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The Fractured Music of Arab-Jewish Friendship in Waguïh Ghali's *Beer in the Snooker Club* and Ismaël Ferroukhi's *Free Men*

Caroline Rooney

Don't forget, Cairo and Palestine were full of Jews. (Said 1999)

In this chapter, I wish to consider how Waguïh Ghali's novel *Beer in the Snooker Club* and Ismaël Ferroukhi's film *Free Men* present us with the possibilities of imagining a common ground in excess of both nationalism and cosmopolitanism (often posited as each other's Other).¹ In particular, these two works engage with the vicissitudes of Arab-Jewish friendship in such a way as to contest identity politics (conservative or liberal) through configurations of ethics, creativity, spirituality, and utopianism that are affirmative of shared lives. Furthermore, the language appropriate to the displacement of what may be termed "a logic of the family"—as a way of defining identity politics—could be posited as a nonliteral one that can be explored in terms of musical analogies. In order to substantiate these assertions, I will offer a reading of *Beer in the Snooker Club* followed by a reading of *Free Men*, concluding with a reflection on the interrelated implications of these works.

Before embarking on a closer examination of the works in question, I wish to signal further their relevance to the question of contemporary transcultural concerns. While *Beer in the Snooker Club* and *Free Men* are historically distant from each other, as will be explored, they are yet very similar in their cultural and sociopolitical preoccupations where they respectively juxtapose different forms of togetherness that may be found at any one moment in history in order to explore their respective dynamics in relation to each other. As I have begun to indicate, these forms of togetherness may be designated in terms of nationalism, cosmopolitanism, and transcultural solidarities of a revolutionary or utopian cast (the latter as Other to the polarities constituted by the first two). In both works, it is Arab-Jewish friendship that metonymically and metaphorically serves to signify the possibility of counter-hegemonic, defiant, or heuristic transcultural affiliations that bear the promise of true universality.

The reason that I raise these questions in the light of the Arab uprisings is that the uprisings challenged certain nationalist legacies (those commandeered by their governments), while this challenge cannot adequately be explained in terms of cosmopolitan liberalism in the Western tradition. Rather, the uprisings can be seen, at least in some respects, to have brought to the fore what the nationalist/cosmopolitan binary eclipses—in particular, earlier liberationist or revolutionary moments in history. While it often seems that the very dynamic of revolutions is one of “setbacks,” instead of interpreting this as failure, we can see a setback conversely in terms of retrieval, or a looping back to a previous moment in order to resume or reset what it initiated. In my view, the dynamics of this are neither teleological nor dialectical, and my suggestion is that we may think of the tempo of revolutionary times in the way that we experience music: for instance, as the unfolding of sonic aggregates that loop and resume, surge and recede, detour and coalesce.

Beer in the Snooker Club, a novel set in 1950s Cairo and London, is frequently associated with a celebration of cosmopolitanism. For instance, in “Drinking, Gambling and Making Merry: Waguih Ghali’s Search for Cosmopolitan Agency,” Deborah Starr summarizes her reading of the novel as follows: “I maintain that it is not through a nationalist lens, nor through the mediated binaries of post-coloniality, but rather through the notion of the cosmopolitan that the novel becomes ‘readable’” (Starr 2006, 272). First published in 1964, *Beer in the Snooker Club* is also a novel that has attracted fresh attention in the light of the Egyptian Revolution. For instance, Susie Thomas blogs, “Having lost his faith in both Arab nationalism and Communism, Ram [the novel’s protagonist] feels his is a wasted life. But as Egyptians gathered in Tahrir Square and the Arab Spring unfolds, Ghali’s novel has never felt more timely” (Thomas 2011). In what is to follow, I will explore the tension between positions dramatized in *Beer in the Snooker Club*, in particular, between a liberal cosmopolitan “universality” and a more radical universality.

The narrative of the novel is divided into five sections. The first is set in the present time of the novel and concerns the narrator’s reunion with the love of his life. He is a young Egyptian Copt called Ram (arguably an allusion to ram-headed deities or to Ramses, thus to Ancient Egypt) and his lover is a Jewish woman called Edna. The second section of the novel comprises a flashback that shows how Ram and Edna met and that tells the story of how Edna brought Ram and his best friend, a fellow Copt called Font, to England for an extended stay, the two young Egyptians being Anglophiles. The last three sections return us to the present, in which Ram realizes that his relationship with Edna is doomed and switches his attention to a woman from his own family background. This summary fails to convey what may be termed the novel’s musical structure, which could loosely be associated with counterpoint, following Edward Said, if the emphasis were on the polyphony of its cosmopolitan texture—a matter of the interplay of disparate voices. However, in this chapter, I wish to attend to the music of the text in different ways, as will unfold.

Although Said’s suggestions concerning the contrapuntal organization of literature and the literary analysis appropriate to such have been widely taken up, what has been overlooked is that counterpoint is an especially Western tradition and one not classically associated with Arabic music. The main difference here is that Arabic

music is traditionally monophonic, following a single melodic line as opposed to interweaving two or more differing melodic-rhythmic lines. While this might imply that Arabic music is more diachronically linear, I would suggest that in actuality, the reverse is true: in not being polyphonic, Arabic music is played in unison or synchronically. We could thus say that its mode of attunement is more synchronic than the comparatively more diachronic mode of attunement of counterpoint. Alexander Honold, in considering the art of counterpoint in relation to Said's interest in it, speaks of "the dialectical process inherent in counterpoint" and of how the "virtual relations with the harmonic order entered into by individual voices as discrete melodic vectors are made visible in the form of their opposite number, whether it precedes or follows them" (Honold 2012, 197).

While Said appreciates the attention counterpoint gives to different voices, my interest lies in a musicality of the collective. In addition, classical Arabic music takes the form of *maqamat*, or tonic arrangements, which I will translate nontechnically in terms of "sonic emotional maps." While the music in question thus offers an emotional synchronicity, it also offers scope for improvisation and spontaneity, being less reliant on a "set text" than Western music.

Thus, beyond a cosmopolitanism heard polyphonically (i.e., as reflecting the crossings and disjunctions of different stories and histories), there are other questions of coexistence that I will explore in the following readings toward a possible explanation of how music and the arts may be understood less in terms of dialectics than in terms of a mediation between temporality and timelessness. This is a question I will return to at the end of the chapter.

The meandering or improvisatory movement of the narration of the novel, which could be considered in terms of an unresolved, digressive *maqama*, reflects the social lifestyle of the narrator. He is the poor relative of a rich and privileged extended family that supports him in his unemployed existence of hedonistic drifting. In this respect, the novel unfolds haphazardly as we follow the urban nomadism of Ram, who hangs out with his friends at cafés—especially the famous Groppi's—at the snooker club, at the Gezira sporting club in Zamalek, and at the houses of family and friends. Ram is a drinking, gambling, and flirting flaneur figure who introduces us to the world of Cairo's elite class continuing their privileged existence in Nasser's new nationalist Egypt, with Ram as a youthful member of this class particularly addicted to the responsibility-free good life.

The cosmopolitanism of the novel is mainly associated with this elite world in which Ram associates with Armenians, Americans, the English, German and Norwegian governesses employed by the club set, and Jews. Through Ram's family connections, he meets the Jewish Edna, who comes from a family enriched by a large supermarket chain. While Ram takes all this for granted, Edna has a sociopolitical awareness of their situation, which she offers to enlighten Ram, as he confesses in the following:

It was Edna who introduced me to Egyptian people. It is rare in the milieu in which I was born, to know Egyptians. She explained to me that the Sporting Club and the race meetings and the villa-owners and the European dressed and travelled people I met, were not Egyptians. Cairo and Alexandria were

cosmopolitan not so much because they contained foreigners, but because the Egyptian born in them is himself a stranger to his own land.

(53)

What this implies is a cultural colonization of the metropolitan centers whereby foreign cultures export themselves without really engaging with the local culture. The fact that Ram is estranged through his cosmopolitanism is also a matter of his education, and while his family speaks French, he himself is British educated, and his sense of the world is shaped by the literature he reads. He tells us:

The world of intellectuals and underground metros and cobbled streets and a green countryside which we had never seen, beckoned to us. The world where students had rooms, and typists for girlfriends, and sang songs and drank beer in large mugs, shouted to us. A whole imaginary world. A mixture of all the cities in Europe.

(55)

With this, cosmopolitanism is posited as precisely an imaginary formation. This is the case not just for Ram but is implied universally. For example, some Americans he meets at the club have wanted to visit Egypt ever since they read a book that stimulated their imaginations.

Ram's questioning of his own liberal cosmopolitanism is set in motion through his increasing radicalization, which is in part brought about through his experience of historical events, in particular the Suez conflict, and in part informed by Edna's radical left view of the world. Ram states:

When Edna began talking to us of socialism or freedom or democracy, we always said yes, that's what the Egyptian revolution was; everything good was going to be carried out by the revolution. To begin with Edna's politics were not noticed by us at all, but gently she talked to us about oppressed people in Africa and Asia and even some parts of Europe, and Font and I started to read political books with more interest We learnt for the first time, the history of British imperialism and why we didn't want the British troops in the Suez Canal area. Up to then we had shouted "evacuation" like everyone else, without knowing why evacuation was so important. Gradually, we began to see ourselves as members of humanity in general and not just as Egyptians.

(53)

This question of being "members of humanity in general" is posited in counterpoint to a contrapuntal cosmopolitanism of cultural difference—paradoxically in counterpoint to counterpoint—in that what is at stake is how imperialism denies the very commonality of humanity. When Edna takes Ram and their friend Font to England, Ram learns that the English notion of "fair play" that he has imbibed is a hypocritical one, not only given the Suez conflict but also because of the difficulties he faces in obtaining a visa. That is, while the English feel that they can graft themselves onto

Egypt, and that they belong there, they do not welcome Egyptians as belonging in England. The visa problem is resolved through the connections of an Englishman, Dungate, whose brother, it is said, "had always loved Egyptians" (65), and Ram gets to meet the leftist middle-class Dungate family. As they are all set to go convivially to a pub, the following is narrated: "I put my coat on slowly and wondered whether meeting these people and receiving their hospitality was actually enjoyable" (68). He speaks of suddenly feeling himself split, aware from this point onward of his being pulled in two different directions.

This fracture is not only of concern to Ram's self-consciousness; it is also a fracture that runs throughout the novel between liberalism and communism, cultural difference and the common ground of the real. In the frivolity of his Cairo life, he especially loves Edna and Font because he sees them as authentic, honest, loyal, and true, as he repeatedly observes.

In speaking of his English education, Ram talks of swallowing supposed truths that turn out to be lies, as is hinted at by the name Dungate as suggestive of eating dung or bullshit. Ram gets to meet various members of the working class, who, unlike the polite Dungates, are rude to Ram, even calling him "wog," which he finds hilarious because of the upfront honesty in spouting prejudice. When he meets a working-class man called Vincent, who is honest and without prejudice, Ram reflects, "I felt instinctively that he was more real than John Dungate Vincent was essentially free from racial traits He was Vincent Murphy and no more" (87). He also meets a woman similar to Vincent called Shirley, and he asks himself what it is he particularly likes about the two of them, answering, "With them I forgot I was Egyptian and they English and I a stranger in their midst. No matter how hard the Dungates tried, they were never able to make me feel one and the same" (101).

The hospitality of the liberal Dungates is based on a logic of the family and the stranger, whereas the friendship he has with Vincent and Shirley affirms a radical sameness in which friendship may be said to override the family/stranger dialectic, as in the case of Ram's relationship with Edna.

Edna leaves Ram to return to Cairo, and it is only in the final section of the novel that we find out that Ram then joined the Communist Party in England but was forced to leave when he could not renew his visa. Back in Egypt, he resumes his rich playboy lifestyle, but we also learn that he becomes an undercover activist for radical dissidents who have been imprisoned and tortured by the Nasserites. At one point, he confronts a female journalist lover who is pro-Nasser with the accusation that she represents the "muzzled press" who disavow the concentration camps in Egypt (205). Given his relationship with Edna, it is striking that Ram calls the torture prisons "concentration camps" (205).

While anti-imperialist, Ram is clearly not an Egyptian nationalist. Influenced by his Jewish lover, he seeks the utopia of universal justice and dignity for everyone. However, there remain differences between Ram and Edna. We learn that Edna, although Jewish, feels herself to be Egyptian more than anything else due to the fact that her globe-trotting parents left her to be brought up by a Greek nanny who was married to an Egyptian, who spent time raising Edna in her husband's humble village. Edna, through experience, is part of the Egyptian *fella*h class or class of *fellaheen*, which Ram clearly

is not. Nonetheless, Ram comes to assert that he is Egyptian in ways that Edna is not, arguing that Egypt is so many things to him, especially the sarcasm, the wit, and the broader sense of humor of the people, traits that he sees as lacking in Edna: "How can I explain to you that Egypt to me is something unconscious, is nothing particularly political" (190). For Ram, the authenticity and companionship he seeks is beyond the political, which is ever divisive, and what he terms the unconscious may be said to have no finite form—hence his inability to articulate it. The inexpressibility at stake here may implicitly concern the sacred, a point I will return to.

Although Ram wishes to marry Edna, she refuses, revealing the surprising fact that she is already married to an Israeli. Her husband turns out to have been an Egyptian communist Jew who had been imprisoned for ten years and then brutalized by Egyptian soldiers with Russian-donated weapons, leading to his disfigurement and castration. Edna explains, "He is in Israel because he is a Jew" (184). Ram says he and Edna can still live together, but she considers this impossible. While the novel does not elaborate on this impasse, we are invited to read between the lines.

When Ram reunites with Edna, she has a mysterious disfiguring scar on her face that she refuses to explain, but it is implicitly the result of an anti-Semitic attack upon her, probably by an Egyptian army officer. As with her radical Jewish husband, she is not wanted in Egypt in spite of her feeling herself to be Egyptian. It is implied that her Jewish identity would thus also make Ram, if he stayed with her, a persona non grata in his own land. What the novel does not address, however, is Israel's recruitment of Egyptian Jews to perpetrate terrorist acts, as discussed by Joel Beinín in his examination of Operation Susannah, a terrorist plot that was thwarted by Egyptian intelligence. Beinín states, "Operation Susannah was the most salient political event in the life of the [Egyptian] Jewish community from 1949 to 1956. The involvement of Egyptian Jews in acts of espionage and sabotage organized and directed by the Israeli military intelligence raised fundamental questions about their identities and loyalties" (Beinín 2005, 31).

While for Ram and Edna, cultural and ethnic differences don't actually matter as differences, they are embroiled in a world deeply invested in a divide-and-rule strategy based on identities, in relation to which cosmopolitanism emerges as the soft power mask of cultural diplomacy. The novel leaves these questions hanging in the air, unresolved. Ahdaf Soueif, however, informs us that Ghali, the author of the novel, committed the transgressive act of visiting Israel, which meant that he could not return to Egypt and thereafter had to live in England (where he eventually committed suicide) (Soueif 2004, 198–200).

The lesson of *Beer in the Snooker Club* is that the promise of universality that Egypt mutely yet undeniably bears for Ram is betrayed by the historical Egypt. In his novel, Ghali goes against the grain of the dissent of his times, both the liberal trend and the revolutionary nationalist trend, out of a utopian communism. In an interview with Philip Lopate, Edward Said states of Nasser, "He led a massive campaign against people who are my great friends today, left-wing intellectuals, many of whose lives were destroyed by their years in prison. It's still not entirely clear to me what he was doing, because he was very closely aligned with the Soviet Union and yet he destroyed the Egyptian Communist Party" (Said 1999). Two points may be made in relation to

this statement. First, Nasser's ties with the Soviet Union were particularly over arms deals (rather than ideology as such) in that the West would not supply Egypt with arms given Egypt's pro-Palestinian position. Second, Nasser's crackdown on Egyptian communists came in the wake of the 1958 Iraqi revolution, during which General Qasim had the strong support of Iraqi communists in a complicated national and international context in which communism was being pitted against Nasserite and Ba'athist Arab nationalism. In this situation, Nasser (with the support of Washington) defended nationalism, and Robert Stephens quotes him stating, "If a Communist State is established [in Iraq], the communists will smite down all patriotic and nationalist elements" (Stephens 1971, 309). Nasser goes on to warn of a "Red terrorist dictatorship" emerging through the violent purging of the nationalists.

Ghali's association of his Jewish character Edna with radical politics is interestingly echoed by Jacqueline Kahanoff's autobiographical reflections on her upbringing in Egypt in which the utopian universality of communism is stressed. Kahanoff writes:

We thought ourselves to be Socialist, even Communist, and in our school yard we ardently discussed the Blum government, the civil war in Spain, revolution, materialism, and the rights of women We wanted to break out of the narrow, minority framework (upper middle class) into which we were born, to strive toward something universal, and we were ashamed of the poverty of what we called the "Arab Masses", and of the advantages a Western education had given us over them.

(Beinin 2005, 50)

Her voice sounds uncannily like that of Edna in Ghali's novel. This could suggest that Ghali accurately reflects predominant strands of Egyptian Jewish sentiments although it is also the case, according to Beinin, that prior to writing the above, Kahanoff had read *Beer in the Snooker Club* and reviewed it enthusiastically. That is, the intriguing question arises of whether her self-construction was somewhat influenced by Ghali's Jewish heroine. Either way, Kahanoff sees *Beer in the Snooker Club* as depicting a common cause between Jews and Copts, whom she sees as nostalgic for the more cosmopolitan nationalism of 1919, one overtaken by what Kahanoff terms "Muslim nationalism" (Beinin 2005, 54). It may be said that she projects her own concerns onto Ghali's work given that his novel very much downplays religious differences in offering a secular Cairene world. That said, Ram's communist leanings are bound up with his skeptical take on identity politics indicating that his deepest investments are in the chance of a common humanity.

When the 2011 Egypt revolution occurred, Ghali's novel came to mind, and I wrote about it in this context (Rooney 2011), going on to subsequently discover a number of internet postings that describe the novel, which first appeared in 1964, as coming across as particularly contemporary. Agamben defines the contemporary in terms of the fracture between the lifespan of the individual and his collective age, a matter of the exceptional individual's alienation from the society of his time (Agamben 2009). This typical Western avant-garde stance might vaguely seem to fit with Ghali's novel, except for the fact that the novel is not primarily concerned with an anachronistic,

spectral relation to its own present but rather with precisely maintaining a fidelity to its present moment through lived coexistence (which is why it feels relevant to the 2011 revolution). Its utopianism is real—not imaginary—in the novel’s celebration of the micro-society of authentic, if unlikely, friendships: this constancy. In fact, what is at stake is an inversion of Agamben’s understanding of the contemporary; the fracture is not between the individual and his or her collective age (the sensitive intellectual and the mindless common masses) but between those in solidarity with each other and the self-interest of those who have a stake in maintaining social divides, mainly on the basis of class but also on the basis of ethnicity, religion, and gender.

The novel, however, is not at all hostile to cosmopolitanism. My reading of the work left me with a certain thought, one not actually expressed in it but rather arriving from the silence of its aftereffect. The silent or unsayable thought is this: cosmopolitanism is a joke. It is a joke in positive and negative, comic and painful ways. It is a source of amusement and fun; it is not for real.

The above observation serves to provide an opportunity to reengage with the question of the novel’s musical aesthetic. In fact, Ram explicitly connects the Egyptian sense of humor with music when he explains to Font, “Jokes to Egyptians are as much culture as calypso is to West Indians, or as spirituals and jazz to American Negroes” (19). There could certainly be a tangent between Ghali’s novel and a novel such as Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* (Selvon 2006), which first appeared in 1956 and stands out for its ironic and witty take on multiculturalism, its calypso ethos, and its episodic structure. However, this fails to address the sensibility of Ghali’s novel specifically enough.

The ironic fissures between the imaginary and the real that *Beer in the Snooker Club* engages with and its sense of cosmopolitanism as a kind of travesty (viewed in terms of the Egyptian sense of humor Ram endorses) give rise to a sensibility that could be termed burlesque. The term “burlesque” derives from the Italian word *burla*, meaning joke or mockery. Some of the novel’s burlesque features include its humorous sociopolitical commentary, its carnival style in which social hierarchies are caricatured, its flirtation with human desires for sophistication, hedonism, and glamour combined with a self-deflating populism and a live-and-let-live spirit, sometimes racy or risqué. As such, it is a work that could be compared with the film *Cabaret* (Fosse 1972), based on Isherwood’s *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939). What the film *Cabaret* does is to juxtapose the world of Weimer cabaret, what was deemed decadent culture by the Nazis, reaffirmed in the film as “divine decadence,” with the growing fanatical nationalism of fascism. The musical conviviality and live-and-let-live spirit of the burlesque underworld contrast starkly with the self-righteous and sinister death drive of militant German pride.

The cabaret ethos that I am trying to address is wonderfully expressed in a recent Lebanese production called the *Hishik Bishik Show* (*hishik bishik* is an Egyptian term that refers to cabaret), which pays tribute to the kind of Egyptian popular culture that Fahmy draws attention to in *Ordinary Egyptians* (Fahmy 2011), and Iain Aikerman’s review of the show captures its spirit:

Musically, it is a curiosity. It has taken its cue from the weddings and cabaret shows of early 20th century Egypt and re-imagined what is an Egyptian pop cultural

experience via a Lebanese lens. When the stage curtains are opened, they reveal a wheelchair-bound general playing the violin, a whirling Sufi who frequents bars, and Roaring Twenties flapper girls intent on having a good time. It is a sometimes mesmerising spectacle, weaving together exquisite musicianship with song and dance, although its comic word play and numerous visual gags may well be lost on those who do not speak Arabic.

(Aikerman 2014)

More specifically, the show offers a pastiche of Egyptian popular music covering the very popular Sayyid Darwish and Um Kulthum, as well as songs listed by Fayid (2015), including Shadia's "Ya Hasan Ya Khoully al-Geniena" from *Leilat al-Hanna* (Night of Joy, 1951), Hind Rostom's "Habibi ya Re2a" from *Atrafat Zog* (Confessions of a Husband, 1964), and Leila Nazmi's revival of Egyptian folk in 1970s. The show (which I saw produced by Metro al Madina in 2014) does not have much of a plot, although it transports us from Cairo's nightclubs to the countryside of Upper Egypt, connecting the populism of the urban street with so-called folk culture. The term "folk" is an inadequate translation given its connotations in English; the Lebanese term *darwish* (*darwich* or *darwiche* in French) would be more precise in that this term refers less to clannish kinsfolk than to the decent though sometimes gullible and foolish common man. Although *darwish* is related to dervish, this is not a narrow reference to Sufism as a religion but rather to a certain Sufi spirit of anti-elitism. An example of this type of everyman could be Habiby's character Saeed in his novel *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist*, a character humorously based on Voltaire's *Candide*. The important point is that this type of character precisely transcends cultural divisions in that all cultures have their common man or common woman types, as discussed by Raouf Rifai in the documentary *White Flags* (Rooney and Sakr 2014). That is to say, the populism at stake is transnational, since it refers to the everyman figure or the one who represents our common humanity.

Ismail Fayid's review of the *Hishik Bishik Show* offers a contemporary (post-revolution) Egyptian perspective of its implications for current audiences (Fayid 2015). He writes:

What I found extraordinary and bewildering was how enthusiastically the audience received the music and performance (they knew the songs almost word for word) when the show is not just a simple reenactment. It is a pastiche, a cynical reinterpretation that makes fun of the originals and makes fun of itself making fun of the original. The performers use exaggeration, slapstick moves and all kind of insinuations, both obscene and absurd.

I felt as if *Hishik Bishik* and the audience reactions were a manifestation of a sinister fascination for a past that refuses to let go. A past that is holding all of us, Egyptians and Lebanese as well as other Arabs, hostage to grandiose post-colonial fantasies that failed spectacularly.

The reference is particularly to the Nasserite past, which Fayid considers the show to trivialize at the same time that he sees this past as something that Arab audiences

invest in too nostalgically. In a way, this touches on what I tried to address earlier concerning *Beer in the Snooker Club*'s depiction of cosmopolitanism as a joke, as something both funny and upsetting or troubling. For instance, it's a joke that Ram and Font play at being English, while what underlies this are serious anxieties over Egyptian nationalism. However, that said, I do not see the *Hishik Bishik Show* as hopelessly nostalgic. What I speak of in terms of the burlesque aspects of cabaret, Fayid sees as offensively kitsch. Regarding Fayid's postrevolutionary perspective, it could alternatively be said that Sisi-mania is kitsch (the strongman posters and superman trinkets, for instance), because it is based on a kind of nostalgia for Nasser that turns out to be inauthentic, kitsch being precisely failed authenticity in my view. However, the kitsch of Sisi-mania does not thereby make Nasser kitsch as if he had been retrospectively remodeled in the image of Sisi-mania.

In her review of the *Hishik Bishik Show*, Ellie Violet Bramley argues that although it might appear nostalgic in that it draws on the past, it is really forward looking. She states, "For all its accessibility, this is an artistically valuable show. For all of its theatricality, its magic lies in the details of the staging and the costumes. And, for all of its nostalgia, its relevance is in its direction: forward-facing" (Bramley 2013). I agree with this and propose that the reason why this is the case is because the show celebrates its rediscovery of *the forward-looking moments in the past*, or the Egyptian popular avant-garde. Bramley quotes Ziad Al Ahmadiye, responsible for the musical orchestration of the show, as affirming,

We were trying to be as honest as we could, and as correct as we could in presenting these songs. If you don't have this special feeling and spirit in the Arabic music—it is not a kind of classical music that anyone can play—you have to understand the spirit of Egypt so that you succeed in presenting these songs in the correct way.

(Bramley 2013)

It is this *spirit* that is seen as relevant to the present by the show's creative cast, who speak of the show's honest celebration of the feminine (as ranges from Sufi mysticism to female singers and dancers) in the context of the puritanical Muslim Brotherhood.

What is interesting about burlesque or cabaret culture is that it often emerges as a response to situations of fascist or racist forms of what may be termed tribal nationalism and the authoritarianism of its norms as ideals. Thus, *Cabaret*, as mentioned, pits its sardonic musical theater against the rise of Nazi Germany, while the film *The Grand Budapest Hotel* makes use of a thoroughly burlesque aesthetic to celebrate the life-affirming culture of Mittel Europa (that *mezzaterra* or common ground) in the context of the rise of thuggish fascist elements in 1940s Hungary. I will turn now finally to an analysis of *Free Men* with the above considerations in mind.

Free Men is a 2011 film that revisits the Nazi occupation of France in order to explore the role of a Paris mosque in providing sanctuary and escape for Jews in danger of persecution or execution. It is based on true stories that are covered by Robert Satloff in his book *Among the Righteous*. Satloff's research makes the case that "at every stage of the Nazi, Vichy and Fascist persecution of the Jews in Arab lands, and in every place that it occurred, Arabs helped Jews." Satloff further observes, "There

were occasions when certain Arabs chose to do more than offer moral support to the Jews. They bravely saved Jewish lives sometimes risking their own in the process" (Satloff 2006, 99).

Satloff gives the following reason for his research project: "I decided that the most useful response I could offer to 9/11 was to combat Arab ignorance of the Holocaust" (5). That is, Satloff sees 9/11 as a protest against American support for Israel. Yet Satloff's response is rather lopsided in that he seems to think that reminding present-day Arabs of how earlier generations of Arabs helped Jews resist persecution is likely to promote acceptance of Israel as a place of refuge; in this light, Israel would not be conceived of as a settler colony but rather as one donated by Arab charity. What Satloff does not really consider is that if Arabs came to the aid of racially persecuted Jews, then today Jews should in turn come to the aid of racially persecuted Arabs such as the Palestinians (as some do). I will come back to this question later.

In his book, Satloff draws our attention to the writings of a North African Jew named Albert Assouline, a captive in a German prison camp. Assouline escaped and made his way to Paris, where he received sanctuary in a mosque. He claims that the mosque's imam, Si Mohammed Benzouaou, issued certificates of Muslim identity to Jews to save them from deportation and death and that as many as 1732 resistance fighters found refuge in the caverns of the mosque. Satloff also refers to the surfacing of the story of Jewish singer Salim Halali, in that Salim was one of those who received help from the mosque. Satloff informs us:

Assouline's story received a boost in June 2005, when Salim (Simon) Halali, a world-renowned singer, died in Cannes. Born in 1920 to a poor Jewish family in Annaba (formerly Bône), near the Algerian-Tunisian border, Halali hailed from a local Jewish Berber tribe. When he was just fourteen he made his way to France, where he was eventually discovered singing in a cabaret. It was not long before Halali became France's most celebrated "oriental" singer. For the next forty years, he was a fixture of Andalusian music, predecessor of today's rai trend.

(145)

Halali's story inspired a French documentary short, *A Forgotten Resistance* (Berkani 1991), and is at the core of *Free Men*. What *Free Men* does is to provide a wider political dimension to Halali's story through entwining it with the fictional creation of a friendship between Halali and a young Algerian economic migrant, Younes. Younes first arrives in France to join his cousin Ali in a factory. When he contracts tuberculosis, Younes loses his job, and while jobless, he is reduced to selling goods on the black market. The Vichy police arrest him for this criminal activity but offer him his freedom if he agrees to spy for them at the local mosque to report on any suspicious activities there. Younis meets Salim at the mosque and starts to frequent his cabaret performances in Paris. Salim had already been given Muslim identity papers by the mosque, but the Germans have begun to suspect the racket. Aware of the Germans' suspicions, the rector and leader of the Muslim community, Si Kaddour Ben Ghrabit, tells Salim that if he is arrested, he should say that his father is buried in the Muslim cemetery in Bobigny. Meanwhile, Younes discovers that the mosque is a

refuge not only for Jews but also for Algerians who have joined the French resistance movement, among whom is his cousin Ali.

Whereas Satloff's account of the Arabs who helped Jews stresses the humane and selflessly ethical aspects of this, Ferroukhi's film deliberately politicizes the situation. This is particularly underscored when the Algerian fighters link the anti-fascist resistance with anti-colonial resistance, chanting, "Down with colonialism, down with fascism!" While Younes is initially apolitical, seeing the political struggles of others as not his business, he is increasingly politicized into understanding that the various fights for freedom from racist power regimes are interconnected, where the fight to free Europe from fascism is offered as a prelude to the Algerian liberation struggle.

The film was released in early 2011, and so while it implicitly addresses questions of Islamic militancy, the making of it would not have been influenced by the Arab Spring. It positions Islam (with the mosque as refuge not only for Jews but for freedom fighters too) on the side of revolution and as inclusive, and the Islam it addresses is one that is humanist rather than intolerant in its worldly involvements. Some have seen the film as a response to Islamophobia, in its restoring the memory of Muslims and the French Resistance as having once shared a common cause (Monji 2015), while this could not be seen as a mere gesture of appeasement in that the film also raises the memory of the Algerian liberation struggle.

It is almost as if the film offers us something like a partnership between the revolutionary humanist Fanon, a widely embracing Islam, and a cabaret culture of *joie de vivre* as its utopian horizon. However, more problematically, the politicization of Younes is accompanied by his induction into committing violence. First, in a scene where he is trying to escape German soldiers who have identified his resistance group through an Algerian informer, he kills a German soldier in self-defense. Shortly after this, he kills the Algerian sellout in cold blood. This violence is presented as understandable in its context, and even inevitable. That said, Si Kaddour Ben Ghrabit upbraids Younes for his rashness, not really over the violence per se but for endangering the reputation of the mosque. The rector is presented as someone who tries to work pragmatically with authorities in power, trying to outwit them through the weapons of intelligence and cunning.

The style of the film is that of an art house Second World War espionage thriller, set to the jazz riffs of contemporary Lebanese trumpeter Ibrahim Maalouf and punctuated with cameo cabaret scenes that present the cabaret world as very much the alternative to the political one. In terms of the musical arrangements, Halali's own song "Andalusia" features as typifying his romanticism, while *tarab* features strongly in the vocals, inducing ecstasy in the audiences. The film also includes a surprising meeting between the Salim character and the great Egyptian musician Mohamed Abdul Wahab, each as an ardent admirer of the other. Mohamed Abdul Wahab (born 1907) was a singer who initially composed songs in praise of King Farouk, changing his allegiance to Nasser after 1952, a trajectory similar to that of singer Umm Kulthum. In brief, what is at stake here is music more in the service of patriotism (love of country) than politics, and the songs of Abdul Wahab, who wrote the national anthems of Libya, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates, are indeed strongly characterized by pan-Arab patriotism.

I can find no evidence of Mohamed Abdul Wahab's having visited Vichy Paris, so it may be that the film invents this scene. However, it is the case that he came to Paris in the 1930s to study French film music, going on to become a composer of Egyptian film scores and to incorporate Western influences and instruments in his work. For instance, as with Hilali, some of his music makes use of Spanish or Latin rhythms. More broadly, Paris in the 1930s and 1940s was a locus of a buzzing Franco-Oriental culture that brought together Catholics, Jews, and Muslims, often around Arab and North African music, as documented by Ethan B. Katz in his book *The Burdens of Brotherhood: Jews and Muslims from North Africa to France*. Salim Halali was, of course, a part of this wider musical culture, and Katz comments, "It was in Paris's Latin Quarter around rue de la Huchette that a host of Oriental cabarets, including 'El Djazair' ... 'Le Kasbah', 'Tam Tam' and 'Nuits de Liban' created a dynamic music scene with Jewish-Muslim co-operation at its heart" (Katz 2015, 168). Katz goes on to mention that when Salim Halali moved to Casablanca after the war, he opened his own cabaret, *Le Coq d'Or*, with an orchestra of Jewish and Muslim musicians, and "it quickly became a legendary regional draw." Katz also points out that "Arabic music greats Umm Kulthum and Mohamed Abdul Wahab came from Egypt just to watch" (168).

Whether or not Abdul Wahab came to Paris during the war and met Halali then, *Free Men* seeks to draw attention to their historical connection in a particular way. At the same time that the two singers meet in the film, Salim is warned of an imminent roundup of Jews in the area and is advised to flee. However, he refuses to heed the warning because it is a dream of his to sing with Abdul Wahab. When the two take the stage, soldiers break in, and Salim is arrested. The scene thus indicates that on an affective and spiritual level, music has the power to transcend religious and national differences, while it is yet helpless in the face of fanatical militancy. Not only that, it is as if the targets of fascism are not simply Jews but more widely those who resist the separatist identity politics of divide and rule.

After his arrest, Salim's last resort to validate his Muslim identity is to claim that his father is buried in the Muslim cemetery at Bobigny, as he was advised to do. He is taken to the cemetery and there, with German guns pointed at him, told to identify his father's grave. Eventually he finds a gravestone bearing his family name, as arranged by the mosque, and he is thus saved from execution. This powerful scene makes use of the Joycean identification of paternity as a "legal fiction," to evaporate it as charade at the same time that another kind of belonging is enabled. That is, the legal fiction is one of authoritarian branding and sectarian ownership of people. As Salim kneels before the gravestone under a cloudy sky, a far-off rumble of thunder is heard, as if to suggest that his salvation is rooted in the truth that Muslims and Jews both are sanctioned as children of the divine. This moment in the film, one of deliverance through compassion, has a sacred feeling.

The above moment in the film may be juxtaposed with a scene toward its ending, when Younes and Salim have a brief reunion after parting ways. The rift between them is partly due to Younes's discovery that Salim is gay. When they meet again, however, there is a charged moment in which they gaze at each other in a way that silently expresses the emotional connection between them given their common cause against

Nazism, with not only its racism but its homophobia. Although the title *Free Men* might sound vaguely masculinist, the film makes clear that the freedom at stake extends to men who are feminine, as Salim is. The actor who plays Salim (Mahmoud Shalaby) has an androgynous beauty but is not camp, while the actual Salim Halali's performances (which can be seen on YouTube) have camp or dandified aspects to them in keeping with the cabaret world more generally.

Earlier I spoke of kitsch in terms of failed authenticity, while Sontag describes camp in terms of failed seriousness (Sontag 2009). While there may be overlaps here, there is a significant difference. It may be said that it is kitsch that takes itself seriously in a literal-minded manner leading to an unpersuasive sentimentality, whereas with camp, there is an understanding of the game as a game or a joke, as in the dandified sensibility of Ram or as in Yurid's account of the *Hishik Bishik Show* as a show that makes fun of itself making fun. That is, camp plays on the distinction between knowing what is and is not real, where gender is real but divisive gender norms are unreal stereotypes. Whereas kitsch invests in the stereotype as real, camp sends up the stereotype for what it is, precisely in appreciating the difference between what is real and what is not. Of course, reality is much more fluid than typologies, epistemologies, and ideologies.

The final meeting between Younes and Salim seems to suggest that the emotional bond between them exceeds their differences as Muslim and Jew, straight and gay, while the two men are yet committed to different trajectories of freedom, Younes presumably going on to fight for Algerian liberation and Salim bound for cabaret life in Morocco. In *Beer in the Snooker Club*, Edna's heritage appears to be more bound up with European Jewish legacies in that her parents come to base themselves in South Africa while her relatives are scattered around America and Europe. In "On Orientalist Trajectories," Ella Shohat addresses how "the Zionist project paradoxically involved a de-Sematisation of the Jew ... even while simultaneously claiming an originary Semitic lineage" (120). In the light of this, while Salim is able to affirm that he is an Arab Jew, Edna is pressured into taking the path of de-Orientalization as her Egyptian identity is called into question. Thus, at stake is also an unresolved fracture between European Jew and Arab Jew.

What do *Beer in the Snooker Club* and *Free Men* contribute to understandings of transnationalism of relevance today? *Beer in the Snooker Club* may be said to challenge the foreclosure of a common humanity by a liberal cosmopolitanism that bases itself on the differences between self and other, family and stranger, at the same time that the novel opposes the authoritarian and right-wing tendencies of nationalism that pit self-determination against a cosmopolitan liberalism seen as fake. In a way, *Beer in the Snooker Club* embraces the fakeness of cosmopolitanism, cosmopolitanism as a joke, while holding out for something more authentic, prefiguring the Egyptian Revolution. The novel, however, remains haunted by its silences. One such silence is the Palestinian question, which is bracketed off in the foregrounding of Arab-Jewish friendship. Similarly, the novel brackets off questions of religion as a concern with the sacred as opposed to matters of identity. I think that the communism of Ram is, beyond what he can say, not a secular formation but ultimately sacred in its implications: it touches on what he speaks of as an Egyptian unconscious beyond the political. Furthermore, the novel runs up against a troubling flippant callousness in

Ram (or seeming inability to feel) that is, in inexpressible ways or ways not addressed, in danger of tipping into the cruelty that he fears.

Free Men does introduce questions of the sacred through the role played by the mosque concerning how religion can and should transcend national identities, while it also brackets off the question of Palestine in creating alliances between Jews fighting fascism and Algerians fighting colonialism. At this point, it is worth pointing out that Satloff speaks of how he tried to present Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust Museum, with evidence of Arabs who had helped Jews so that at least one Arab be inscribed among the righteous. However, to this day, Yad Vashem refuses to acknowledge any of the Arabs who intervened against the Nazi persecution of the Jews. This amounts to a shocking politicization of the Holocaust, either because the Holocaust loses its significance as a violation of the sacred or because the sacred is transferred to a self-promoting national cause.

With the above in mind, it may be said that while liberal cosmopolitanism forecloses the sacred so that its forms of togetherness are merely performative enactments, like the polite rituals of hospitality offered by the Dungates in Ghali's novel, right-wing nationalism attempts to reappropriate the sacred for its own political ends, denying thus the value of other lives. Both *Beer in the Snooker Club* and *Free Men* serve to raise the question of whether the cabaret aesthetic and milieu constitute a *political* resistance to the theater of identity politics or whether they constitute instead a resistance as *limit to the politicization* of human relationships. This is open to debate, but on the whole, the cabaret or burlesque ethos implicitly sends up the deadly earnestness of the political through an awareness of human realities that exceed political determinants.

What I would like to suggest further is that the Egyptian Revolution may be seen on the one hand as hinged on political resistance to authoritarianism and on the other hand as a creativity that resists the all-pervasive politicization of human relationships. Burlesque is more generally related to the carnival or the carnivalesque, which itself borders on the religious festival. This brings me to the Egyptian Revolution as a *mulid* (Keraitim and Mehrez 2012; Elmarsafy 2015; Rooney 2015), that is, experienced as a radiantly joyful togetherness. Mona Prince, in her firsthand account of the revolution, speaks of it in such terms and ends her testimony with the following:

We danced and sang until a friend came back with a big cassette player.
 We inserted a cassette and pressed play.
 We cheered and sang along.
 Pink
 My life is pink ...
 Pink, pink
 My life is pink without you, Hosni.
 Without you Hosni, life is now pink.
 Pink, pink, pink. (191)

The revolution is presented as a song (somewhat camp) that we can all sing in unison (Arab style as opposed to contrapuntally), and it is a song that can only come into its

own by deposing the figureheads of illusory unity (political leaders and their causes) through a demonstration of real unity, a human solidarity that borders on the sacred, here in a festive way. As such, the song mediates between its moment in history and the timelessness of what cannot be dated. In fact, tellingly, this song comes from an Egyptian film, *Khalli Bālak min Zouzou* (Watch out for Zouzou), with Suad Hosni (here, the alternative to Hosni Mubarak) in the leading role and with Salah Jahine, a leading Egyptian poet, as its lyricist. In the film, Hosni plays a student whose humble origins are revealed through her mother's belonging to a belly-dancing troupe. In brief, the film celebrates both unapologetic femininity and the cabaret world of the belly dancers.

While nationalism and cosmopolitanism each posit themselves as progressive in relation to the regressive, respectively, the dialectics of progression and regression are ultimately irrelevant to the true common ground, which is why works such as *Beer in the Snooker Club* and *Free Men* are able to present us slices of history that have the potential to seem always contemporary as they musically resist the foreclosure of the synchronic, upon which dialectical histories of assimilation and expulsion are otherwise predicated. That said, the valences of nationalism, cosmopolitanism, and revolutionary friendships often coexist in any one historical moment, in which can reside the symbolic (nationalism), the imaginary (cosmopolitanism), and the real (solidarity that is dependent on neither the symbolic nor the imaginary). With respect to the Arab uprisings, the fraught question of Arab-Jewish friendship remains pertinent. I say this because the thwarting of the Arab uprisings—their being put on hold, so to speak—can be attributed in part to the fact that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues, where Israel fears genuine anti-neoliberal and antiracist democracy in the region and where American support for Israel makes its liberal cosmopolitanism a joke.

Finally, why music? In a conversation between the conductor and pianist Daniel Barenboim and Edward Said, Barenboim asks Said to explain, from his perspective as a cultural critic, why, as globalization spreads and intensifies, “political conflicts and national conflicts are deeper and pettier than ever before” (Barenboim and Said 2004, 14). Said responds that this is, first, a reaction to global homogenization and, second, a case of the imperial advocacy of “partition” as a solution to “the problem of multiple nationalities” (14). Said goes on to say:

It's like someone telling you, “Okay, the way to learn a musical piece is to divide it into tinier and tinier units, and then suddenly you can put it all together.” It doesn't work that way. When you divide something up, it's not so easy to put it all back together.

(14)

For both Barenboim and Said, music both inspires and entails a pluralistic and unified collaborative ethos, one that may sometimes entail—as exemplified by their friendship and professional partnership—co-creative and mutually supportive visions across official enemy lines. It is as if in music, we are able to find our way around the destructive forces that exploit our differences by turning them into fractures and partitions.

Note

- 1 An early version of this chapter was presented at the Mediterranean Fractures conference organized by Norbert Bugeja and Abdulrazak Gurnah (University of Kent, April 2014). I am grateful to Ayman A. El-Desouky and Eid Mohamed for the opportunity to present a longer version at the Doha Institute (January 2017) and to all those who responded to both versions of the work in progress at these events.

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