On History and Memory in Arab Literature and Western Poetics

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Edited by

Bootheina Majoul and Yosra Amraoui

With an Introduction by Cathy Caruth

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INTRODUCTION

ON HISTORY & MEMORY: CROSS-CULTURAL MODES OF LISTENING

CATHY CARUTH

> "The first [revealed] word of the Quran is 'Read.'"
> —Bootheina Majoul

The terms that frame this volume—"history" and "memory"—were originally drawn from the work of Paul Ricœur, the twentieth century French philosopher whose late work constituted an exploration of their intertwining and mutual challenge. Both terms contain paradoxes: memory, apparently the most immediate sense of the past, nonetheless relies on the peculiar relation between an absence (what has happened and is no more) and a presence (an imprint, or picture, of that absence), and thus centers as much on the gap between the two as on the immediateness of its impression. History, understood as the marking or writing that preserves memory, also tears that memory out of context, thus deriving its permanence from the displacement of the memory that gives the past its meaning. Memory and history, from this perspective, rely on each other for the transmission of the past, yet they may do so as much in a critical fashion as in the continuity of a simple passage: memory and history are both subject to error, unconscious or conscious forms of erasure, and abuse, but they can also serve as correctives to each other in the transmission and reconceiving of the past and the opening of new possibilities for the future. In this volume, "memory" and "history" are in constant play across the essays as dynamic and evolving means of challenging, passing on, and creating the events that constitute what we call, in a larger sense, the history of nations and of humanity.

At the heart of this interplay of terms is another word, however, not named as such in the title but serving as a refrain across these essays, a term that indeed describes precisely what resists a proper naming and disrupts both

memory and history in different ways: the word "trauma," a rupture in, or erasure of memory that demands historical recognition and yet resists being inscribed in readily accessible or comprehensible narrative forms and understanding. As it arose in the works of the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud (among others) in the late 19th century and first part of the twentieth century, this term describes an experience that is not assimilated as it occurs and that repeats itself later in another episode of unassimilated experience. It is not exactly a memory because it is constituted, one might say, by its own erasure, and though it demands recognition and recording, it refuses ordinary linguistic modes because it is precisely not locatable as past and not articulable as memory. Unlike "memory" that depends on context (the individual or even collective context of a consciousness, a place, and a time) or "history" that depends on the pastness of events (as given in memories) precisely to pass them out of their context to the future, "trauma" denotes an event that is experienced as inherently out of context and, as such, is never locatable simply in the past. Woven into all three parts of this volume--Part I: "History & Contested Memories," Part II: "Into the Cobweb of History & Memory in Arab Literature & Philosophy," and Part III: "History and Collective Memory in Western Poetics"—are the resonating stories, across nations, languages and cultures, that have faced obliteration and erasure and that emerge through new forms of writing—literary, historical, spoken traditions and song—which bear witness --which give testimony-- both to the acts of oblivion that constituted certain kinds of personal, collective, and political events and to the necessity of rethinking the forms that memory takes and of reconceiving the language in which history is written.

But in whose language would such a reconception take place? I have begun with the terms of Ricœur and Freud, originally written in French and German, respectively, and translated here into English, which is also the language of this volume. English is my "mother tongue," but not that of most of the writers in this volume, whose first language is Arabic, which is also the mother tongue of the editors Bootheina Majoul and Yosra Amraoui. The framing of this volume thus raises immediately a question of translation at the heart of the problems of history and memory: who speaks in the name of memory, and who writes what will count as history? How can one language transmit the proper context and meaning of another, and why, nonetheless, does each story seem to call out for other readers, listening from another language, to listen and to respond? Who is the audience for the English of this volume, and who is not addressed in such an appeal? On the other hand, how might this cross-linguistic project exemplify the very movement, contradiction, and

dynamism—not only the danger, but also the hope—of the perhaps inherently multilingual nature of both memory and history? Indeed, Tunisian Arabic is hardly the same as Egyptian or Algerian Arabic, which also comprise some authors' languages or objects of analysis in this volume; nor does the Tunisian language, in the everyday life of many Tunisians, consist only of Arabic, but rather of a mixture of Arabic and a certain Tunisified French—transmitting within the linguistic history of the Tunisian language the events of colonialism, but also the remarkable events of Independence and the ruptures of political continuity most recently exemplified by the revolution of 2011. And this relation between continuity and rupture may also be what allows the language/s of Tunisia to speak to and through both French and English and to remind those whose languages are the languages of "the West" to listen beyond their own understanding for the stories that resist simple translation into their own linguistic and cultural terms.

Indeed, at the heart of the Tunisian language—as perhaps of all of the Arabic languages of the writers in this volume, and perhaps of all languages, those of "East" and of "West"—is not only a story of memory and history but also a story of trauma and survival, of the ruptures in memory and the impossibilities of straightforward histories that require a listening across cultures, and across languages, in order to be heard. Freud, himself, would exemplify trauma, at one point, through the figure of a speaking wound whose (female) voice emanates from a character in a poem who is neither properly Christian nor Muslim, man nor woman, animal nor human, human nor tree. The wound is, itself, the figure of a term—trauma (τραύμα) that was also not Freud's own: it was the ancient Greek that identified the wound as a physical wound, which in its passage to later languages also came to refer to the psychic (and historical) tear that ruptures language as such and required the writing of trauma as an address that speaks not only within, but also always beyond, its own linguistic context, beyond the familiarity of memory and the comprehension of a pre-established history.

What does it mean, in this context, to take seriously the Quranic injunction, of which Bootheina Majoul reminds us in her essay: "read" [يَقْرَأ]? Indeed, in the Quran it is repeated twice, the second time with emphasis: "Read! [**اقْرَأْ!**]." Toward the beginning of this volume, Mohamed-Salah Omri suggests one answer to this question, part of what he calls a method for a "new humanism," by giving this mode of reading a new name: *tarafud*, a neologism that is, itself, a joining of languages: a blending of the English word "confluence" and the Arabic word "*rafd*." As

itself a joining of languages, *tarafud* connotes "confluence in the sense of flowing with and *rafd* which suggests support and generosity." This word is thus "a concept which describes the relationships among world literatures, away from hierarchy, domination and one-dimensional traffic. It also describes ideas of giving and hospitality." The name under which we read across languages is itself, then, not given in a single language; it suggests that we move between languages in the very process of coming to understand it, a movement that is grounded in generosity and listens for resonances but is always, one might add, at risk of misunderstanding, erasure and forced translation. Yet it is this risk that must be taken, Bootheina Majoul seems to suggest in her juxtaposing of Parts II and III-- "Arab Literature and Philosophy," on the one hand, and "Western Poetics" on the other-- in order for Arab works and Western works to be grasped both within their own contexts and through the disruptions of these contexts. It is this double movement of reading, or the self-divided dimension of these works between context and disruption, that allows them both to challenge, and to resonate with, each other.

This volume, then, can be understood, I would suggest, along two major axes of conceptualization (of writing and reading, response and address). First of all, the essays take up the challenge of Ricœur's engagement with history and memory as mutually dependent and contradictory modes of access to the past. This is a contextualizing and critical mode of writing, in which the political and cultural stakes of reading emerge in the conflict between official histories and alternative memories, or between collective official memory and the revisionary histories that attempt to offer new visions. In Part One, "History & Contested Memories," the political stakes of this conflict are on particular display. As Mounir Triki writes, in his analysis of Palestinian historiography, "the historiographic interplay of history and memory is fought linguistically," which means that to combat oppression and recognize political truth one must also produce "linguistics with a conscience." One linguistic element where this fight takes place, in Triki's analysis, is the word "diaspora," whose truth for Palestinians requires a contextualization and distinction among different, concrete contexts (migrants vs. refugees, for example). Another striking use of a conscientious linguistics is exemplified by Yosra Amraoui's reading of the German term "Muselmann," or "Muslim," to describe the most depleted members of the Nazi concentration camps, the ones who had apparently given up all hope and had no future. The use of "Muslim" in this context—barely marked in ordinary discourses on the fate of these inmates who bore in their bodies and psyches the stamp of the Nazi extermination of the Jews—inscribes a dehumainzing assumption, in Western discourses,

about the nature of Muslims at the very moment that these discourses are attempting to bear witness to the erasure of the human. There is also, conversely, a misunderstanding of the nature of the camp inmates' own presumed passivity that requires rethinking and rearticulating. The loss and remaking of context to challenge official history and renew the possibility of a different form of transmission also govern the readings of American foreign policy discourse in Jamia Zaghal's work on the Six-Day war and the nature of narrative in Faten Houioui's work on Amy Tan's *The Valley of Amazement*, which, in a different mode, reveals the possibility of history after the "total amnesia" of a specific line of cultural memory, in this case that of the Chinese courtesans. In Hamdi Doukali's work, it is through orally transmitted narrative that this "(re)making of history" can occur, a possibility that challenges the insistence on written authority.

As Habiba Maddouri suggests at the end of this section, the challenge to traditional historiographic forms of authority often associated with "postmodernism" or "poststructuralism" —and, in various ways, we might add, displayed in this volume— does not mean "the end of history" or the reversion to a relativistic or subjectivistic dogma. Indeed, what is carried through critique and rewriting is often a truth that cannot be reduced to a single narrative framework. Maddouri focuses on what she calls "historiographical metafiction" but we might widen the realm of this challenge of decentering and de-naturalizing—of "de-totalizing," as she calls it, the ideologies both of "memory" and of "history"--to include the larger work of theoretical and critical discourses in this volume, which can be said to bear witness, in their own ways, to dissident historical truths.

At the same time, the theoretical work of the volume pays special tribute to the literary, to film, and to the philosophical—to languages or forms of representation that do not claim to be grounded in a simple referent—as the site of a particular opening of possibility for the recording of historical truth or the revitalizing of obliterated memory. These sections can be said to emphasize the second line, or dimension, of inquiry in this volume: the dimension of rupture, the ways in which critical arguments not only use history and memory to recontextualize each other but also the ways in which the languages of the human arts can be said not only to contextualize but also to disrupt the contextualizing gestures of critical discourse, and in such disruption to transmit the traumatic histories—and regenerative possibilities—that have been erased or foreclosed by rational thought. And it is through these new forms of transmission that the essays in each section, divided between Arab (Egyptian, Palestinian, Algerian, Sudanese,

Persian, Tunisian and Andalusian) and Western (British, American, and Yugoslavian) literature, philosophy, theology, and film, appear to speak to and through each other. In Part II, "Into the cobweb of History & Memory in Arab Literature & Philosophy" and Part III, "History & Collective Memory in Western Poetics," the authors explore the alternative genres of remembrance and witness that these languages of the literary have made possible.

In Part II, Robin Ostle thus shows how the work of Edwar Al-Kharrat seeks to shift the focus of memory from the details or facts to the "process of memory," which arises in involuntary forms that are recreated in Al-Kharrat's trans-generic narration of the memory-act that takes the city of Alexandria itself as a kind of primary text. Bootheina Majoul reveals another site of disruptive writing in the "battle of the books" that took place between the philosopher Ibn Rushd and the Sufi scholar Al Ghazali, which produced the need to rethink and deconstruct the theology/philosophy dichotomy. In their arguments about incoherence (*The Incoherence of the Philosophers* answered by *The Incoherence of Incoherence*), the battle of the books challenges, in its meditation on incoherence, the prioritization of any single mode of explanation as the guarantor of faithfulness to the past. "History," Majoul writes, "will prove to be a testimony for the war of ideas." It is such a war of ideas that can be said to emerge through the narrative of Aboulela's *Lyrics Alley*, in Dalel Sarnou's analysis of the conflicting forces in Sudan at the time of Independence. And Hanene Baroumi and Olfa Belgacem both turn to another source of language-making: the language of dissident women on the one hand, and the language of song **[(often passed on by women)]**, on the other, to reveal the radical means by which erased women's experiences, or the often disappearing languages of a region or a childhood, are passed on in forms that evade and escape traditional forms of communication.

Part III, focusing on literatures and films in medieval British English, 20th century American English, and Serbian, also explore the literary as a site of indirect communication and of the disruption of traditional historiographical forms to transmit the traumatic experience not available to immediate individual or collective memory. As Mohamed Karim Dhouib notes, Chaucer's medieval poem *House of Fame*, early in British literary history, already "posits that claims of one monologic authority is simply a mirage, and that one authority contradicts another leaving us simply with a maze-like variety of perspectives rather than any final truth or definitive meaning." Yet the challenge to historiographic authority opens the way, in the following essays, not to relativism but to other modes by which

traumatic histories make their way into writing. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, analysed by Leila Hjaiej, it is music that carries with it the memory of slavery and helps make the testimonial transition from Ricœur's "memory" to "new representations of history." In Sana Oueslati's analysis of Emir Kusturica's film *Underground*, it is rather the "tragi-comic" genre, the formal oscillation between generic modes, that captures what cannot be straightforwardly told in the history of a war in Yugoslavia and reshapes a history that will, in its reception, open itself to differing collective responses. In Faulkner's "Red Leaves," as interpreted by Eya Kharmachi, and Robert Coover's *The Public Burning*, read by Sana Ben Ali Taga, it is collective trauma that can be said to emerge out of its oblivion onto the literary stage: in the first case, in a story in which the experiences of Indians and slavery intersect, and in the second, in the violent cold-war politics of the McCarthy era as exemplified by the execution of the Rosenbergs. In the latter case, Ben Ali Taga argues, it is a personal memory that is used to combat collective oblivion, whereas in "Red Leaves," according to Kharmachi, Faulkner creates "a counter narrative that seeks to re-appropriate the seeds of the collective unconscious of the othered group such as Indians and Blacks." Literature thus operates as a language that can enter into the oblivion of memory and the gaps of history, testifying to a past that can only emerge through a reconsideration of what constitutes the history, and the humanity, we had taken for granted. At the site of this oblivion, in the language of a burning history and the song of obliterated pasts, the literary texts of both "Arab" and "Western" languages resonate across cultural boundaries and touch each other at the point where memory and history are inadequate to the ruptures of experience, and the demand arises for an equally unsettling mode of writing that can testify to the work of bearing witness.

The very conceptualization of these new and disruptive forms of writing and reading in this volume must itself be understood, however, in a very specific context. This innovative cross-cultural collection on memory and history are inextricably bound up, one might argue, with a specific set of developments, the events of the remarkable 2011 Revolution in Tunisia that overthrew the authoritarian Ben Ali government and started a wave of similar revolutionary acts across the region. Mohamed Salah Omri in fact introduces his discussion of *tarafud* in the context of a reflection upon the revolutionary actions of this period, which in his analysis were not only events in the streets but "the birth or the relaunching of concepts of human dignity, freedom and justice," which also "signaled a creative moment in the wide sense of the term." Revolutions are thus also revolutions in the very concepts, or nature, of memory and history; they "authorize revision,

not only of national narratives but also of academic methods and theory." Indeed, in the words of the Tunisian theoretician Fethi Benslama, the act of self-immolation by Mohamed Bouazizi that set off the revolution, an act that had its own private basis in personal memories of special significance to him, took on for the Tunisian people "the value of a testimony to truth," the testimony to a collective experience, a "burning history" that still demands our witness. It might be said that the very possibility of joining the critical, dissenting, challenging voices in this volume, of bringing voices together from across the globe to place into question the authoritarian abuses of memory and uses of history, has arisen out of the inventiveness of this revolution and its own, startling and still unsettling, authorization of rethinking, reseeing, remembering differently, and writing anew the histories of trauma and survival, of erasure and invention, that constitute the stories of the nations and languages represented in this book.

It is, nonetheless, not a triumphalist vision of revolution or of (re)writing that provides the framework for *On History and Memory in Arab Literature and Western Poetics*; it is the insistence on listening and hearing anew that this volume can be said to bring to the fore. As Hanene Baroumi suggests in her essay "Tears of the Ogress," even the term "revolution" must also be heard from the perspective of Arab women writers, such as the Algerian writer Assia Djebar and the Moroccan sociologist Fatema Mernissi, who challenge the patriarchal appropriation of the term for a narrative of completion and fulfilment. The danger of this mode of narrating revolution is that it may forget the reversals and problematics that come after many rebellions and revolutions, and in particular erase from view the return of the female protagonists of rebellion to the shadows of their patriarchal oppression. These revolutions, from this perspective, must not be thought as single events but as continuing and unfinished calls to remember and to recreate, a possibility that can be heard in the "fourth language" of Arab women's texts. And also, we might add, in the language of song that traverses this volume and that emerges most powerfully through the voice of Olfa Belgacem as she sang the folk songs that emerged unexpectedly from her own past at the moment she held her first child in her arms. Indeed, the writing—and singing--of women are central to this collection and in a certain way can be said to frame it. For it is the scholarly listening, the friendship and the resonating voices of the women who frame this volume—the [organizer of the conference and] envisioner of this volume Bootheina Majoul, the co-editor Yosra Amraoui, and the introducer, myself—that speak to a cross-linguistic, cross-cultural, and cross-scholarly mode of listening—among scholars from Tunisia, Algeria, England, and the United States--that arises

on the margins of history and in the hope of a future of shared testimonial exchange.

Cathy Caruth

PART I:

HISTORY & CONTESTED MEMORIES

CHAPTER 1

REPRESENTATIONS OF HISTORY IN TIMES OF REVOLUTION

MOHAMED SALAH OMRI

In the Arab world, the revolutions of 2011 renewed interest in the French revolution of 1848 and the *Spring of Peoples* (as they were known by many Europeans at the time) as a whole. Beyond the perils of looking to nineteenth-century Europe for models to explain radical movements that took place in Africa and the Middle East in the 21st century, perils which are embedded in discourses I will critique in the course of the present essay, there are parallels which cannot be ignored, particularly with regard to the Tunisian case which inaugurated the movement. Elements of surprise, the types of alliances, people's demands and the aftermath of the revolution, to name but a few features, have been pointed out. 1989 in Eastern Europe was also evoked, and, to a lesser extent, Iran of 1979.[1] The achievements and setbacks of 1848 are dissected by Karl Marx with authority and depth in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, where he appeals to metaphors and literary figures, perhaps in some kind of echo of Lamartine's "poetic" appeal for a Peoples' Spring.

The material conditions and the social bases of 1848 and its aftermath, and indeed those pertaining to Arab revolutions, are not my concern here.[2]

[1] In terms of personalities, an intriguing parallel was drawn between Napoleon Bonaparte and the Tunisian Islamist leader Rached Ghanouchi within the context of the 2011 revolution by the sociologist Mouldi Guessoumi in his book *Society of the Revolution* (2015, 261-266). The personal and political itineraries of both men are somewhat closely matched. For example, both men were exiled abroad, formulated their alliances, returned triumphantly home and reactivated their bases and won elections. But what interests me here is the manner in which both men – as narratives – are indicative of temporalities which were accelerated and accentuated by the revolutionary moment.

[2] Several people have done that, including Guessoumi, Hedi Timoumi and Ahmed Jdey for Tunisia, Gilbert Achcar and others for the region as a whole.

What I retain is Marx's interest in the temporalities of the French revolution and its aftermath. He explains the two seemingly contradictory temporalities played out in 19th century France: "A whole nation which thought it had acquired an accelerated power of motion by means of a revolution, suddenly finds itself set back into a defunct epoch, and to remove any doubt about the relapse, the old dates arise again – the old chronology, the old names, the old edicts, which had long since become a subject of antiquarian scholarship, and the old minions of the law who had seemed long dead" (Marx 1986, 97). Marx was attempting to dispel two discourses of the time: one which rationalised sudden radical change by appealing to the past for guidance and evidence while the other argued that in times of change the survival of the dead haunts the living. He asserts: "Earlier revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to drug themselves concerning their content" (99). Yet, in order to arrive at their own content, he argues, the revolutions of the nineteenth century must let "the dead bury their dead" (99). He was speaking of a time when workers, for the first time in history, rebelled *for* themselves. In the Arab region, during the colonial period, revolutions did not so much target a social class as they did an outside force, and therefore had to seek allies and compromises across social strata. The 2011 revolutions in the Arab region bear a combination of the two types, being postcolonial and social, country-specific and transnational, all at once. No wonder, then, that discourses as well as cultural practices, since the early days of 2011, have witnessed bewildering diversity which cannot be restricted to the conflict between the old and the new, or the national and the global, as one would expect in a revolutionary moment. This complexity will be explored through the two key terms, history and representation.

Three broad conceptions of history inform and guide the present essay. Hayden White (2010) speaks of narrativity of history or historical narrative as literary representation; Karl Marx famously talked about the transformation of history, or history as a human agency, which includes among others, revolutions; the medieval historian Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) (1999) saw in the *longue durée* of the history of nations cause for meditation and reflection (*al-nadhar wa al-i'tibar*). The three are, in my view, linked by dialectic, or even a continuum, through which we may be able to explore the bewildering times in which we live. In terms of narrative, during most of the paper, I will be in the company of Hayden White, although not always explicitly. Marx is lurking underneath as befitting someone who tried to uncover the inner working of history. Ibn

Khaldun, as befitting lessons, is what I conclude with.[3] Representation of history is understood widely, starting with the academic horizons within which revolutions have been received, followed by a critique of methods and approaches, and concluding with a critical account of specific instances of representation. In some cases, the representation takes the form of coordinated, or even institutionalised, effort. This is the case with transitional justice processes and truth commissions. The present essay explores these through transitional justice in Tunisia, under the heading "transitional time and archival anxiety", where I study the tension between local historiography and truth-telling mechanisms of transitional justice.

Temporalities in Conflict

I start with a paradox, which seems to me unique but overlooked. Since 2011, the Arab region has been experiencing two broad attitudes or movements. We have, on one side, the systematic annihilation of the human past (destruction of archaeological sites, repression of historical thinking, banning of modern ways of life, attempts at establishing enclaves governed by the imagined radical rule of by-gone times in places like Iraq, Syria, Libya). This created a perception that the Arab region became the graveyard of the humanities or the place where the humanities come to die. Some of its manifestations include violence against the human sciences, the arts, heritage, creativity and rational knowledge, an increase in violent hostility towards the humanities and humanity itself. Discourse banning arts, destruction of archaeological sites and attacks against artists spread beyond their traditional hubs in the area, to reach societies known for their relative openness, such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Tunisia. But if these acts witnessed an expansion in the aftermath of 2011 uprisings, the starting point of systematic destruction in the past three decades was, in my view, the attack against Iraq -or more accurately, the attack against humanity in Iraq- in 2003. All of this has been happening at a time of religious authoritarianism, compounded by extended political authoritarianism, financial corruption and pervasive consumerism.

[3] The main sources relevant to what I discuss here include Hayden White, "Storytelling, historical and ideological" (2010); Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1869 edition), where he is at his most literary mode and where, appropriately to my account here, he scorns "so-called objective historians" for ignoring the underlying class struggle at work and focussing instead on exceptional individuals and heroes; and Ibn Khaldun, who unveils the dangers of ideological uses and explores his philosophy of history in the Introduction to his book *al-Ibar* .

On the other side, we observe in this same region the rebirth of subjectivity or communal and individual attempts to impact the course of history constructively. The Arab world became a place which is witnessing the birth or the re-launching of concepts of human dignity, freedom and justice, which are the foundations of the humanities and its ultimate goal. Indeed, the 2011 rebellions signalled a creative moment in the wide sense of the term, that is, an explosion of creativity and imagination, and the emergence of new actors and new forms of expression, which gave the world hope in the possibility of acting in history anew. Unchained creativity has affected literature as well as the visual and performing arts. Broadly speaking, the first attitude may be said to represent forces aiming at ending human history and the restoring of a presumed divine order or a utopian past, while the other can be understood as a form of beginning in the sense that revolutions are usually based on the idea of making history and intervening in the shaping of the future.

These attitudes, which in fact amount to ways of being in the world, are simultaneous and, therefore, in interaction with one another on a daily basis and across walks of life. That interaction varies in intensity and range, from benign personal choices to deadly conflict and outright annihilation of the other. The present essay explores manifestations of these attitudes in a variety of sources and reflects on the ways in which the past is remembered and mobilised by all sides and more importantly, and more poignantly**,** when what is remembered is supposed to be a shared history. The Tunisian philosopher, Zeineb Cherni (2017), Leftist militant before the Tunisian revolution and active citizen since, has reflected on this in terms of temporalities. She argues: "The course of history in Tunisia submits to a stratification of temporalities. The post-historical temporality is fragmented. In Tunisia, and for some, we are witnessing an a-presence in the present or a non-contemporaneity in the present… Allegiance, which is a threat to the principles of the republic, would result in reclaiming passeist social models which would legitimate an ultra-subjective violence to exterminate the other" (22). The clash of temporalities is neither new nor unique to Tunisia. The "fragmented temporality", mentioned above, can be detected in the explosion of forms of representation, made possible through globalised means of communication and the privatisation of forums of expression, as I explain below.

But a discussion of representation of the Arab world is bound to recall Said's *Orientatlism* (1978). And here, two key ideas must be born in mind, namely, the idea of the East as already read and representation in the sense of speaking for or on behalf of someone. Up to the revolutions of 2011, the

dominant assumption in Western perceptions of the Arab region had been, arguably, that the people and cultures of the region were known or knowable. *Known* to the western mind and knowable to its capacity to study the other because it can (it is capable intellectually, and it has the means: institutions, access, etc.). And this other is *knowable* because these societies are seen as simple, even primitive. This knowledge is also thought to be the only valid one because natives are seen as unable to produce knowledge about themselves, or at least not the right kind of knowledge. This leads to the second point, which is mentioned in the epigraph of *Orientalism*, a quote from Marx: "They cannot represent themselves: they must be represented". It must be noted that Said was not really focussed on the Orient's representation of itself or self-representation, and much less on Marx, but instead on demonstrating the hollowness of the position and claims outlined above. Self-representation is closely related to history, for on it rests subjectivity. On some level, then, revolution is a form of self-representation, of acting on history as subjects. It is a form of the marginalized speaking and doing, or of the damned of the earth, to recall Frantz Fanon, taking matters in their own hands, seeing the glimpse of a world in which they would be damned no longer. Tunisians, Egyptians, Yemenis, Libyans, Syrians… acted out of what the late Tunisian historian Ahmed Jdey (2012) called "collective pain" or, in the words of Fredric Jameson, in another context: experiencing history as a hurt. Much of course has been built on representation and constitutes responses which range from postcolonial theory to decolonial thinking. But what is really central to the problem is not only representation but presence, by which I mean subjectivity or the capacity to act on history, to affect its direction. National liberation movements, varied as they have been, can be seen from this perspective; post-colonial revolutions are another case in point.

Ambitious Times, Limited Methodologies

Yet to grasp what happened in 2011, academic analysts and pundits alike resorted to images of coloured or scented revolutions (jasmine, Spring, Facebook, etc.) or theories of exceptionalism; some even evoked manipulation and conspiracy. The events of 2011 were first seen within a specific horizon and expressed in images fit for that horizon. Michael Hudson (2012) argues that this horizon was shaped by "group-think, theoretical tunnel vision, ideological agendas, insufficient attention to the work of Arab intellectuals, and a lack of multidisciplinary approach" to the study of the Arab region (22-23). According to this mindset, "authoritarianism in

the region is durable, democracy is an inappropriate goal and is impossible to reach in the Arab region, and populations are passive, either due to rentier state policies or coercion" (26-27). In all cases, little attention, or regard, has been given to the social movements, protest culture, patterns of resistance and alternative imaginaries which had been at work in the Arab region all through the pre-2011 period. In such scholarship, at best we are dealing with what Marx dismissed, with disdain, as the "so-called objective historians", those who ignore the underlying social struggle at work and focus instead on exceptional individuals and heroes, or, worse, on single Arab dictators.

In light of the above, I argue that the translation of collective pain into collective action, regardless of its aftermath, demands appropriate academic response. The failure of knowledge of the kind I describe earlier should make us think of different ways of knowing, and different positioning in relation to the Arab region and people, as well as to history and to representation. Some of what I outline here is known, but little of it is actually translated into method. Revolutions authorize revision, not only of national narratives but also of academic methods and theory. They challenge the validity of paradigms which have proven not paradigmatic enough, unproductive, obsolete, or outright biased.[4]

I am advocating an attitude, which could be summarised in three terms: Listening, solidarity, and critique. By listening, I mean pedagogy of learning rather than teaching. I see my role – and here I speak from a particular position - as that of solidarity, which prevents me from participating in perpetuating censorship through certain discursive academic practices which obscure and often seek to replace those it should enable. Therefore, my work, the present essay included, is conceived, in part, as a forum for free expression not yet one more prison house of language. In the Tunisian case, and more widely, the rebelling people liberated my voice, and I feel the need to acknowledge that. That gratitude should not, of course, preclude critique and rigour; but neither should it fall into the traps of privilege and narcissism of the kind we see all too often in academic practice. In addition, the people and cultures under study have reflected

[4] The state of the field of Arabic studies in European and North American universities is a good place to observe the East as known and as knowable, after observing it as an ornament during the dominance of Orientalism, as I explain in the paper, "The study of the Arab world and Islam in the United States and Britain in the context of the "war on terror" (in Arabic) (Omri 2011). Here, I speak critically of four features, which characterised this field over the past three decades, namely, expansion, securitization, ethnification and corporatization.

on, and produced knowledge, not only about their societies, but also about humanity as a whole. That knowledge needs to be acknowledged and given the status it deserves. This is the proper domain of decoloniality and the search for global epistemic justice.[5]

The 2011 revolutions brought the values and positions mentioned above to the fore and made possible new global thinking as well as appropriate methodologies. And it is in this spirit that I have joined efforts with a team of academics over the past several years to work on Arab revolutions and New Humanism. The inaugural exploration of the methodological challenges posed by 2011 was the special dossier of the journal *boundary 2*, vol.39, no.1 of 2012 where Ronald A. Judy and I took upon ourselves the task of listening to how Tunisians made sense of their revolution through their own eyes. Judy notes, in the introduction to the dossier, that "the Tunisian writings collected here intimate the emergence of a collective intelligence and imagination along the lines of something else, the new humanism Fanon detected in the revolutionary moments of Africa some sixty years ago" (16). One of the fitting methods for new humanism is confluency or *tarafud*. I will return to New Humanism in the conclusion. For now, I wanted to draw attention to what I mean by *tarafud*.

As a reaction to the one-sided and dated concept of influence prevalent in comparative literature, I propose in a 2006 book, the theory and practice of confluence between literatures, languages and methodologies (Omri 2006). The basic idea is that modern Arabic literature, which is my main research interest, is the result of a complex relationship with Western literatures and Arab-Islamic and local heritage, as well as the moment of writing: it is the locus of confluence of a diversity of sources. These result in texts which require sensitivity to the multiplicity of styles and of languages, a methodology which, in disciplinary terms, draws on the focus of area studies on linguistic competence and contextual knowledge on the one hand, but also on a comparative literature aware of global and transnational aspects, including theoretical insights from multiple global sites. More recently, I have been dissatisfied with this term (i.e., confluence) and looked to Arabic for an equivalent with added complexity.

The term *tarafud* is what I came up with (I explore it fully in my essay "Towards a theory of *tarafud*: the poetics and ethics of comparison" (2015 in Arabic). *Tarafud* is a term that does not exist as such in Arabic but is

[5] For an overview of decoloniality scholarship, see, "Decoloniality as the Future of Africa, Sabelo" J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015 in *History Compass*, 13/10, 485-496.

coined based on a blending of confluence and *rafd*, confluence in the sense of flowing with and *rafd* which suggests support and generosity. *Tarafud* is then a concept that describes the relationships among world literatures, away from hierarchy, domination and one-dimensional traffic. It also describes ideas of giving and hospitality. In the term confluence, "con" refers to the Latin root "with," but could also recall opposition and tension or contradiction, alluding to tension as one way in which languages and cultures relate. Confluency can perhaps convey both and could render, in a fitting way, the coined *tarafud*. The coinage puts Latin-based and Saxon languages alongside Arabic, not in a translational way but in a constitutive manner. *Tarafud* recognises the multiplicity and diversity of the creative act. It also accepts the principle of contribution and accumulation regardless of linguistic source, genre and style. In the context of the present paper, *tarafud* allows a critique of existing representations and their methodological bases. It is conceived as a form of distribution of knowledge, which accepts, as *constitutive*, the validity of knowledge and of the experience in which knowledge is based regardless of location. This form of hospitality or hospitability rejects the spirit of the already read, mentioned above. It is also applied to explain the confluence of global and local imagery, political stakes and ideologies in order to account for ways in which history has been conceived and represented.[6]

Representations of History

The manifestations of representations of history, if we restrict ourselves to the context of Arab revolutions, are too numerous to account for here. Since 2011, history has become available for free representation on unprecedented scale, leading to explosion in representation. I must stress that the important point in historical narrative, as Hayden White tells us, is that the genre or type of "story-writing" is key, and it is the element through which ideology is expressed. A historical event may be narrated as a tragedy or a comedy bound with the ideology of the form of representation itself. It is for this reason that in this incursion into what is a

[6] I have since used *tarafud* in a number of places, including thinking about world literature, trade unionism and political music in Tunisia, and in literature and memory. For example, Tunisian historiography is used alongside other historiographies, not excluding them. In terms of ideas on representation of trauma, we would do well listening to those who experienced prison and torture and reflected upon them in writing, like political prisoners Ammar Mansour and Gilbert Naccache form Tunisia, for example, alongside insights from theorists Judith Butler, Cathy Caruth and others, and writers Coetzee and others.

vast field, I pay special attention to the narrative form, the style and the language in which history is told. Here then, I gather some of the representations under metaphors, plot types or narrative styles, which seem to me salient, with no attempt at comprehensive survey. History as a *revenge narrative* by those who saw in the turn of events a licence to take revenge on old foes and their narratives; history as a *story of retribution*, a chance to hold to account bearers of the defeated historical narratives; history as *redemption story* by which those castigated as being on the wrong side of history are finally redeemed; the narrative of *divine destiny* by which the beginning of Islam, especially the caliphate rule, is recalled as model for our time; the *utopian fable* of total equality for all in the eyes of unreformed Marxists; history embodied in *the enlightened despot* whose mission is to save the nation from chaos and regression…[7] In what follows, I highlight a limited number of these broad trends captured in images, events and statements. These range from the parochially local to the famously global. But in all cases, they have been globally disseminated and traded.

Naomi Klein, author of *No Logo* and *Disaster Capitalism*, noted the obscenity of one inaugural event of the 21st century, namely, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, in an article titled "Smoking while Iraq burns" published in November 2004. In the image, we could observe the devastation of a nation marketed as manly pleasure and corporation profit. Yet resting to smoke a Marlboro cigarette while watching Babylon go up in smoke, so to speak, is not very different from chanting *Allahu Akbar* while axing Palmyra statues or bombarding the Buddha shrine in Afghanistan, burning the Sidi Bou Said shrine in Tunisia or mutilating a woman statue in Setif in Algeria. In fact, it could be argued that the latter are mere copycats, mimicking or are cultural appropriations of the former. Jihadi John (notice the name!); the human-heart eater in Syria and others, talk the talk and walk the swagger of a Rambo or a Terminator. Similar iconography – and the same means – is deployed in the bid to terminate the work of human history. That work is called idols *asnam* or *awthan*, pagan representations of *shirk* [idolatry] famously destroyed by Prophet Muhammad when he entered Mecca. While the American army blew up al-Amiriyya shelter or Falluja to presumably "purge" Iraq of "enemy combatants" (notice the name again!) and non-existent weapons of mass destruction, al-Qaida and

[7] One example in Tunisia, a leader of al Nahda party has famously celebrated the advent of the 6th *caliphate* as the outcome of the revolution, predicted by what he called a "divine sign". See the speech here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pP0OL5iRZNg