

**‘A Continual Entering into History’:  
Review of *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47: 4 (Sept. 2011)  
Special Issue on Egyptian Literary Culture and Egyptian Modernity**

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Caroline Rooney, in her introduction to the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* Special Issue *Egyptian Literary Culture and Egyptian Modernity* (September 2011), posits the writer as ‘a seer able to realize through anticipation both the pitfalls and the progressive opportunities of history as it unfolds’. This Special Issue, the outcome of a symposium of the same name held at Cairo University in April 2010, is embedded in this ‘continual entering into history’, developing, as it did, ‘fortuitously’ and ‘in tandem... empathically’ with the events of the still unfolding Egyptian Revolution, emblematised by a date some nine months after the symposium: 25 January 2011.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, while many of the contributors explicitly reframe their arguments in the light of 2011 events in Egypt and the wider region, there is an almost uncanny prescience in what was clearly already an emphasis on the democratic, socially committed credentials of literature (broadly defined) and in the links contributors stress between writers and national citizenry, private and public spheres, form and content, realism and experimentalism, and secularism and the sacred. This should not surprise us, given that history’s tensing is present-continuous (or, as Rooney terms it, prospective) as well as retrospective.<sup>2</sup> As Edward Said puts it, ‘alternative or new narratives... become institutionalized or discursively stable entities’; or, in Derridean terms, ‘the archive produces as much as it records the event’.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, living (in) history can be analogised with the anticipatory process of writing (and arguably reading), in which the present is structured ‘as if it were being remembered from a point in future time’.<sup>4</sup> The point is not merely theoretical: Walid El Hamamsy reminds us that the iconic 25 January demonstrations were enabled by protests that had been taking place since at least 2003.<sup>5</sup>

A fascinating aspect of this Special Issue is the way in which it emphasises both secular and sacred future-oriented temporalities. Rooney suggests that in this context, the notion of the secular must be expanded to include religious beliefs in the plural.<sup>6</sup> In a particularly rich contribution, Ayman A. El-Desouky suggests ways in which Naguib Mahfouz’s controversial novel *Awlad haratina* (1959; trans. *Children of the Alley*, 2006), whilst an allegory of the failures of the 1952 Revolution that inaugurated Nasserism, also anticipates the ‘people’s revolution’ of 2011. Its experimental style ‘narrativiz[es] popular structures of consciousness of time as the sacred time of revolutionary action’; that is, a type of knowledge occulted by official religious and state histories. Here, sacred time is non-transcendent but historically interruptive; it is the continuous time of the people’s struggle for social justice, reform and freedom.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> C. Rooney, ‘Egyptian Literary Culture and Egyptian Modernity: Introduction’, *JPW* 47: 4 (2011): 369-76 (370, 371). The 2010 conference was organised by Cairo University and the University of Kent as part of the ESRC/AHRC *Radical Distrust* project led by Rooney.

<sup>2</sup> Rooney, 371.

<sup>3</sup> E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), pp. 59-60; J. Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 17.

<sup>4</sup> M. Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 5.

<sup>5</sup> W. El Hamamsy, ‘BB = BlackBerry or Big Brother: Digital Media and the Egyptian Revolution’, *JPW* 47: 4 (2011): 454-66 (456).

<sup>6</sup> Rooney, 371.

<sup>7</sup> A. A. El-Desouky, ‘Heterologies of Revolutionary Action: On Historical Consciousness and the Sacred in Mahfouz’s *Children of the Alley*’, *JPW* 47: 4 (2011): 428-39 (433).

Importantly, the generative source and medium of this time is oral tradition.<sup>8</sup> The Special Issue emphasises links between oral and literary modes, suggesting not only that literature ‘translates’ inherited stories, but that we must – particularly in light of the role of social media in both mobilising and attempting to repress the Egyptian people<sup>9</sup> – expand our notion of literature, often seen as the preserve of an elite minority, to encompass ‘new’ forms of storytelling and/or consciousness-raising, notably blogs. Rooney reminds us of the aesthetics and politics of orality that underpin virtual media, in terms of its immediacy, interactive potential and minimal mediation by ‘power’.<sup>10</sup> Rehab Bassam is interesting on this front: she – perhaps controversially – claims the quotidian reality of a middle-class Cairene woman as novel and champions the non-aligned potential of ‘private’ self-expression disseminated first through the Internet and then in print.<sup>11</sup>

What remains to be seen is whether ‘new’ social media, including blogs and networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter,<sup>12</sup> have the capacity to *replace* conventionally published creative media and what the implications of this might be. One is struck, reading the Issue, by the accelerated nature of social change and its translation into continually evolving and mutually transformative cultural forms. Thus, for example, Bassam frames 2010 as ‘at that time’, definitively of the past. She provides a genealogy of changing influence amongst Middle Eastern contributions to the blogosphere from the early 2000s to the present; she also notes – recalling El Hamamsy’s warning that social media can also be manipulated by states – that Egyptian bloggers have been censored and even imprisoned.<sup>13</sup> Here, and elsewhere, we note approval of an increased accessibility of creative work of the last decade, often produced in Arabic as opposed to English (or French, in other Arab contexts)<sup>14</sup> and encompassing output such as Alaa Al-Aswany’s spectacularly successful and oft-cited *Imarat Ya’qubyan* (2002; trans. *The Yacoubian Building*, 2004), Khaled Al-Khamissi’s *Taxi* (trans. 2007) and Magdy El-Shaffee’s graphic novels.<sup>15</sup>

One therefore notes the irony – one that structures the field of postcolonial studies – of only being able to include papers written in English in the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*.<sup>16</sup> As Wail S. Hassan suggests, while seminal theorists of postcolonialism were affiliated to the Arab world – Albert Memmi, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said – postcolonial studies ‘rarely takes Arabic literary and cultural production into account’. There are many ways in which postcolonial and Arabist scholarship could revitalise each another. The agenda which Hassan proposes, however – not merely to expand the geo-cultural field of material commonly studied under a postcolonial rubric, but also to interrogate the theoretical underpinnings of the discipline and to reconsider its emphasis on the (minority) diaspora experience<sup>17</sup> – involves a formidable linguistic challenge. This is not least because of Arabic’s diglossia, indeed the spectrogllossia of some Arab cultural contexts.

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<sup>8</sup> El-Desouky, 434.

<sup>9</sup> See, in particular, El Hamamsy.

<sup>10</sup> Rooney, 369-70.

<sup>11</sup> C. Rooney, ‘“In less than five years: Rehab Bassam interviewed by Caroline Rooney, Dar Al-Shorouk, Nasr City, Cairo, April 2010’, *JPW* 47: 4 (2011): 467-76. Cf. M. Awadalla, ‘Generational differences in three Egyptian women writers: finding a common ground’, *JPW* 47: 4 (2011): 440-453.

<sup>12</sup> See Nadia Idle and Alex Nunns (eds.), *Tweets from Tahrir* (NY: OR, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Rooney, ‘In less than five years’, 469, 470, 472.

<sup>14</sup> Bassam herself has turned from English to Arabic in her writing, as well as increasingly in her reading.

<sup>15</sup> This last is mentioned in the Rooney-Bassam interview, 471.

<sup>16</sup> Rooney, ‘Introduction’, 375, 4n.

<sup>17</sup> W. S. Hassan, ‘Postcolonial Theory and Modern Arabic Literature: Horizons of Expectation’, *Journal of Arabic Literature* 33: 1 (2002): 45-64 (45, 59, 60).

Moreover, while the Issue urges postcolonialists to engage questions of national self-determination through attending to the cultural forms in which the nation expresses itself, the ‘synchronicities’ and feedback loops of the Egyptian revolution are indicative of linkages between the national and the global.<sup>18</sup> A scrutiny of ‘the nation’ as hegemonic revolutionary paradigm remains incumbent: as Marilyn Booth observes with reference to a range of literary texts (one of which she translated), both nationalism and globalisation have produced ‘terrifying dilemmas of everyday life’ for young Egyptians.<sup>19</sup> There are also more ‘local’ (for example non-Muslim and/or non-Arab) ways of inhabiting Egyptian space.

These reflections notwithstanding, the Issue sits on the cusp of a remarkable turn, the changes of which are also rung in Rooney’s individual work on cultural texts from the region. If, pre-2011 she theorises a politics of ‘chronic disappointment’ in literature of the late Mubarak era, by the *JPW* Special Issue she is emphasising – drawing on El-Desouky – amara, the ‘active intervention’, ‘meeting place’ and ‘place or moment of appointment’ that Tahrir crystallised.<sup>20</sup> Engaging canonical and popular fiction, digital media, film and music, and deploying postcolonial, spatial, psychoanalytic and sociological theories as well as indigenous concepts of struggle, *Egyptian Literary Culture and Egyptian Modernity* is an invigorating contribution to the still unfolding contemporary postcolonial field.

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<sup>18</sup> Rooney, ‘Introduction’, 373.

<sup>19</sup> M. Booth, ‘House as Novel, Novel as House: The Global, the Intimate, and the Terrifying in Contemporary Egyptian Literature’, *JPW* 47: 4 (2011): 377-390 (388).

<sup>20</sup> C. Rooney, ‘The Disappointed of the Earth’, *Psychoanalysis and History* 11: 2 (2009): 159-74; C. Rooney, ‘Ahdaf Soueif in Conversation with Caroline Rooney, Cairo University, 12 April 2010’, *JPW* 47: 4 (2011): 477-82 (481).