated. No matter how hard he tried, things were not going anywhere. He was still where he started.

Then, in 2019, he received a call from Sadat, one of the biggest, and oldest, names in mahraganat. "I was in the cafe, working an early shift, when he called", he told us. "He told me to come over to Salam, in Cairo right now. That he wanted to work with me. 'Get in an uber wherever you are and come straight along to my place and I'll pay him the fee', he told me".

[43] A well-known German NGO operating in Egypt.

Afroto was hesitant, and unsure whether he should be insulted with the offer or not. He called one of his rapper friends who had worked with Sadat before. The friend told him to go ahead. "'That is just what Sadat was like', he told me. 'Go it's a good opportunity'".

And so he did. He changed out of his uniform, bailed from his shift, and called his father to tell him he was travelling to Cairo. He did not take an uber though, but rode a microbus he could afford and paid for the transport himself.

Sadat hosted him in his house. He was working on an album and wanted Afroto to feature in one of the songs. The ideas flowed and in a few days they had a song recorded and all. The album dropped immediately and that song was its biggest hit, according to Afroto.

"I was supposed to only stay for a few days till we finished the song but people kept booking us for weddings, asking for me along with Sadat to perform that song", he told us. Mahraganat as a genre is closely tied with weddings. A lot of the mahraganat singers made their names, and initial money, in local weddings, and continue to make a significant portion of their money from weddings, local ones in their neighborhoods as well as extravagant ones in hotels. For rappers, however, it is unheard of. Rap's explicit, aggressive, and overall less dance-friendly aesthetic along with the dearth of romantic tracks, means it is not as wedding-friendly.

"As a rapper, weddings are not for me you know. I did not expect this. But people kept asking, and he told me to stay, and there was good money to be made. SO I did it", Afroto told us.

He made enough money, and followers, those few weeks he stayed at Sadat's that he regained faith in his music career as a viable option, and quit waitering.

As we had this conversation we were hosted by AG, a sound engineer who started off mixing and mastering tracks for his rapper friends in Alexandria. As his friends' popularity grew,

so did his within the industry. He eventually relocated to Cairo to cater to a wider base of musicians.

We were in AG's studio, which was nothing more than a room in his apartment, with two couches, a desk with a computer on it, two chairs and a coffee table. Rappers like Afroto, who worked with AG back in Alexandria, would now come to spend a few days over at his place every few weeks to record the songs they have been working on. There were at least 6 men other than AG in the apartment at that moment, greeting us with flip-flops and pyjamas as we sat there playing with his two puppies.

Just as Afroto describes from his encounter with Sadat, there was an utter collapse between the private and the public, home and market. A feature of the warping of homes, of this diasporic intimacy of the moment, I argue, is this utter confusion, this opening up of the domestic outwards till it collapsed into nothing.

Another feature is a collapsing of the public inwards, with it attempting to capitalize on this absence of home by masquerading as ones. In July 2020, after his first true hit, Afroto found himself in one such space, when he was interviewed on a midday talk show called *Beit Raya w Skena, 'The house of Raya and Skina'*.

Raya and Skina are heavily narrativized historical figures, commonly known as the first women in Egypt to be sentenced to death, after they were found out to be involved in serial homicides. The two hosts of the show, Intisar and Badriya Tolba, two relatively well-known middle aged actresses commonly cast as the low-class vulgar woman played out for laughs in TV dramas, were supposed to be the Raya and Skina in this context.

The set had plum sofas, a stand fan, and wooden shelves with framed photos on them, reminiscent of a living room. Sitting on the sofa, in even respectful tones, and a polite smile,

Afroto tried to engage the two women with whom there seemed he had no common grounds. They introduced him as a '*motreb*', a term for a singer that brings to mind the classical vocalists, whose vocal mastery could move listeners' souls, obviously far from how rappers would describe themselves. Afroto graciously thanks her. He tries to explain what rap is, emphasizing how they write for themselves. They ask about his waitering work. He animatedly responds.

Then Badriya asks: "Was it the way you look that made it so that you are where you are?" "Not the way I look", he says, looking a bit confused, " it's what I lived. As I told *hadretek*, I write for myself from what I have seen".

She tries to explain herself: "I mean, if you were still *samara* , but with a bit of handsomeness and the like, would you have been singing the romantic…".
The second hostess interrupts: "*Haram 'aleky.* No, that is uncalled for, he's beautiful, *zy al 'amar"*.

Afroto awkwardly laughs.

"What do you mean a bit of handsomeness. Do you see him as ugly?", Intisar continues, reprimanding her colleague.

"*Rbna Ykhaleky*, god preserve you", he thanks her for standing up for him as he laughs. "She just means to ask you, if you were white with blond hair and green eyes, would you be singing romantic songs?", she asks

"No, there is no connection. Marwan Moussa, he is a close friend and he has a name for himself just like me, and trends just as much as I do, and he's German-Egyptian. He has blue eyes, and blonde hair, and he raps. There is no connection", he responds.

Afroto might have been sitting with a plush pillow behind his back but watching him there felt like watching an ambush more than anything else.

Intisar then moves on to talk about *mahraganat:* "Afroto, Do you know about the backlash against mahraganat? It's because it has *sha'ik*, '*thorny',* words and there is no censorship over it, so anyone writes anything while on whatever he is high on. They write *kalam kharig,* words that are 'out', and people started to sing it in weddings and neighborhoods and it was being recorded and people were saying these offensive things '*kalam 'abeeh*' in homes and in their lives. A devastating social phenomena".

Afroto's voice in the background murmurs with repeated "yes"ses and "That's true"s. Before he tries to interrupt: "*Bossy hadretek, see".*

She does not let him: "You used to sing *mahraganat*, or you had an experience there"

"*Bossy hadretek*", he tries again.

She bulldozes through: "did you rethink it when you saw that there is.."

"No no no. I'll tell you something, *hadretek.* There is absolutely what you are talking about, it really happens. But it is not everyone in *mahraganat*. I have nothing to do with *mahraganat*. I am a rapper. I do rap. But, just to be fair, not everyone in mahraganat presents this content that is bad. Some of course do, and we all know who they are and where their songs are coming from, but no one has ever held them responsible. The idea is again, it is not everyone in *mahraganat*. Some of them make music that you can honestly listen to".

"They are starting to be held responsible now", she responds.

"Of course", he agrees, "I was talking about the time before, when that used to happen".

"The *naqeeb*, the head of the union, he took a stand, and announced that these were not *motreb-s* nor singers nor performers"

"Exactly. But it is also not fair to ban everyone. Because there are some who are not like that"

Badriya reenters the conversation here. “You pick your words though. Your words have nothing bad in them”, she says, perhaps in an attempt to make up for her faux pas regarding his looks.

“I do NOT sing mahraganat, first off..”, he repeats before getting interrupted once more by Intisar.

“And you are highly educated, studying in law school”, she says.

“Yes you have high qualifications. I don’t really understand what you said but it’s good. There’s something to it”, Badreya supports her.

He laughs nervously, starting to look ruffled for the first time, “look hadretek I might have done *mahraganat*, but it is always a collaboration with someone. I’ll make a track with someone well known in *mahraganat*, who has a name, but it is never one of those people who say or do any of these things. They’re even people whose style is close to rap. But on my own I never do mahraganat”.

“*Bettawar nafsak,* Do you work on developing yourself then?”, Badriya asks.

“Of course, who wouldn’t want to work on themselves?”, he responds.

“In terms of studies, of instruments? Do you try and see what’s new in your field?”, she continues.

“Obviously. But the thing is for me and anyone in rap it’s a talent. Not anyone can do rap. Because as I told you, it is a responsibility. I write and sing and do the melody, I do everything”

“And people have to accept you. They have to want to hear you”, she interjects.

“That’s also very important”, he allows, “so you will never find anyone sitting in his home, listening to a rap song, just decide to be a rapper. It cannot happen. No matter what he does he will never be a rapper. He has to live the life”.

"But he can be *bta'mahraganat",* she declares.

"Yes because he'll receive the words ready made, the melody ready-made, and he'll just sing", Afroto responds, his frustration seeping through his even tone as he sits on the edge of the couch and his hand motions get more agitated.

"He also wouldn't need a good voice", Intisar adds.

"Yeah they'll just turn the autotune to the max and be done with it", he smirks before schooling his features back to seriousness, "But if someone wants to do rap you have to go through life, like the 4 years I had before this last one. My life was all about rap, school, work. The rap part I would have to go out and meet, even if I wasn't working on a song, I would meet up with those who also did rap and we would gather in the streets and we would live that moment together. Our lifestyle…".

"Are there people like that in Alexandria?", Intisar wonders out loud over the rest of his sentence.

Afroto looks incredulous before recomposing himself and continuing: "of course. The whole thing spread initially from Alexandria, it started there, in Egypt. The biggest names, the most rappers, are from Alexandria".

"What's the instrument you like playing, or want to try to learn playing, the most?", she suddenly asks.

"I never tried it but I want to. I want to play *oud.* It has nothing to do with the music I work on. I just want to do it*".*

As someone who dwells in the online parts of the Egyptian rap scene quite often, I am exposed daily to circulating tweets or lives by rappers, and the intense analysis and discussions

around even the most trivial of them. A televised appearance by one of the bigger names like Afroto, even if on a show like *Beit Raya w Skina* was not going to go unnoticed. As soon as the clip from the interview was posted on Youtube rap fans flocked to see it, and they were understandably outraged on his behalf.

A common joke at the time was: "These women needed to be talking to Batistuta, not Afroto". The implication being that Batistuta's aggressive explicit presence would have been more suited to the offensive conversation than Afroto's polite evenness. The overwhelming sense was that instead of being hosted graciously on their show, as was framed and thus expected, he was pranced upon, *et'amalo kameen*, as some commentators put it. A checkpoint was set up for him in an unexpected space, in a space where there should not have been one, in a home.

A few hours later Afroto went on a short live to respond. He is obviously recording himself on his phone, holding it with one hand and the microphone of the plastic white headphones he wears in the other. He is obviously walking on a street, the metal doors of a closed garage or a shop glinting behind him, dull next to the gleaming silver chains he wears on his black t-shirt.

He starts off by thanking people for being more upset on his behalf than he himself. "It makes me so happy that you care about me so much to be this upset", he states. "But I'm *metzawel*, thrown off, that you are so upset so I want to talk about it". He then argues that 'we', him and everyone listening, should excuse the hosts because they just do not really understand things like the differences between rap and mahraganat. They are not in the field and thus cannot be expected to. "Also, I do not see that these people insulted me or offended me. And I see that I talked very well and came across very well. We should focus on the positives of this situation", he says as he walks, his mouth the only consistently visible part of his face. He argues that the everyday viewers of the show, who did not know rap, all had positive responses to him. "See

how many people were watching this randomly as they ate and never heard of rap and came out saying 'that boy is respectable. He's doing good work'", he continues. He highlights the things he said that he felt were really important to get across: the difficulty of what rap is, the talent it requires, and how unlike any other genre of music it is. "I do not see this as bad as you did. I do not see this is as bad… We should look at the half full part of the glass as they say".

Afroto challenges the fans' narrative. Rather than centering the perceived violation and aggression of the two women, and what they represent (the mainstream, the middle-aged, the moralizing state institutions charged with policing art, and even perhaps women though that deserves a much wider discussion), he centers the impact and the effect. Afroto is supremely aware of how he looked, and more so how he sounded. More than that, he was supremely aware of what he was walking into. He never had any expectations of being hosted graciously in an intimate setting, he knew that no matter what the place looked like, was being framed as, that it was a hostile area. That he will be surrounded by strangers who did not and could not understand him and what he did, and he was prepared to navigate that estrangement accordingly.

"Now, how you sound?". Devonya Havis departs from this question, posed repeatedly by one of her ancestors, to think of an alternative philosophical praxis inspired by the lives and experiences of Black women. The question , she argues, "served as a reminder of how his positions and actions were not only personal but also relational, anchoring him within a community" (2014, 240). Afroto here is moving from the same space as that question. All throughout the interview he showed profound understanding of the social field in which he was operating, and he responded accordingly. Not only in his even tone and the repeated *hadretek* s,

but also in the way he chose to frame himself in the ten minutes he had in air, and in a frankly hostile setting, as a respectable compliant subject.

By highlighting his waitering years, starting both the interview and our conversation with talking about them, and being liberal with details and anecdotes re that part of his life, he maneuvers his potentially disadvantageous class position, which might paint him as a thug, delinquent, or one of those peddling *kalam abeeh* like the mahraganat in this case. By always tying them in with his college studies and a decidedly middle-class politeness in demeanor and cadence, he firmly narrativized himself as the protagonist in the ever-sanctioned, ever-popular *Qesas al Kifah,* the strife stories, the moral ethical respectable educated young man who gets ahead by hard work, gumption, and playing by the rules. This, coupled with the gracious allowances he gives for the 'spontaneous' women's accidentally demeaning comments, which likely echo the inner thoughts of many of the viewers, makes it only natural for him to be cast as sympathetic, reasonable, and morally upstanding.

His compliance is feigned, however. He does murmur affirmations when Intisar goes on her anti-mahraganat tirade, but he refuses the repenting artist role she tries to paint him in, and he also refuses to completely condemn the *mahraganat* singers. Not only does he qualify the accusation, softly going against her totalizing narrative, and vouches for those he had worked with as 'not of those type', but he also points to structures beyond the artists themselves as the ones to blame for the "devastating social phenomena" as she puts it. One of the things I translated him as saying in that interview was "no one held them responsible", but in Arabic what he said was "*mahadesh hasebhom",* which works doubly as no one made them pay, held them accountable, and no one paid *them.* The subtle subversion did not go unnoticed by Intisar, who swiftly brought up the stance of the *naqeeb* and his union, but it still stood there. The

mahraganat is as abandoned as the spaces they come from, the unregulated 'slums' in the urban centers of Cairo and Alexandria . The withholding of care and support to these spaces, the abandonment of them, means no one gets to pay. It is simultaneously an abdication of the power to regulate and control. Through his feigned compliance Afroto pivots away from the polarities of a resistance he cannot afford and a complicity he refuses (James 2019, 77), and he quietly emphasizes the social embeddedness of the entire interaction.

But feigning complicity is not the only thing he does through this feigned complicity, and narrativization of himself. He highlights his own vulnerability.

Afroto's first truly big song, and the song that got him on *Beit Raya w Skina* and that he performed there, is called *Segara* or *Cigarette*[44]. Ironically it falls in the contested *Trap Shar'y* space. While *Segara* is definitely not rap or trap, according to the criterion of Batistuta and fellow genre purists, unlike most other contested songs in the scene it is definitely not a *mahragan* either. Instead the *shar'y* parts of it are much closer to the folkloric Egyptian *mawwal* than anything else, a slow emotional lament that usually precedes actual songs.
Segara, true to the *mawwal* tradition, is a gentle reproachful plea to the world, the *donya.* Afroto portrays a feeling of systemic victimization by it: the donya refuses to laugh his way; it hates him, refuses him love. He beseeches it to let him go, find someone else to direct her wrath at. "*Argoky Mely*", "Please bend", a verse ends on this extended melancholic plea.

There is a popular proverb: "*yoda'serro fe ad'af khal'o",* "He instills His secret in the weakest of His creations", meaning that God bestows the weakest of people with a uniquely divine sense of power. This is clearly reminiscent of Victor Turner's 'powers of the weak', the mystical and symbolic powers associated with those on the margins of social structures (1970,

[44] *Afroto - Segara.* 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-V_D7aTVaag&ab_channel=AfrotoOfficial-%D8%B9%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AA%D9%88

99). Afroto here plays with that proverb, by claiming himself, "*el 'abd lellah"*, "god's slave", a phrase usually used to talk about oneself while conveying humility, as *"ad'af khal'o"*, "the weakest of his creations". After outlining his grievances with the world, the suffering he has undergone, he can make a legitimate claim to vulnerability, and thus to divine 'secrets' that come with it.

Afroto does that in the song, but he also did it in the interview, and in the live afterwards. He tells Intisar that before *Segara* he had successful songs but they were hosted on other people's channels. When Badriya exclaims the unfairness of that, how it was also his work. He explains that as the lesser known artist in a collaboration, you have to defer to the bigger names, because they have the fan base and the viewership when you don't. In the live he talks about how to the television audience, he is unknown, and thus he has to bear the burden of educating the hosts, has to withstand whatever offense comes along with their ignorance, and take care of how he comes across, because it is not his platform, and they are not his viewers, they are there. Over and over again Afroto highlights the ways he is at structural disadvantages, how he is marginal to the spaces he has to navigate, and he manages to maneuver this marginality to his advantage by emphasizing his vulnerability, and the moral and mystical potentialities that come with it.

Afroto navigates hostile spaces, an alienating world that pretends to be home, by capitalizing on his vulnerability, positioning it in a way that allows him to feign complicity, and protect his spaces subtly but effectively. However, in doing so, he has to continuously confront that vulnerability, and the reality of his homelessness, that though he might be able to walk through these spaces he does not truly belong in any of them, and that doing so requires a constant bearing of, and poking at, at all the places where he is most exposed.

What toll does that take on a life, on a self? What kind of poetry can be forged under these conditions? What does it *feel* like?

The Opposite of Birthdays

We were reading a poem from Ahmed's latest anthology when I asked Sara: "how do you feel about this?". "It makes me feel..", she starts before a loud birthday song plays in the cafe we were sitting in.

We watch as the lights dim and the workers come out with a chocolate birthday cake, with lit candles all over, and a group of young women start singing along, their phones out as they captured the reaction of the birthday girl to the celebration.

"It makes me feel like the opposite of birthdays. Not just this one really. He always sounds sad even when what he is saying is not", Sara continued as the squeals died down.

My fieldnotes reek of gloom, of melancholy . Many of my interlocutors talk of depression, and of mental illness in general, but others talk of sadness more generally, less concretely, of feelings that are *gham'a* or *t'ela,* dark and heavy without necessarily giving them a name. The move to the intimate, to the personal, to a philosophy of poetry as expression of an authentic self, was by and large also a move towards bleaker poetry, a poetry that feels like the opposite of birthday as Sara put it.

بتيجي كده فجأة
كل حاجة بتبقى غامقة
و الدنيا بتبقى ساكتة
يا رب انا عايش بسترك

طمنني لما اقلق
خليني ابقى اجمد
خليني استحمل الكاتمة
يا رب انا عايش بسترك
احيانا ببقى شايفها مستحيلة
و الهموم بتزيد و بتبقى تقيلة
و ببقى عايز اسيب نفسي اغرق فيها
كانت تسود في عينيا و تغمق
حيطان على بعض بتتزق
نتعارك انا و السقف
كنت بحس ان الارض بتتشق
كنت احس ان الاوضة بتضيق
الوش بيتخطف بيزرق
قلبي مرزبة في الدق
عقلي بدل ما يقول لأ
بيسكت الخوف جوا صدري بيعيش
بيسكن بحس انه امتلك من قلبي
و مسكو لحد ما عرفت الاحساس
و حفظته و غلبته بعون الله نهيته و شيلته

أبيوسف – كل حاجة بتبقى غامقة

Youssef, Interrupted

In March of 2020, days after the sudden retirement of Marwan Pablo, Abyusif deleted every single song he had on his Youtube Channel and effectively disappeared.

Months later, he reactivated the channel and unceremoniously released *Kol Haga Bteb'a 'am'a, Everything Goes Dark*, as the first song in an album he titled *Makeena, Machine.*

Shortly after that he was hosted on an online show *Safe and Sound*, where rappers go on a live just like the one they would on their own, field questions from commentators in real time, and then sit down for a brief interview in the studio.

The live starts with Abyusif talking to an off screen producer, asking her where the questions would show on his device, where he was supposed to look, whether they will start with the live or the interview.

They motion for him to start. "Oh, *Salamu 'aleeko*", he mumbles then looks down, presumably at a phone or a device out of the frame where the commentators' questions can be viewed.

"No questions so far", he tells the producer to the left of the camera. "Maybe I can ask myself questions and then answer them". He fidgets as he does just that.

"How are you? Fine ilhamdullilah. Happy? Yes, happy. I'll just ask the questions I know they would. *Malak ya 'am mokta'eb?* Hey man are you depressed? Does this look like someone who's depressed?"

"The feed disappeared", he interrupts himself before quickly following with "oh, here it is, it's fine".

"Well no one is asking any questions. But people are greeting me", he says as he looks down then notes down the compliments people are sending his way: "Abyu on the beat" "*'azama,* Greatness" "Abyu is on the top".

"Where are the questions, people?", he asks, still looking down. He appears a bit flushed but it is hard to tell on screen.

"Questions, questions, questions, come on".

As the questions finally come he seems to settle in. He looks up, his voice gets louder and his back straighter. He starts swaying in the rotating chair and moving his hand as he talks. It is as if he could finally justify his presence there, find purpose in it.

He answers questions about the slow pace by which the songs of the album are released. “You have to understand. This album, we have created an experience that people will live along with us”, he tells us.

He goes on to explain: “This album is about a thing, a *makeena* that goes through stages. In the first stage the songs are released a certain way, with a certain tone, and a certain level of writing, so that it gives a certain impression. Then there’s a stoppage. That’s part of the drama, part of the story. The machine has produced in a certain way and is now no longer able to produce that same way, and it has the intention to change the mode of production and come out differently. So the time between the stages is calculated, we have calculated it”.

As he moves through other questions, Abyusif puts his hand on his knee and I keep getting distracted by it bouncing as he talks, and the long heavy pendant swaying on his chest.

“Why have you stopped after the *A’taqed Keda ‘ansab* track”, he reads a question. “This is the same question as why have you deleted the tracks? No one has asked this yet but I know everyone wants to know”.

“Uhhhh…uhhhh”. The camera closes up on his face. His eyes wander from the lens, us, to the producer to our right as he finds his words.

“When I started making songs, I never imagined getting to any of the things I have gotten to. I can say I leaned towards *ka’aba w ta’asa*, gloom and misery. I wasn’t a happy content person. I made songs to get out of whatever depressive state I was going through, and it was something I liked. It made me like life and want to live, live for it, live to make songs every day. This was a time where no one heard us. We would get like 500 views in two-three months. But the point was not to get heard, though that’s of course always good, to be heard. The point was to

keep going with the songs and the things being done, like building a house that no one would see", he volunteers.

He is looking more to the left of the camera now, on the other side of the producer, closer to us but still off center.

"*Ilhamdulillah* God graced me and people started hearing me and seeing me and i*l wahed* would go out onto the streets and people would want to take photos with him, they liked him. *Il wahed* started to feel people's love in the way they interacted, and such", he continues, referring to himself in the third person as *il wahed,* the one.

"The perspective I had on making songs changed. I became focused on wanting to get the maximum number of this thing I was now getting. This love from the people , I wanted more of it. *Il wahed* becomes greedy about it", he tells us, explaining that it became so he would be thinking about this when he was making songs, whether or not it will be a hit, resonate with people, get him more of this attention and adoration. It would work too: "God made it so the more one planned, the more I thought about it, the more it worked out that way".

"You could say I got used to it. I got used to, uhh, people hearing you, seeing you, greeting you, these things", the pace of his speech gets faster as he goes on. "That old feeling of depression I used to have came back. But now it had nothing to take it off me. In the past there was something that could take it off: 'people here you so it's..', like that. But now it could be there along with its antidote in a way. And like everyone goes through hard circumstances, I went through hard circumstances that I can't talk much about because… well because I don't want to honestly. I don't want to get into it. I don't want the energy that will come from it".

I could not quite tell whether his shoulders were held up the way they were now from the beginning, or whether they had creeped up as the minutes went, but by now they were up to the point where he looked slightly hunched over.

“Anyway.. These circumstances..they made me feel that there was no..reason to continue with what I was doing since it wasn’t defeating the depression completely”, he continues. “As much as fame and the financial return and all these things are good but in 2019 I have reached a level in these things that *ilhamdulillah* could cover *il wahed* the rest of his life *ilhamdulillah.* So there was no longer a reason to keep making songs”.

The screen fades into another angle, closer, more at a diagonal to him, as he narrates how he woke up one day and just decided to delete all the songs on Youtube, intending that to be the end of his music career: “this was finished. This person was finished”.

Abyusif goes on to talk about how he stopped talking to anyone and how he had acclimated to this idea of never making songs again to the point of calling acquaintances to arrange giving away his recording equipment. “When I did this - if we can say that this depression, or this feeling of misery, is a person, when I did this, he got so much stronger… I can say he was just about to defeat me. He had me pinned down, and the referee was counting down about to declare a knockout”, he counted down as a wrestling referee would, smiling for the first time in the interview. “Before he could get to three..one day, from a feeling of *kabt,* repression, in me I just went on the laptop, opened up the music production software and made a piece of music. Then I got a pen and a piece of paper and I just started writing. I got the mic, recorded. There wasn’t any plan for anything but this is just what I do. It's what I know how to do you know”.

As he tells it, the floodgates opened from there. The songs came one after another and he found out that his perspective changes, and that his writing became very different. All throughout his career he wrote through characters. For every 'era' he would create a persona, name it, then inhabit it, write from it, as it. "What I realized was that these new things I was writing, it was not a character. It was me Youssef. Not someone else, but me", he declared.

He started sending the songs to Joe, who seems from the conversation to be his manager. But whenever Joe would talk about releasing the songs, Abyusif would balk. "I was sending songs to a friend, not to share, you know", he said.

"Over time, as I wrote and made songs, this person, the depression, my real adversary.. Before 2019 I used to think my peers, my colleagues were my adversaries, but with all this I realized it was me. *Ana il khissm,* I am the rival. Anyhow, with the making songs and all, I found myself starting to defeat him. There were getting to be days where he doesn't come, doesn't talk to me in my head", Abyusif narrates, his voice getting stronger, more animated.
He kept making songs, and a theme started appearing. The songs seemed part of a whole, an album rather than singles. Then it started appearing as three related but separate stages: *Itlaf, Seyana, and E'adet intag,* Wreckage, Repair, and re-production.

Initially he was going to call the album 'Youssef', because it was him. "The first stage is Abyusif as we know him, I'm talking as if I was the listener here, but he is broken, isn't working. He got wrecked", he explains. "But in the process of writing and making the songs I could feel myself coming back. The bravado and confidence my songs used to have and inspire were coming again. But I claim it was much more real than it was before, it wasn't faked".

"This album took a lot of time to come together, it still isn't done", he says as he laughs a bit at someone off camera. "But we have enough songs for an album and there came the time to release but I wanted people to have the experience the way I did, thus that structure".

This live was streamed on July 24th, 2020. The fifth song in the album *Fawa'ny* was released July 10th, supposedly the last in the first stage *Itlaf.* On August 6th, A 17-minute long video was uploaded on Abyusif's Youtube channel. Described as a short film about the year 2019 in Abyusif's career, it was titled *Estelem ya Hysm*[45]. Shots of the various concerts and videoclips starring him over the year are interjected with his commentary, describing how each concert went, how every track came about, all rather standard. The film ends, the titles roll, and then a phone rings. What comes is a conversation between Abyusif and 'Hysm':

"Hysm, who?", Abyusif asks.

"Hysm who is taking over the system, *elly hystelem il system".*

"No one is taking over the system", Abyusif responds feebly.

"*Ma'lesh,* it's ok*",* is all Hysm says in a dull sinister tone.

All throughout the camera swerves in a dark shadowy house, showing a creepy silhouette of Abyusif with black blue lights flickering at his back.

Abyusif's next release a month later makes it all clear. Titled *System*, the track is shot at the same house from the short film, this time lit creepily in red rather than blue. In it Hysm is talking, Abyusif's newest character. Full of himself, confident as anything, sinister, uncaring about anyone but himself, Hysm is definitely not Youssef. As for the album, *Fawa'ny* was its last installment. The second and third stages seem unlikely to happen at this point. Hysm *estalam.*

[45] *Abyusif - Estelem ya Hysm.* 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KkliiykSMNI&ab_channel=AbyusifI%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%81

The Limits of Healing

"As things changed, particularly after the revolution, I felt I needed to write something more personal. I started writing about things that mattered to me: loneliness, isolation, estrangement, friends, the rare romantic thing but with a bit of darkness. Very rarely, things would escape me that have a glimpse of hope to them, but I kill that quickly so it doesn't spread", Rana had told me. "People would tell me that what I write brings about depression, that I was sad because I was writing these things. I almost believed them. I thought that maybe they were tight, maybe if I started writing intentionally happier things my life would change. But I found the opposite. When I write these sad things, *bakhef,* my mood gets better. I write a poem saying I want to kill myself and the moment I am done with it I feel that feeling go away. Poetry makes me *'akhef* in both meanings of the word: getting healed, and getting lighter", she explained.

Like Abyusif, Rana talks of the process of creating poetry as healing, an antidote to her sorrow, her depression, feeling suicidal. They are not alone. Many of my other interlocutors echo these sentiments, and other researchers have traced this conceptualization of art/music/poetry as a means of surviving and coping with mental anguish (see Sprengle 2019). The thing is, I find myself having to squint really hard to see these narratives as ones of healing as Abyusif and Rana put them.

To be healed, is to have been freed of what has failed you, to return to a state of health that was taken away by illness or injury. Abyusif tries to fit his experience into that metaphor: he is injured by an aggressor, depression, he finds healing through making songs, his trajectory makes it so he loses perspective on what his songs should be about and for and thus they lose

their healing ability, his injury worsens and worsens until he returns to the music, with an approach that allows it to do what it is meant to, fix him. He marks his healing by finding his voice, by his songs becoming authentic, true, his.

But that turns out to be fleeting. Youssef does not last, getting overthrown by the bleak and obviously inauthentic Hysm, who Abyusif later explained was not only a colloquial version of the common name Haytham as generally assumed, but was also an acronym: Hate You So Much. “I have tried to kill Hysm but I have failed”, he tweeted in March of 2021. Abyusif meant for his narrative to end with repair and reproduction, instead we, and he, were stuck with Hysm.

With Rana as well, though she speaks of getting healed, a few seconds before in that same conversation she talks of stamping out any hope, or anything other than the darkness, that comes out in her poetry, fearing it will spread. Despite framing healing, as getting rid of the depressive feelings, when that happens in the poetry, it is treated as a malfunction, refused and walked away from.

Victor Turner hypothesized that ‘conceptual archetypes’, "systematic repertoire of ideas by means of which a given thinker describes, by analogical extension, some domain to which those ideas do not immediately and literally apply" (Black quoted in Turner 1974), or foundational metaphors, would appear in the works of particularly liminal thinkers, chief among which poets, before they their effect can be truly felt in the wider social field (Turner 1974, 28). I add here that they are never found alone but alongside and weaved through remnants of older more established analogies. In this case there is the dominant metaphor of healing as pertains to depression, and the bluer toned emotions. Poetry exhibits the prints of this overwhelming metaphor, and the medicalization of feelings and bodies inherent to it, leading to a proliferation of narratives within it that attempt to recreate ‘healing’ trajectories as described below, and the

adoption of its language to the point where the names of pharmaceutical drugs, particularly antidepressants and pain medicines, are everywhere in the poetry across genres with poems and songs titled Tefranil 50-100, Cataflam, Ketamin, Betadin, etc.

But healing falls short of the demands of the moment. It is not fit for a present in which exposure is a mode of inhabiting the world, in which injury is a chronic protracted inflection. It is not fit for conditions of duress. The poetry, and the poets, apprehend the failure of that metaphor, not only by playing out for us the way where it does not work, like Abyusif did, but also by undermining it in the same breath they evoke it in as Rana did, in the ways these 'darker' feelings were not exclusively maligned but also tolerated, and even celebrated. They are alluding to an alternative emergent structure of feeling, more reflective of the moment, one that has yet to be named and articulated, has yet to become fixed (Williams 1977).

Nakad, a Celebration

I had gotten the cheapest tickets, which were 100 pounds. That put us in the last few lines in that open-door concert hall, which were a couple of steps above the main seating area and had wooden chairs instead of the black padded ones in the front. We sat in our seats as directed by the usher and waited for the concert to start, looking at the white banner behind the stage with famous lines from Amr Hassan's poetry all over and his faded figure behind them.

"Oh, this is a big deal", Monica, my friend who was there with me said as we look over at the full band setting up their various instruments, and the lights swerved and changed colors as two men set up a wooden stool and table in front of the microphone in the center of the stage.

"Yes, Amr Hassan is a big deal", I responded and proceeded to explain how I got the tickets a month in advance, and how shortly after I got them that all three concerts that weekend were sold out.

After a long wait, almost an hour, Hassan finally came on stage in a white button down shirt with perfectly coiffed shoulder length hair. The music started, and the place exploded with applause. I could hear the couple sitting in front of us whisper '*Khaleena Suhab', 'Let's stay friends',* as they clapped. The audience had recognized the poem from the music before he could utter a word.

"Is this poem really about getting friendzoned?", Monica asked incredulously. Hassan's dramatic tone and the melancholic music were not justified by the poem's subject matter to her mind. She was obviously an outlier, a woman in front of us started crying as she videotaped the performance, and the applause at the end of the poem was as loud as anything.

This set the tone for the entire evening. The music and his tenor were heavily coded as sad. He also made multiple jokes on how coming to this concert was self-flagellation and how he did not understand why we would willingly submit ourselves to this much 'nakad', and the audience seemed to agree with his characterization. There were many tears and sniffles to go around. From the three people sitting right in front of me two were visibly weeping by the end, one of whom, the woman who had started crying with the first poem, did so for the entire concert, more than an hour long. When Hassan glimpsed an audience member wiping away her tears after one poem he said: "No, save the crying for later. This was my upbeat poem. It only gets worse from there".

Hassan builds a narrative for himself, for his poetry, as one defined by *nakad*, by misery. It is not only that he insists on acknowledging its presence the way Abyusif and Rana did, but

that he values it, he thinks it gives him value with his audience, he takes pride in it. He might be a particularly obvious example but he is definitely not an anomaly. Poets from all over made it a point to tell me how *heavy* their poetry is, how sad , how dark, how painful, all in the context of how and why they write what they do. More than that though, many of them work on creating personas for themselves that are particularly tragic, dramatic, and identifiable by their suffering. Hassan himself, for more than a year, has been posting consistently on social media about his chronic pain. He started with a notorious video on Facebook, shot while he was in his car, where he disclosed his years of experiencing severe pain all over his body, and barrages of doctors who have failed to diagnose him.; how this constant pain disrupted his life and his career, making his performances excruciating ordeals; how he was then diagnosed with Fibromyalgia, a chronic illness characterized by fatigue and muscular pain. It has no cure.

After that video there were periodic posts detailing his suffering, as well as ones about his writers' block, and him feeling depressed. More than a year later, In the winter of 2021 he declared he will 'retire' from performing because his health has deteriorated so much that he can longer cope with it until he pursues medical options. Less than two months later he announced new concerts, but his posts continue.

Amira El Bialy, as well, is a young poet from Alexandria who was mentored by Hisham Al Gakh and belongs to the same strand of 'ammiyya as him and Hassan, the one marked by its emphasis on performance, and tragic romance. She recently posted a six-minute Facebook live to her millions of followers. In it, she is on the verge of crying, repeating that she is in crisis, asking us to pray for her, and preaching patience for herself and everyone listening. She does not tell us what kind of crisis she is involved with, only repeating her pleas for prayers.

A conversation I had with Basiony shed some light on this phenomena for me. He was telling me about his plan to reinvent his persona as an artist. Known for parodies and rap songs that function as jokes more or less, he was planning a somber retelling of his life story, emphasising the part of his young adult life where he was homeless and broke despite his middle class roots. “People like you if you tell a joke”, he told me, “but they love you if you sing drama”.

Basiony believed that you can only get the loyal hardcore base, that intimate attachment of an audience, by being a tragic figure, entrusting them with your sorrows. “Tamer Hosny is so beloved only because he sang of drama and love and struggle and pain”, he said of the famous pop star. “Drama extends your lifespan”. Basiony astutely realized the social and cultural currency that melancholy has come to acquire, and he plans to capitalize on it, just as Hassan and Amira are. But even the poets that are not interested in creating a ‘brand’ for themselves as Basiony would put it show this sublimation of sorrow, their realization of its status even if they view it outside of the framework of building an audience, or monetizing it. Rana showed that in her own tendencies towards what she wrote, but Ahmed did as well.

When I was sitting with him in *Sha’et Garden City,* he was telling me about his first anthology *il Dariba 40%, The tax is 40%.* The anthology has a clear story arc, with sections set out as: Before, During, Rehab, Escape, and Recovery. “You have read it, it has a clear story anyone will get immediately”, he told me.

I did read it, and I got it. The anthology was about his struggles with alcoholism, his journey to ‘recovery’.

“*Matkasaftesh,* weren’t you embarrassed?*”*, I blurted out in response, coloring immediately when my mind caught up with my mouth.

"*Iny modmen*, that I am an addict", he asks sharply.

"No No No", I try to explain my blunder, "I meant the writing. I would just imagine how exposing it might feel to publish such an intimate anthology. I just meant to ask whether that was a concern for you, having it published when it was so private?".

"Well it isn't like I am going to go on a 16 minute video crying to people about having Fibromyalgia, trying to gain their sympathy, and then pretend to be a poet", he responded, going on a rant about Amr Hassan without mentioning his name.

I was so flustered after my question I could not get myself to ask him to explain, even though I did not understand how Hassan and his video had anything to do with it, so we moved on to talk about publishing and other things. But for months, I would go back to my notes and try to make sense of it, honestly flummoxed by the seeming digression.

It was not till I was sitting in Hassan's concert, listening to him joke about *nakad,* that I understood. Ahmed was telling me that he did not have to affect an aesthetic of Nakad; he did not have to create a tragic persona; he did not have to narrate his sob story on a Facebook live. Because his was *earned*. It was authentic. It was weaved through his self by life, and would thus make it into the poetry with no assistance needed.

Ahmed interpreted my question as me equating his disclosure in the poetry with parading his pain looking for sympathy. His response was that he did not have to. His pain is paraded by his very existence. Whatever value *nakad* has he does not need to work to attach to himself, it does that all on its own.

Mohn, maligned

The other side of the valorization of sorrow, is the disdain for its opposites, for birthday, for those feelings that are *soft* and *light*, rather than *heavy* and *dark*.

Noura is a poet who likes the soft.

When she was a teenager, Noura was inspired by classical fusha poetry she learned in school to write poetry herself. Over time, and poetic explorations, she found herself loosening the rigidity of classical poetry, and valuing the feeling of the words more than the structure and the artistry, and thus moved to writing in the ‘ammiyya. She would share her poems with friends, and post them online, characterizing them as light cute poetry. One day, in 2013, she was playing a piece of music while reading one of her poems out loud. Realizing they went together she found a software that could mix different sound tracks together, and layered recordings of herself reciting her work over music she felt matched them, then uploaded these tracks onto the SoundCloud[46] making sure to choose royalty free music to avoid infringing on copyrights. Noura’s tracks have been played around 6 million times on SoundCloud, and proliferated elsewhere on the internet, despite there being only 10 of them.

By 2019 Noura had a significant, if niche, following. She was followed by 4 million people on SoundCloud and had held multiple small performances reciting her poetry, making her just the person to be contacted by a daytime talk show called *kalam Setat*, *Women’s talk*. *Kalam Setat* was by no means a popular show. Aired midday, it had a small audience of mainly housewives. Noura went on it, talked about her writings, and recited a few of her poems. Later that night, a Facebook page posted a clip of Noura reciting *Saheb el ‘oyon el ‘asaly*, making fun of her. By the next day, she had gone viral.

[46] SoundCloud is an online audio hosting application, as Youtube is with video content. It was very popular in the 2010s as a platform for independent musicians and poets in Egypt to post their work.

Noura's online celebrity was swift, and brutal. The ridicule was so prevalent and widespread online that she was constantly being recognized whenever she went out, leading to a wide stretch of self-imposed isolation. She was also bombarded with a constant barrage of derisive comments making fun of not only her poetry but also how she looked and dressed amongst other things for weeks on end. Before the book fair when a fusha anthology of hers was set to be released, a man created an event on Facebook, calling on the public to go to the fair on the day of her signing to sexually harass her. When people wrote comments saying that she was so ugly they would not want to harass her, he replied saying "come and beat her up them".

Noura publishing an anthology was framed as the death of culture. Rumors circulated that her anthology was written entirely in franco-arab, as in a transliterated version of Arabic usually used by young Egyptians online for ease, despite it being in fusha, alongside comments saying things like "people can now enter the fair by flashing their lipstick".

In an interview with one of the Egyptian news sites shortly after going viral, Noura is quoted, in fusha, saying "room is shrinking all on its own, don't aid it along. Try to accept new and different things". She tells the interviewer that she never declared herself a poet, that it was just meant to give off certain feelings and allow her to share these feelings with an audience. She made sure to mention multiple times that she wrote fusha, and was proficient in the classical language, that she was well read in 'legitimate' literature, and that she does not in any way try to propose that what she is writing is poetry. She ends the interview saying: "This is the way I speak, I am not putting on a performance. I worked hard to get to where I am and am proud of who I am, and I hide behind poems and writings to express my feelings because I am afraid of society. I went on screen because I have something to offer".

When I met Noura in 2020, she had mostly recovered from her viral ordeal. When we talked about that poem, I had a very firm belief that the outrage Noura was faced with was because she was a woman, and because of the way she carried herself and chose to appear as a woman outside of the apprehendable.

In that fated interview, she wore a turban pushed back showing the front of her hair, with her heat straightened black bangs falling over her face and bright red lipstick. The first few lines of the poem alternate between full sentences in English, and Arabic responses. As she moves back and forth between the two languages she stresses her T-s and S-s falls just short of rolling her R-s in the first, opens her vowels in the second, slightly queering both. As she sits on the oversized chair, facing the four middle-aged women hosting the show, Noura defies every narrative, every archetype.

But she thought differently. First, she blamed the context of the performance. “That poem was not meant to be performed in a studio without the accompanying music and everything”, she told me. “It is not a text that can carry its own weight that way, so it came out lame and cliche. Unlike when I performed it in the cafe where people liked it and it was spontaneous”. Later in the conversation, when we had moved on from that poem and were talking about her experiences as a woman who writes poetry she told me that as a girl, when you express your feelings you get put in a box. “That track that people harped over”, she continued referring back to the poem, “is a track where a girl who has always been ashamed of her feelings finally expressed herself. She’s such a soft person trying to confess her feelings to a boy she can’t get herself to talk to. Then all of a sudden she decides to tell him: I feel something for you. That’s the character… In Egypt it has spread that anything that belongs to feeling, especially soft feelings, is *mohn*[2], oh it is such a terrifying thing, you cannot ever be a *mamhon* that would be the end of the world. And coming

from a girl, you're much more open to attacks. If it's a boy, they usually respond so people back off. But as a girl you cannot respond with the same aggression so there is no stopping them". It is worth noting here that is associated with female sexual desire, and the word shares a root with *mehna*, ordeal.

The inappropriate context of the performance and the lack of accompanying music Noura describes might be an explanation for why the poem was deemed cheesy, or even bad, but as indicated there were lots of cliched bad poetry all around. Her follow up, I think, comes closer to the heart of the matter. Emotional expressions in Egypt are heavily policed and there is a hyper-vigilance surrounding them, particularly the 'soft' ones as Noura described them. So yes romantic poetry is abundant, but it is only really acceptable within deceivingly rigid frames. So Hassan can recite a poem missing his ex, in gruff melancholic tones, and emerge unscathed because he is a man, because he invokes imageries of Christ and other Abrahamic prophets such as Joseph, and because he recites it in gruff sorrowful tones, and it is a gruff sorrowful poem pining lost love. Noura on the other hand cannot, not just because she is a woman, but because she has English sentences sprinkled through the poem, because her images are of yellow dresses and lipstick, and because she recites it in a doe-eyed earnest hopeful tone, and it is an earnest hopeful poem.

As Noura astutely notes, the soft, the hopeful, the earnest is *mohn,* it is contemptible. The painful, the heartbroken, the sorrowful, however, that can be tolerated and even enjoyed and celebrated. There is definitely a gender element there, and a hierarchy of intimacy: the personal contextualized in a macro-narrative involving macro-histories of, of course male, prophets and deities is poetic and acceptable, but a personal contextualized in the mundane, the quotidian, the

‘frivolous’ feminine of lipsticks and dresses is not. But while this might explain contempt and dismissal, it fails to explain the voracity with which Noura, and softness in general is met with. Why and how has it come to be that the tender is so despised?

The Elephant’s Body in the Room

“The cadaverous presence establishes a relation between here and nowhere”, Maurice Blanchot argues. The place of the body itself disappears, “It is not here, yet it is not anywhere else” (1989, 256). The fragility of this position makes itself known with the quiet that permeates the room where death happens. The presence is so tenuous that sound is a transgression, compromising the strange presence of the dead.

When Noura talks about the ‘phobia of *mohn’,* when I take note of how my body holds itself, cringes, in the presence of her poetry, even as I truly do not rationally see anything that ought to do that about it, the feeling, I realize, above anything else, is that of violation. Softness feels like singing in the presence of a body, a violation of the flimsy sanctity of mourning.

Rana passingly tied her depression to political failure, to the revolution, as did everyone of my ‘ammiyya interlocutors. In a 2017 article, Naira Antoun did so as well in an article hosted in Mada Masr. Her interlocutors also did that. She explores this entangling of personal and political depression, citing Cvekovitch’s *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012). But what about those who do not make that link? Why dwell in the depoliticized personal, who have not *seen*, who do not carry the weight of 2011 the way Nasr described?

Their experience of entering the world, of poetic becoming, I argue, is that of walking into the room with the dead body, but it lies under a white sheet, no one allowed to talk of its existence. They can sense the fragility of the moment, can intuit the transgression it would be to

do anything than mourn along, the quiet everyone soberly preserves, but they do not *know* what is being grieved.

What they do know is the diasporic intimacy, the 'longing without belonging', the hostile homes they are being hosted in. Pablo's *Denamet, Dynamite*[47], talks of murky vision and blinded indiscriminate fuckery :

"الرؤية هباب

كله هيتناك مفيش حساب"

Then it talks of bruises, everywhere, with no indication of who put them and how, or of whom they were put on:

"في كل حتة كدمات

الحرب سايبة علامات"

And disillusionment so vast it brought down the sun:

"الشمس أصلا كانت فلات"

They might not have seen the body but they lived the aftermath. They intimately understand the moment they inhabit. Their bodies are marked by it, even if they are not as weighed down by the memory.

[47] *Molotof ft Pablo - Denamet.* 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g07sRCEYTrw&ab_channel=Molotof

During the year he was ‘retired’, Marwan Pablo appeared three times. The last of which, 8 months before his return, was not about his career or rumours about him as the previous two, but was about sexual violence.

Following a floodgate of allegations of rape, harassment, and blackmail against AUC student Ahmed Bassam Zaki, sparking what has been called “an Egyptian Me Too movement” (Walsh 2020), Pablo impulsively reactivated his Instagram page and started a live. Cigarette in hand as usual, smoke blowing into our virtual faces, he sighs: “I do not know from where to begin.. I just don’t know.. To be honest I was not intending on coming out, but something happened to me. As I was scrolling through Facebook I saw the things the girls had said about what they went though. I felt I have to talk about this”.

He sips from a cup of tea in his hand, puffs smoke, and rambles.

“I saw people saying ‘she’s wrong because she was wearing this or doing that’. *Il mo’tada ‘leh hwa il sabab ino o’tada ‘leh*. The violated party is the reason they were violated”, he scoffs as he waves the cup of tea around, “This, of course, doesn;t make sense, it is not logical”. Pablo goes on about how widespread ‘this’ is, wondering about the causes, repeating that there were no possible excuses for it, and validating the pain of victims.

“There’s no *ihana*, degradation*,* no *ihrag,* shame, in seeking help, in talking about it… It is in no way the person;s fault that this was done to them, but it was. So now it is a responsibility for you to go on”, he says, minutely shaking his head to the sides as he talks.

“This Ahmed, I don’t know the rest of his name. Anyway, the people he did, whatever he did,, they are already on the way to get justice. That’s clear as day. The issue is with the people who..were molested, or raped, but did not go on social media to tell or complain. That’s the

issue… I wish I could talk about this in a way that's deeper than this but.. I myself.. I am in a period of healing.. So..I am coming to you in the midst of healing to try and explain", he ends with a self-deprecatory laugh.

He goes on to encourage victims to seek therapy, to talk, to not feel shame, before he interrupts himself suddenly: "I wish something like this can be finished. I wish something like this had something to heal it".

"That's it. There's nothing more to be said", he states a few minutes later as he wipes his face with a tissue, as if wiping sweat, "Maybe my words didn't explain all that wall, but I want to reach the person.. There must be from those seeing me a minimum of 500, 1000 people, pay no mind to the 100, there is a minimum of four. If you are seeing this *inta aw inty* and you have had this happen to you you have to know that there are many many others, who have gone through the exact same thing. Not the exact experience, it won't be the same details, but there are so so so many like you. The thing is we do not speak, we do not tell. So… so… There are so many like you. You just look for support. And complain. And express", he emphasized.

"You are not alone. You are not alone", he repeats in English, "Believe me".

"Ask for support. There's no shame in that. There's no weakness in that. There's no helplessness in that, *mfehosh 'elet hela*… Actually, It does have helplessness in it, *feh 'elet hela*. It has some helplessness. There's a bit of helplessness there", he admits before shrugging his shoulders, "but it happened".

"I wish someone felt that they were not alone", he mumbled before shutting off.

In the beginning of this chapter I talked of the limits of healing as a root metaphor, how it breaks down when faced with poetry's sorrow. But what is left when healing fails, when it reaches its limit?

The new structure of feeling has yet to take shape, to be fixed, to gain a name. The moment it does is the moment of its capture (Papadopulous, Stephenson, and Tsianos 2008), which I believe has yet to happen. It has just a bit of time still. Pablo grasps at some of its features though: settling in and extending out.

All throughout, stuttering and fumbling around at words, Pablo refuses an easy out. He models an ethos of sitting with the discomfort, with the pain, with the *helplessness.* He will not claim what he does not have in the situation. He will not refuse himself, or those of us he speaks to, the weight of what will not get healed. But he also refuses to lie down. He might not have the antidote, but he has a belief in community. There are people out there. He is sure of it, if only we reach out to find them.

"بكيت بحرقة كإني مشيت كل الطريق...

وحد غيري وصل"

أحمد الطحان - النهاية

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