

The Politics of Decolonial Interpretation: Tradition and Method in Contemporary Arab Thought

YASMEEN DAIFALLAH *University of California, Santa Cruz*

What is the relationship between interpretive methods and decolonizing projects? Decolonial thinkers often invoke pre-colonial traditions in their efforts to fashion “national cultures” — modes of being, understanding, and self-expression specific to a de-colonizing collectivity’s experience. While the substantive contributions of precolonial traditions to decolonial thought have received well-deserved attention in postcolonial and comparative political theory, this paper focuses on the role that interpretive methods play in generating the emancipatory sensibilities envisioned by decolonial thinkers. It draws on the contemporary Moroccan philosopher Mohammed ‘Abed Al-Jabri’s interpretive method to show that its decolonial potential lies in its “reader-centric” approach. This approach is concerned with transforming its postcolonial reader’s relationship to precolonial traditions, and not only with establishing the truth of historical texts or making use of their insights in the present as is more common in political-theoretical modes of interpretation. It does so through a tripartite process of disconnection, reconnection, and praxis.


Introduction¹

What is the relationship between interpretive methods and decolonizing projects? Anticolonial thinkers have often harked back to pre-colonial traditions in their efforts to fashion “national cultures” — modes of being, understanding, and self-expression specific to a de-colonizing collectivity’s experience, and perceived as key for achieving genuine de-colonization (Cabral 1974; Fanon [1961] 2004; Laroui [1973] 2006). To be sure, these thinkers recognized that the process of de-colonization was a political and physical struggle in the first instance, and that socioeconomic transformation was key to upturning the colonial relationship. However, many of them posited that one of the distinguishing marks of modern European colonialism was its effect on colonized subjects’ worldviews and self-perceptions, and not only their modes of social, economic, and political organization. While anti-colonial thinkers expressed this effect using the language of “culture” and “psychology” (Césaire [1956] 2010, 131; Fanon ([1952] 2008, 4)², postcolonial critics speak of a persistent kind of domination that outlasts European colonialism. For Ashis Nandy, this

“second form of colonization...colonizes minds in addition to bodies, and releases forces within colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once and for all” (1983, xi). Similarly, for Gayatri Spivak, the “epistemic violence” of colonialism operates through imperialist law and education (and prior to these, economic exploitation) to construe the colonized subject as the Other of the West, as well as obliterate that subject’s already precarious subjectivity (1988, 24-5).

In this context, intellectual and cultural activity comes to assume a special significance in the process of de-colonization on at least two levels. First, since colonization is defined as a process of cultural (psychic, epistemic, ideological) as well as political and economic domination, its undoing has to entail a process of cultural de-colonization, including a thoroughgoing critique of the effects of colonialism, an unearthing of the modes of life it eradicates or distorts, and a provision of alternative visions for social and political life. Second, this process of intellectual and cultural production could *itself* be understood as a mode of self-transformation or “self-renewal” to quote the Martinican anti-colonial thinker Aimé Césaire ([1956] 2010, 131). Put together, cultural de-colonization’s transformative potential would seem to derive from both, its substantive critique of colonial domination *and* the process through which that critique is conducted.

The wide variety of colonial legacies notwithstanding, recent scholarship in postcolonial and comparative political theory has shown how establishing a relationship to pre-colonial traditions of philosophical, aesthetic, legal, literary, and religious thought and practice has come to serve as a critical resource for anticolonial thought (Chatterjee 1986, 1993; Gray 2016; Jenco 2015; Idris 2016). This article builds on this scholarship and expands its domain by examining if certain modes of recalling and rehabilitating past traditions hold more decolonizing potential than others. To do so, it draws on the prominent contemporary Moroccan philosopher and public intellectual Mohammed ‘Abed Al-Jabri’s (1935-2010; hereafter Jabri) conceptions of tradition and method to show that in a postcolonial context, interpretive practices are not only, or primarily, a means

Yasmeen Daifallah , Assistant Professor of Political Science, University of California, Santa Cruz, ydaifall@ucsc.edu

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¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Arabic are by the author.

² Fanon famously describes the second process as “the internalization or better, the epidermalization- of that inferiority” ([1952] 2008, 4).

of examining historical texts or adapting their insights in the present. Rather, these practices should also be seen as a means of liberating their practitioner from modes of relating to past traditions induced by the colonial condition. In this vein, this article reconstructs Jabri's interpretive method to argue that its decolonial thrust lies in its "reader-centric" approach, or its concern with "rebuilding" its contemporary (Arab) reader (Jabri [1980] 1993, 12), and not only with establishing the truth of historical texts or enacting their insights in the present. This transformative process operates through a tripartite interpretive strategy of disconnection from, reconnection with, and praxis of the Islamic intellectual tradition. Ultimately, I show how this reader-centric approach tries to undo the reactive relationship that colonialism instilled between the postcolonial subject and its pre-colonial past(s), and to replace it with a relationship of critical commitment. This relationship is meant to provide a firm cultural and historical grounding for the reading subject at a time of heightened cultural interpenetration or, for Jabri, of neo-colonization ([1989] 2010, 45) and to enable a reflexive, non-defensive mode of engaging the Islamic and Western traditions of knowledge whose influences persist in the postcolonial present.³

Jabri's method also aims at producing decolonizing content by tracing what he calls the "critical-rationalist, unificatory, and civilizing [city-making]" trends in Islamic intellectual and sociopolitical history, and rooting present-day theorization in them (Jabri [1989] 2010, 123). Indeed, Jabri's efforts in that direction have garnered the attention of central decolonial thinkers such as Walter D. Mignolo, who cites Jabri as an example of how contemporary Muslim philosophers have been trying to overcome "the enduring enchantment of modernity" through "building from what is alive, today, in both 'traditions': the tradition of European modernity and the tradition of the Arab-Islamic world" (2002, 948). As my exposition of Jabri will show, however, the anti-colonial nationalism of Jabri's early career bequeaths to his thought an enduring allegiance to post-Enlightenment notions of reason and political freedom whose traces can be detected in his interpretations of the Islamic tradition of legal, theological, mystical and philosophical enquiry. Jabri's modernist bias notwithstanding, I suggest that the reader-centric orientation of his interpretive practice is more suited to the objectives of de-colonization than interpretive methods concerned with recovering the textual or perennial truths of historical texts. In addition, while Jabri's approach shares an affinity with interpretive modalities that read (Euro-American) canonical texts to mine their insights for the present, the aims of the former are more radical and capacious. In a colonial and postcolonial context where the relationship to pre-colonial traditions had been

disrupted and distorted, I read Jabri's method as an active attempt at repair and restoration through a mode of recovery that is not framed by apologism, knee-jerk refusal, or unreflective emulation, but on critical homage and reflective ownership.

The stakes envisioned by such an interpretive scheme are higher than those entailed in conventional processes of interpretation in political theory. Its reconstruction of the pre-colonial and colonial trajectories of the postcolonial subject, and its critical positioning of that subject vis-à-vis these trajectories is a condition for re-imagining future political horizons at a time when the revolutionary narratives shaping decolonization struggles have given way to what David Scott describes as an "exercise of power bereft of any pretense of the exercise of vision." For Jabri as for Scott, what is at stake is the "refusal to be seduced and immobilized by the facile normalization of [the post-colonial] present" (Scott 2004, 2). I read Jabri's conceptualization of a different relationship to the Islamic intellectual and religious tradition as a version of this "refusal" that envisions a praxis-based political horizon rooted in the conceptual and historical resources of that heritage, and aims to cultivate in its Arab readers the sensibilities appropriate to that vision.

Accordingly, this paper proceeds in six parts. The first situates Jabri's intervention in a broader conversation about the significance of "national culture" as a political category in postcolonial settings. The second frames the question of establishing a decolonial national culture as a primarily interpretive one, and places Jabri's method in conversation with comparative political theory's recent examinations of the significance of interpretive practices to formulating political visions in (post)colonial contexts. The third section provides the intellectual and historical contexts of Jabri's intervention by examining the conceptions of "tradition" and "modernity" in modern Arab political thought and their mobilization to authorize various political visions since the nineteenth century. I situate Jabri's conception of the character of, and appropriate approach towards, the Islamic tradition in these debates, and clarify its significance to forging a critical conception of tradition as both, an intellectual heritage as well as a locus of decolonial aspiration. Fifth, I offer a detailed examination of Jabri's interpretive method to analyze its reader-centric character, and explain how it is generative of a decolonial sensibility. In the sixth and conclusive section, I offer some reflections about how Jabri's approach compares to salient approaches of examining textual traditions in political theory.

The Politics of Culture in Postcolonial Thought

One of the primary achievements of postcolonial thought is its exploration of culture as a site of resistance to domination during and beyond the colonial age. Despite its bifurcation into post-structuralist critiques of Enlightenment epistemology and Marxist critiques of Western material hegemony, both these strands of thought share a concern with the role of intellectual, literary, and aesthetic production in transforming

³ The usage of the binary "West/ non-West" to designate different entities or traditions of thought is problematic in that it implies the existence of separate and monolithic geographical or civilizational entities and reproduces that binary. As used in this essay, the notion of West/non-West refers to the thinkers' own terms for dominant and subordinate political-cultural entities during and after colonialism.

consciousness. It is in that sense that, while noting the methodological and disciplinary variations within postcolonial studies, Sandra Ponzanese usefully defines it as “an ideological and intellectual awareness that has characterized the uprising of colonial countries from political and cultural domination...and that started before the date of independence” (2004, 6). Robert Young dates the origin of this concern with culture, or with the “subjective effects” of objective material exploitation, to “the notion of cultural revolution first developed by Third World socialists and communists as a strategy for resisting the ideological infiltrations of colonialism and neocolonialism” (Young 2016, 7). At its core, this concern expressed the conviction amongst Latin American, African, and Asian intellectuals since the 1960s that “coloniality operated not only in the sphere of the political and the economic, but basically at the epistemic, cultural, and aesthetic levels” (Mignolo 2011). Conceptions of the specific role that pre-colonial cultural traditions play in the formation of a decolonial national culture considerably shifted overtime. One way to usefully situate Jabri’s interpretative intervention is by locating it within the broader arch of postcolonial intellectuals’ mobilizations of pre-colonial traditions to formulate decolonial visions. At their most basic level, these visions aimed at transcending the various kinds of dependency on, and hegemony of, former colonizers in postcolonial societies.

Early postcolonial thinkers such as Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Amílcar Cabral variously conceived national culture as the product of the anticolonial intellectual’s efforts at giving point to the nascent “national consciousness” and of devising ways to express what Fanon termed a “new reality in action” (Fanon [1961] 2004, 159). These thinkers considered pre-colonial cultural traditions one of the primary resources for accomplishing that purpose, alongside the colonized intellectual’s critical assimilation of European thought or what Césaire calls “modern elements,” and his/her intuitive grasp of the fundamental and rapid transformations unfolding before their eyes (Césaire 2010, 141).

While Fanon’s conception of the role of pre-colonial traditions in forming a postcolonial national culture is implicit in his account of the “loosening up” of pre-colonial modes of expression like epic storytelling, sculpture, pottery, and dance to reflect the dynamism of the national struggle and “stimulate [the colonized’s] sensibility...and restructure his perceptions” (Fanon [1961] 2004, 174-5), Cabral’s approach is explicitly pragmatic and syncretic. In a lecture on “National Liberation and Culture,” Cabral proposes developing a national culture by encouraging a focus on local culture’s “progressive elements” and resisting its “retrogressive elements” with respect to the exigencies of the liberation struggle. Inherent in this proposition is an assumption about the compatibility of local culture’s “positive elements” with what Cabral calls a “universal culture” that critically assimilates “mankind’s achievements in science, art, and literature” (1974, 16-7). For these intellectuals, a genuinely universal culture, or to use Fanon’s term, a “new humanism,” emerges out of the intellectual’s keen understanding of a people’s “will

and restlessness” during liberation struggles, which will eventually lead to “the discovery and advancement of universalizing values” ([1961] 2004, 178-180). Though national culture may initially borrow from pre-colonial and European cultural forms, anticolonial thinkers expected it to eventually surpass these adaptations, or at the very least, to inject them with the unique qualities of local experiences that, in the words of the anticolonial historian Abdullah Laroui, would “deepen and expand the realm of Western culture and reveal that [its] alleged universality is in fact lacking...our experience, an experience that if we manage to properly crystallize, will assume a general significance” ([1973] 2006, 110-1).

More generally, thinkers writing during the height of decolonization struggles tended to hark back to a pre-colonial culture untainted by colonialism, and were sanguine about the emancipatory possibilities of combining local and European cultures. Later thinkers would realize that the relationship between pre-colonial and postcolonial cultures was mediated by what Stuart Hall describes as “transculturation,” the violent and persistent cultural transformation wrought by the colonizing experience that “was inscribed deeply within [the societies of the imperial metropolis]— as it became indelibly inscribed in the cultures of the colonized” (1996, 246). For anticolonial thinkers writing after the heyday of decolonization, colonial culture was not a phase to be transcended or an imposition to be thrust away, nor was precolonial culture a raw resource awaiting creative and spontaneous adaptation in the absence of colonization. Rather, colonialism had left its constitutive imprints on the colonized and their relationship with their pre-colonial heritage as well as modern European thought. While this condition has animated intellectual production in postcolonial settings, it has also concerned East Asian thinkers since the mid-twentieth century where, as Goto-Jones paraphrases a prominent postwar Kyoto School intellectual, Western philosophy was conceived to have “already penetrated into the core of Japanese being” necessitating a rediscovery of that being that will “naturally involve cross-fertilization” between the Western history of philosophy and “ideas previously thought of as ‘Japanese’” (2009, 25-6).

While postcolonial theory had widely examined the specific effects on anticolonial nationalist thinkers of such cross fertilizations between the colonial Enlightenment, Orientalist thought, and indigenous traditions, this article explores an historico-theoretical time intermediate between anticolonialism and postcolonialism which I call the time of “post-decolonization.” This is a time marked by the eclipse of theories of revolutionary transformation (nationalist, socialist, Marxist, etc.), the pervasiveness of authoritarianism, dependency, corruption and oppression in newly independent nations, and the demise of Third Worldist non-alignment with communism or capitalism. It is a time animated by anticolonial aspirations for “freedom, authenticity, and sovereignty” (Di Capua 2018, 5), but devoid of the theoretical and/or historical certainty about the possibility of achieving these aspirations that characterized decolonial revolutionary narratives. During this time,

national culture seizes to play the role of the expresser of liberation struggles, or the facilitator of the appearance of national consciousness on the “the stage of history” (Fanon 2004, 180). It is a time when “transculturation,” the violent and tenacious effects of colonialism on national and pre-colonial cultures, begins to be acknowledged and analyzed.

Historically, this time is postcolonial in that it occurs after the time of decolonization, and could roughly be dated to the 1960s–1980s, i.e., the time in which disillusionment with the postcolonial state had set in, and in which the Third World is increasingly dominated by the logic of (neo)liberal capitalist development. Theoretically, it is pre-postcolonial in that it retains its allegiance to modernist ends, such as socioeconomic progress understood in terms of industrialization and capitalist marketization (as an end or a “stage”), national sovereignty, and bureaucratic and scientific rationality. Thinkers inhabiting this time do not venture a holistic critique of post-Enlightenment (liberal or Marxist) narratives, even as they understand the attainment of their ends to be contingent and not historically necessary. These thinkers are therefore more reflective about the historically-specific character of modern European theories and sociopolitical arrangements, which they nonetheless consider desirable.

Like many other thinkers who reach intellectual awareness during the decolonization period and whose intellectual contributions appear in its aftermath, Jabri occupies this intellectual space-time.⁴ An active participant in the Moroccan liberation struggles of the 1950s, a longtime politburo member of the main Moroccan socialist party (*Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires*), and a relentless advocate for Arab unity, Jabri’s political commitments remained those of “liberty, unity, and socialism,” the slogan of radical Arab nationalism since the 1940s.⁵ A philosopher by training, and an academic at Morocco’s Mohammad V university in Rabat from the 1970s until the time of his passing in 2010, Jabri sought to develop a critical mode of inhabiting these commitments at a time when their achievement seemed no longer warranted by theoretical argument or the postcolonial state’s political record, and when the emerging realization of the depth of transculturation complicated the meaning of “independence” for thinkers invested in decolonization. For the post-decolonial Jabri, the choice between what “we call the Western model” and an “authentic model drawn from, or inspired by, our civilizational heritage” is a false one. This is because

[t]he [Western] model had imposed itself upon us since the beginning of European colonial expansion...as a “universal” model based on a set of attributes that [it claimed] were absent from any preceding civilizational model, such as the rational organization of state and economy, the

⁴ For a theoretical account of this juncture, see Scott (2004). For a discussion of Arab intellectual production during that period, see Frangie (2015).

⁵ Jabri explicitly expresses his adherence to these ends ([1989] 2010, 125). For an anthology of the foundational writings of radical Arab nationalism, see Haim (1962).

inauguration of science and industry, the missionizing about the new values of democracy, freedom and social justice, etc. This model imposed itself on us using its own tools, from unequal terms of trade, to interventions in local affairs... to direct rule, to economic, cultural and ideological hegemony. And the end result: the implantation of the Western model in our countries— in architecture, agriculture, commerce, administration, and culture—and its connection with the mother-capitalist node in Europe. It is thus that Arab and other colonized societies were involved in a process of “colonial” modernization...of a set of sectors that later became the central structures of the post-independence state ([1989] 2010, 19).

Thus implanted, colonial modernity became a constitutive element of the postcolonial subject’s daily life, not a matter of “choice.” The same applies to pre-colonial traditions, or “what remains of them in us.” Here too, the postcolonial subject does not have a choice “because one does not choose one’s past, but carries it along with oneself” ([1989] 2010, 18). Presenting either as a choice expresses a lack of historical awareness of the effects of colonial modernity. Rather, the point is to develop a critical understanding of the dual constitution of the postcolonial “Arab self,”⁶ a project Jabri only partially contributes to through examining the epistemological structure of the Islamic tradition.

While the following sections are dedicated to specifying how Jabri contributes to this critical understanding, it is also important to point out the roads he did not take. One could legitimately argue that the post-structuralist/post-colonial deconstruction of post-Enlightenment epistemologies was within Jabri’s intellectual reach. Indeed, Jabri’s aforementioned characterization of the “colonial modernization” of Arab societies indicates a critical position towards the “modern” values and institutions that this process introduced albeit one that does not amount to a holistic critique of European modernity. To ask of Jabri to acknowledge coloniality as constitutive of modernity would be to insert him in a “problem-space” that is not his, however.⁷ For Jabri as for other post-decolonization intellectuals living in, and writing for, postcolonial societies, the problematic remains one of attaining “progress,” i.e. of understanding and attempting to resolve the imminent political, social, economic, educational, and public health problems, in their grave immediacy. Indeed, in addition to his involvement in Moroccan anticolonial struggles, Jabri has had a career as a high school educator and inspector, co-

⁶ Jabri’s notions of the “Arab self” is charged with the Pan-Arab undertone characteristic of the decolonizing generation of progressive Arab intellectuals. It tends to assert, rather than argue, the shared experience of Arabness. Elsewhere in his writings, Jabri expresses a critical awareness of the historicity of identity as a concept that gets shaped through “existence rather than essence,” and of Arab identity as an historical formation that was mobilized by Arab thinkers and leaders to gain autonomy from Ottoman and colonial rule in the late nineteenth and the early-mid twentieth centuries respectively ([1995] 2012, 10-1).

⁷ I use “problem-space” in the sense defined by Scott, as “an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable (conceptual as well as ideological-political) stakes hangs (2004, 4).

wrote a high school textbook on philosophy and Islamic thought, and played a key role in shaping Morocco's post-independence education policy (Jebari 2018, 83). The problem-space in which Jabri was engaged arguably represents the mode in which many peoples outside the Global North conceive of progressive change—namely, as an aspiration for self-sovereignty, participatory politics, distributive justice, and a rational arrangement of the social and political spheres. The insight we gain by examining this habitus is that of attaining a better grasp of the vantage point of intellectuals and peoples who inhabit the commitments of post-decolonization time. More importantly, this vantage point offers us an insight into how interpretative strategies can facilitate shifts from a foundational adherence to specific political or moral visions (Marxist, nationalist, etc.), to a more tentative and conditional affinity to such visions that is premised on a praxis-based sensibility, and rooted in pre-colonial traditions.

A Question of Interpretation

Jabri's thought posits a question about the role of pre-colonial traditions in shaping decolonial political visions in a global order in which the West retains political and cultural hegemony, and in which colonial legacies still have palpable institutional and epistemic effects. The thrust of this question is interpretative. It explores the possibility of fashioning modes of decolonized being and understanding that do not re-produce (imagined versions of) pre-colonial pasts, or submit to the conceptual and institutional schemes of the (former) colonizer, and that forge a relationship to past traditions that is neither apologetic nor dismissive, but nourishing and enabling.

Despite the profound interpretative challenges and political stakes posed by these questions, attention to the reading strategies devised by thinkers outside the West (i.e., thinkers whose primary audience is not Euro-American academics or publics) to tackle the relationship between past and present have been relatively scant within the field of political science. To be sure, since the 1990s, the subfield of "comparative political theory" has produced broader and deeper examinations of the range of responses that non-Western political thinkers have provided to questions of political identity and change in the aftermath of colonialism. While questions of interpretation have haunted comparative political theory since its inception, they have been more focused on delineating the appropriate modes of interpreting non-Western political traditions from the asymmetrical standpoint of scholars situated in Euro-American academic institutions (Euben 1999; Godrej 2009; Jenco 2007; March 2009). More recently, political theorists have started to pay close attention to how practices of interpretation undertaken in colonial, postcolonial, and East Asian contexts constitute political theoretic acts in their own right. Such studies have shown the role of interpretative modalities in enabling meaningful innovation and intellectual self-transformation in late nineteenth century Chinese reformist thought (Jenco 2014, 659), and in the

"creative misappropriation" of pre-colonial traditions to help "navigate European empire and reflect on colonial and postcolonial contexts" for late nineteenth and early twentieth century Arab editors and publishers (Idris 2016, 383). Covering intellectual production in more recent periods, Euben and Zaman (2009) discuss how the anti-intellectualist mode of interpreting the Islamic tradition of the Islamic revivalist Sayyid Qutb (1906-66) was borne out of his concerns with achieving decolonization and critiquing the emergent secular postcolonial state, Goto-Jones (2009) elaborates on the Kyoto School's world-historical mode of interpreting European and non-European history, and Iqtidar draws on contemporary debates about applying *Shari'ah* in the present to offer a sharper definition of the concept of tradition for political theorists (2016, 424).

My analysis of Jabri builds on this scholarship's examinations of modern constructions of cultural pasts as a site of self-transformation and formulation of future political visions. It further expands their focus to the decolonial concern with attaining political, economic, and cultural independence and progress, a concern that animated (and, as I have suggested above, still animates) many progressive intellectuals and general publics in what is commonly referred to as the Third World or the Global South. I do this through analyzing the role of Jabri's reader-centric interpretative strategy in re-orienting postcolonial readers towards their past to produce a simultaneous and carefully calibrated sense of affinity to, and critical detachment from, that past. Before doing so, I will first sketch the contours of modern Arab constructions of the Islamic tradition. I situate Jabri's intervention as an attempt to transport conceptions of the cultural past from a decolonial problem-space concerned with recalling, reconciling with, or rebuffing that tradition, to a post-decolonization problem-space that aims at historicizing *and* maintaining the relevance of that tradition.

The Politics of *Turāth* in Modern Arab Thought

Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* perceptively locates the genesis of claims about the existence of a coherent pre-colonial "Arab culture" in the anticolonial period, when colonized intellectuals and political leaders responded to colonial charges about the barbarity of Arabs by refuting them on an equally "Arab" basis (Fanon 2004, 150-4). Fanon's remark about the constructed "Arabness" of Arab culture should not be read as a contestation of the existence of pre-colonial Arab intellectual and literary production (what the referents "Arab," "Arab-Islamic," and "Islamic" heritage denote in modern Arab intellectual discourse).⁸ Rather, the significance of his remark lies in the identification of liberation struggles as the site of transformation of an intellectually diverse and temporally expansive body of

⁸ The use of these qualifiers usually indicates the ideological commitments of the intellectual trend in question. Whereas Islamists tend to use the qualifier "Islamic," liberal and nationalist thinkers use "Arab" and "Arab-Islamic" to emphasize the Arab linguistic and/or cultural elements in the Islamic tradition.

work from a field of socially and politically relevant knowledge, to the decisive marker of Arab identity and difference. It is in this sense that the “colonial encounter” between Arab peoples and modern Europe (often dated to the 1798 Napoleonic invasion of Egypt and Syria) could be seen as the point at which the Arabic-language tradition of Islamic knowledge ceased to only be a historically extended, socially embodied practice of rational inquiry (McIntyre 1988; Asad 2003) and became, in addition, the inherited past of modern Arabs and their “epistemological anchor of the past in the present” (Massad 2007, 17). As discussed in the next section, one of Jabri’s key contributions to the Arab debate on the relevance of the Arab and/or Islamic cultural and religious heritage (*turāth*) in the 1970s and 1980s was to clarify the status of that concept as an ideological formation specific to the anticolonial period, and to explain the intellectual and political consequences of continuing to inhabit it ideologically, i.e. reactively and polemically.

Modern Arab thinkers’ use of the notions of Arab and/or Islamic “civilization,” “culture,” and “heritage” as markers of identity did not mean that pre-colonial modes of engaging the Islamic tradition ceased to exist. Not only did these modes persist amidst traditionally educated Islamic scholars (Zaman 2002, 2012), but many Muslim modernists, including Jabri, considered themselves interlocutors in this discursive tradition by mobilizing some of its central methods such as renewal (*tajdīd*), revival (*ihyā*), and the practice of original reasoning from within the tradition (*ijtihād*) (Iqtidar 2016). The pre-modern concept of “tradition,” and the modern concept of “heritage” should therefore not be considered mutually exclusive. However, what the anticolonial construal of *turāth* is meant to underline are the efforts of Arab reformists, *belle-lettrists*, politicians and Islamic revivalists at responding to colonial charges of irrationality and despotism, and at rethinking the Islamic tradition in relation to European post-Enlightenment notions of reason, liberty and individual autonomy during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Hourani 1983). It is in these re-interpretative efforts that we can situate the genesis of the juxtaposition of “tradition,” understood as an identity-marker and as boundedness to extant conventions of thought and behavior, and “modernity,” conceived as the kernel of reason, science, and freedom from pre-modern religious, social, and political binds as well as the marker of coloniality. Heir to this generation’s attempts at thinking through this juxtaposition, Jabri belongs to a subsequent generation of revolutionary struggle and postcolonial disillusionment.

Specifically, Jabri’s contributions emerged in the intellectual atmosphere that followed the collapse of the union between Egypt and Syria in 1961, the thudding Arab defeat by Israel in the 1967 Six Day War, the lapse of Lebanon into civil war in 1975, and the emergence of what seemed to be a revolutionary “Islamic alternative” with the 1978-79 Iranian Revolution. This was a time marked by a deepening of both secular and religious critiques of the failure of post-independence regimes to deliver on their promise of strong, independent states. Much of that critique centered on the role that pre-

colonial traditions of religious thought and sociopolitical organization should play in the postcolonial present. On the one hand, Marxist and Arab nationalist thinkers considered the continued preoccupation with the “heritage” a sign of, and a reason for, Arab societies’ inability to transcend their socially and culturally “traditionalist” past (Al-Azm [1968] 2007). On the other, Islamist critics attributed the demise of the post-independence state (and of war-torn Europe) to its divergence from the true path laid out by the Qur’an and its successful application in the early Islamic period (Shehata 2012). The Arab intellectual landscape of the 1970s and 1980s thus seemed polarized between a secular elite stipulating rupture with the Arab-Islamic heritage as a pre-condition for “progress” envisioned along European terms, and an increasingly popular conception of a “return to true Islam” as the sole solution for the postcolonial predicaments of authoritarianism and political and economic weakness.⁹ Unproductively caught between these poles, the literature of the 1980s and 1990s often spoke of the “crisis of Arab thought,” a reference to what many Arab intellectuals saw as a failure to transcend an ideologically-driven polemic and develop a body of social and political thought that could reflect and guide the condition of Arab societies (Boullata 1990). Amidst this crisis literature, Jabri’s intervention should be read as a response to the Islamist challenge “from thinkers with backgrounds in secular traditions of political thought to address nativist and essentialist claims about the heritage, and preempt claims of inauthenticity against those outside Islamist circles” (Browsers 2015, 136). Jabri’s formulation of an “authentic” and “non-essentialist” conceptualization of *turāth* was an attempt to transcend what, by the 1980s, seemed like a stale debate.

Jabri rise to prominence amongst Arab intellectual and general public circles in the 1980s and 1990s could be attributed to several reasons. First, the intellectual range, rigor, and accessibility of his re-interpretations of the Islamic intellectual tradition culminating in his highly acclaimed, and widely commented upon and critiqued, four-volume *Critique of Arab Reason* (1984-2001). Second, Jabri’s politically engaged and professionally distinguished profile cast him as an “organic intellectual” rather than an ivory-tower academic. Third, in addition to his academic writings, Jabri also wrote pamphlets on highly salient political issues such as democracy ([1994] 2004), identity ([1995] 2012), and religion and politics (1996) for a general readership. Last, and as Jebari (2018) points out, Jabri’s position as a critical voice hailing from the North African “periphery” of Arab intellectual production whose traditional center was Egypt and the Levant, and who exclusively wrote in Arabic and staunchly advocated Arab unity, all imbued his writings with an additional layer of attractiveness and controversy, especially after numerous volumes have been written in response to his theses on *turāth* by major intellectuals of the day (e.g. Abdurrahman 1994; Tarabishi 1996-2010).

Jabri’s greatest intellectual investment was in overcoming the standstill in what he took to be the “question

⁹ For an account of this juncture, see Kassab (2009).

of an entire generation: how do we relate to *turāth*?" (1991, 9). He critiqued extant responses to this question on the grounds that they were all uncritically emulative of the past in one form or another. On the one end of the spectrum of such responses lay liberal and Marxist thinkers who understood the present Arab condition by analogizing it to the European past (Jabri [1980] 1993, 14-5). On the other end lay Islamic reformists and revivalists who projected their present grievances and future hopes on the early Islamic past and considered a revival of that (variously imagined) past as the solution to present social and political problems (12-3). Though both secular and Islamic reformist currents have had decisive marks on Jabri's intellectual formation (Jabri 1997), he considered them reactive in that they figured the past as an embodiment of all what the present lacked: social cohesion, political unity and strength, and cultural vibrancy and rationality. Instead, he offered his Arab readers a promising alternative: a systematic examination of what, in line with earlier Arab nationalist thinkers, he termed the "Arab-Islamic heritage" (*al-turāth al-'arabi al-islami*) that stresses its historicity, traces its constitutive influence in the present, and assesses its potential relevance for an emancipatory political and cultural project. By "emancipatory" Jabri meant an intellectual commitment to "critical rationalism," or the immanent critique of *turāth* and European thought in their historical contexts (Jabri [1989] 2010, 43), and a political commitment to democracy (Jabri [1994] 2004, 365).

Jabri's work has recently received more attention in Anglophone scholarship, most of which has been dedicated to situating him within Arab intellectual debates on *turāth*, and analyzing his epistemic classification of the Islamic tradition into textual (rhetorical, exegetical, and juridical), gnostic, and philosophically rationalist modes of knowledge production (Abu Rabi' 2003; Browsers 2015; Eyadat et al. 2018; Salvatore 1995). In what follows, I build on and broaden this "area-studies" focus on Jabri by examining the decolonial upshot of his redefinition of, and interpretative approach towards, *turāth*. Specifically, I argue that a) Jabri's redefinition of *turāth* de-stabilizes existing conceptions of pre-colonial traditions to clarify their origins in the colonial intervention and its after-effects,¹⁰ and b) that the decolonial potential of his reading strategy lies in its simultaneous attempt to detach and embed the reader in that (redefined) tradition in order to enable new ways of practicing it.

Redefining *Turāth*

Jabri's central contribution to the *turāth*-modernity polemics of the 1970s–1980s was to highlight the ideological character of *turāth* through noting its genesis in the Arab-European colonial encounter. Before this juncture, the word *turāth* was a linguistically uncommon way of referring to the "inheritance" that is disbursed amongst the successors of the deceased (Jabri 1991, 24;

Massad 2007, 17). However, since the early nineteenth century, the term *turāth* has come to refer to the "literary, religious, aesthetic, and intellectual traditions" produced throughout the Islamic territories during what Jabri considers the fecund period of Islamic culture (8th-16th centuries).¹¹ Still, this definition does not capture the way *turāth* is experienced by those who regard themselves as its heirs (Jabri 1991, 30). For modern-day Arabs, *turāth* is

[n]ot the remnant of their historical culture, but its completion and perfection: It is theology and law, language and literature, reason and mentality, longing and expectation. In other words, it is epistemology and ideology, and their rational bases and affective charge in Arab-Islamic culture.... It is the living presence of the past in the consciousness (*wa'i*) and inner worlds (*nufūs*) of present day Arabs (Jabri 1991, 24).

Jabri's definition posits *turāth* as a concept with a two-fold character. First, it is a body of knowledge that plays a major role in constituting the subjectivity of its bearers, both as an intellectual-religious tradition and as an embodiment of a lost potential for cultural and political flourishing (24). Second, *turāth* is an expression of these peoples' current anxieties and future desires (for fending threat, achieving progress, etc.), and is therefore ideological and affective. In short, *turāth* is experienced by contemporary Arabs as an epistemological-ideological-affective complex that "has no counterpart in European notions of cultural heritage" (24).

The reason for this "fusion" (*indimaj*) of various experiential dimensions in the concept of *turāth* lies in the way colonialism distorted the colonized subject's relationship with its cultural pasts (Jabri 1991, 24). In a Hegelian-Marxist dialectical vein, Jabri conceives this relationship, absent external intrusion or threat, as one in which the past provides the foundations (*usūl*) that enable budding social forces to contend with and surmount existing ones by mobilizing ideas extant in a community's collective memory to cast the present as a deviation from these foundations. Jabri offers prophet Muhammad's formulation of Islam as a revival of Abrahamic monotheism, and European Renaissance's regeneration of Greco-Roman culture as examples of a relationship to the past in which it offers principles that ground and authenticate the transcendence (*tajawuz*) of the present condition (Jabri [1989] 2010, 20-4). This relationship to the past is the cornerstone of Jabri's conception of the process of historical -socioeconomic, political and ideational- change which he terms "the process of awakening/renaissance," *al-'amaliyya al-nahdawiyya*, or simply, *al-nahda* (20). European modernity (*al-hadātha*) is but a specific instantiation of that process. Common to both these awakening/modernizing moments is a critical-rational (*'aqlaniyya-naqdiyya*) impulse which, together with an underlying change in socioeconomic structure, are key to transforming a collectivity's mode of being. Following his interpretation of the medieval philosopher

¹⁰ Jabri is not the only one to have performed this de-stabilization (e.g. Asad 2003; Massad 2007), but he was amongst the first to formulate it and to present it to an Arab audience.

¹¹ Jabri's periodization reflects the Orientalist narrative about the rise and decline of Islamic civilization. For a critique of this position, see Hallaq (1984).

Averroes (Ibn Rushd), Jabri defines “critique” as the ability to understand and question extant modes of knowledge-production on their own terms, and rationalism as the belief that “human reason’s capacity for knowledge is unbounded since all things have causes [that humans could discern] in nature as in the normative principles of *Shari’a*” (1986, 535-6).

Whereas the *nahda* process had operated seamlessly in the European and early-Islamic cases, European colonialism disrupted the dialectical flow between past, past, and future for the colonized. This is because “external threat, especially when cast as a challenge to the defeated self’s viability and personality, makes the latter take refuge in the past.” Instead of operating as a set of foundations propelling social and cultural movement from within a collectivity, colonial threat makes *turāth* assume “an inflated, glorified” status for the colonized as long as that threat persists ([1989] 2010, 26). This distorted relationship with *turāth* is compounded by the fact that, in the Arab (and arguably the postcolonial and East Asian) case(s), that which is perceived as a “threat” is also considered a “model.” To the colonized, “Europe represents colonial occupation, monopoly and hegemony... as well as modernity, progress, and all the material and moral meanings [these concepts] entail, such as science, technology, freedom and democracy.” This dual character of the colonizer, and, later, of “the West,” produces “tension, anxiety, and confusion” in the Arab self’s orientation towards *turāth*, which is now conceived as both, refuge and obstacle to progressive change. Jabri posits this tension as the bases of the binary “tradition-modernity” or “*turāth-hadātha*” that had animated Arab thinkers since the nineteenth century (Jabri [1989] 2010, 26).

According to this understanding of historical change, a collectivity’s cultural heritage should not be in tension or opposition with its intrinsically initiated process of socio-political transformation. The binary “tradition-modernity” is a colonial effect, not a conceptual juxtaposition. The dissolution of that binary, and the restoration of the past’s progressive potential rest on transforming the postcolonial subject’s relationship to it.

Before elaborating on Jabri’s attempt to enact that transformation, it is important to underline what he accomplishes by defining *turāth* as both a religio-intellectual tradition and an ideological-affective concept, and by de-mystifying the binary *turāth*-modernity. For Arab intellectuals, Jabri’s notion of *turāth* problematized its secular (liberal and progressive) depiction as a “tradition” (in the Kantian sense) or a “fetter” (in the Marxist sense) that compromises the ability of autonomous individuals, or progressive social forces to transform their condition.¹² It also challenged the Islamist valorization of (specific) Islamic interpretative traditions in the present.¹³ Jabri’s re-definition reveals these positions as effects of the

distortion that colonialism introduced in the subject’s relationship with its past, and to the figuration of the colonizer as both model and enemy.

For political theorists and historians of political thought who conceive tradition as “mean[ing] a range of things including the longevity of particular ideas, the lineage of modes of thinking, and the provenance of ideas” (Iqtidar 2016, 425), Jabri’s definition of *turāth* specifies the ways in which longstanding traditions of systematic knowledge production (Islamic, Indian, Confucian, Aztec, etc.) are retrospectively construed in the wake of colonialism and the global expansion of Euro-American cultural influence. Rather than regarding tradition as a set of ideas with a distinct politico-historical trajectory, Jabri’s postcolonial (Arab) subject experiences it as at once, the locus of identity and potential rebirth, a sophisticated and authoritative interpretative tradition, and an archaic body of knowledge with little practical relevance except for religious guidance and linguistic study. This phenomenological account of the tension that marks the post-colonial experience of precolonial tradition is of special significance to political theoretical examinations of non-European traditions of political knowledge, both within and without the geographical West.

Jabri’s perspective on tradition might seem to echo (or, more accurately, to presage) postcolonial theory’s critique of “tradition-modernity” as symptomatic of a Eurocentric historicism that stipulates: “first in the West, and then elsewhere” (Chakrabarty 2000, 6). Yet, the decolonizing significance of Jabri’s redefinition of *turāth* does not only reside in the substantive intervention it stages in its context, but extends to its mode of performance. Delivered didactically and accessibly, Jabri’s re-conception of *turāth*-modernity enacts the demystification for its reader as it utters it. Given the colonially-induced distortion of the relationship between the (post)colonial subject and *turāth*, such an enactment presents a necessary first-step for reworking that relationship. This reader-centric quality is at the heart of Jabri’s understanding of the public responsibility of the Third World intellectual to “modernize (*tahdīth*) the rational and moral standards (*ma’āyir*) of judgement” from within the confines of “the regnant culture...thus addressing the intellectuals, the educated, and the people as a whole” (Jabri 1991, 17).

That being said, Jabri’s insistence on an indigenously-founded modernity should not be read as a strategic deployment of pre-colonial traditions for modernist purposes. Rather, it stems from a conception of modernity (or more generally, of *nahda*) as a process that *has* to have intrinsic roots in order for it to initiate movement from within a given society. If modernity is a self-referential discourse, then a decolonial intellectual’s reliance on European modernity—however “universal” the latter figures itself— to institute change is an irresponsible posture (Jabri 1991, 16). Rather than revoking “universality” altogether, however, Jabri believes in the possibility of drawing instructive insights from other traditions, provided that the proper conditions for this adaptation are met. To “liberate

¹² For examples of this argument, see ‘Aflaq (1987).

¹³ Jabri distinguishes between Islamists (i.e. political actors whose claims are grounded in an interpretation of Islamic rule) and traditional Islamic scholars. Whereas the former’s discourse is infected by colonial threat, the latter’s mode of knowledge-production is outdated (Jabri 1991, 28-9).

[ourselves] from the West – on the intellectual and cultural levels- is to treat it critically, i.e. to read its culture in its historicity and relativity, and to discern its progressive elements and implant them in our soil” (Jabri [1989] 2010, 44). A preliminary step for such a critical engagement with the West is the enactment of this critical sensibility vis-à-vis *turāth*. This does not only develop the critical muscle required for deconstructing European culture, it also leads to the “acquisition of a renewed (*jadīda*) and authentic (*asīla*) rationality that could sustain the principles of contemporary knowledge” (44). The reinterpretation of *turāth* produces a subjectivity that is modern, i.e., critical, rational, and rooted in the new understanding of tradition generated by the re-interpretative act. In this vision, modernity is not a set of ideals or sensibilities to be embodied wholesale when the subject is rationally persuaded of their worth, but a transformative process through which a subject must pass within its own cultural frame of reference. Otherwise, that process risks being superficial and reactive, i.e., precisely Jabri’s diagnosis of the Arab intellectual response to colonialism. It is to Jabri’s delineation of this “modernizing” mode of reinterpreting *turāth* that I now turn.

Turāth and the Production of the De-colonized Self

Jabri’s method should be read in two related registers. First, it is an intervention in intellectual and ideological debates about how best to read historical texts associated with interpreting Islamic revelation. As Jabri sees it, extant (secular and Islamist) modes of relating to *turāth* approach it with the question: “what is there to take or leave?” The problem with this approach is its ahistoricity, “for tradition is not a merchandise produced at once, outside of history.” In a dialectical fashion reminiscent of his definition of *nadha*, Jabri describes *turāth* as “made up of successive moments that eliminate or complement each other; moments of thought that express a reality, and act upon it.” Understanding *turāth* in its historicity does not mean consigning it to the archive, however. Rather, the possibility of “investing” *turāth* in the present emerges out of the practice of “assimilate[ing] it as a whole, in its diverse trends and throughout its historical stages” (Jabri 1991, 121). This is what Jabri’s reading practice opts to do.

Second, Jabri’s method should be read as an attempt to cultivate a specific relationship between the reading subject (the collective “Arab self”) and its past using what I call a reader-centric mode of interpretation. The aim of this method is to overcome a contradiction in the Arab postcolonial subject’s relationship with *turāth* between, on the one hand, “the ideological weight of *turāth*’s presence in contemporary Arab consciousness” and on the other, “the objective, historical distance that seems to separate *turāth* from the contemporary [modern] moment with which that consciousness wishes to engage” (Jabri 1991, 31). The aim of Jabri’s interpretative strategy is to resolve this contradiction, and

along with it, the postcolonial subject’s alienation from a “past” to which it is attached but which seems to have lost its relevance, and a “present” in whose knowledge-production it plays no part. The decolonial thrust of this reading practice lies in its attempts to make *turāth* available for contemporary social and political theorizing by substituting the reader’s reactive connection to pre-colonial intellectual traditions with one based on holistic understanding and considered reflection. While Jabri consciously draws on European theoretical tools to modify this relationship, I show how the workings of his method undo conventional assumptions about the relationship between the reading subject and its textual object, and about the ultimate aim of historical interpretation.

Jabri’s method is premised on establishing a critical distance between the modern-day reader and canonical texts of the past. Rather than assume an “autonomous” subject able to attain such distance from the aspirations and concerns that animate its reading of *turāth*, Jabri devises an elaborate procedure to enable this “distancing” to take place. This two-step heuristic works through “separating the subject” (*faṣl al-dhāt*) from its “object (*al-mawdō’*),” the historical text, followed by re-connecting (*waṣl*) that self with the object. To achieve the “separation” between the modern reader and the historical text, Jabri deploys a blend of structuralist and historiographical methods.¹⁴ The first dimension of this interpretative approach is structuralist in two senses: it analyzes a text as a set of relationships between signifiers (*alfāz*) and not as individual terms referring to a distinct signified (*ma’na*), and it conceives bodies of works by a particular author/trend as a “structure” (*binya*) animated by an identifiable problematic that could “accommodate variations amongst the author’s works” (Jabri 1991, 32). A “problematic” expands beyond the “spatial-temporal perimeter” of any one thinker to encompass all theoretical thinking within a given society during a given historical period revolving around “a set of problems that interact in such a way that it is impossible to resolve them in isolation” (Jabri 1999, 33). The objective of this first step is to “distill the meaning of a text from within the text itself,” not from past interpretations or the projection of present desires (Jabri 1991, 32).

Jabri supplements this synchronic analysis of the internal problematic within a thinker’s corpus with a diachronic analysis of the text’s historical and ideological context. “Historical analysis connects the ideas of the author with their cultural, political, and social context. This serves to grasp the historicity of the text” as well as test the soundness of the foregoing structuralist analysis. Jabri complements this historical analysis with one that examines the ideological intervention that a given text/corpus performed in its context, which he specifies as the “only way for a text to regain its historicity” (Jabri 1991, 32). Jabri’s privileging

¹⁴ Jabri’s indebtedness to early Foucaultian structuralism, though seldom acknowledged, is evident in his reference to the concepts of “episteme” and “archaeology” in his *Critique of Arab Reason* ([1984] 2009, 37).

of ideological analysis will become apparent in the critical role it plays in reconnecting the text/thinker to its contemporary reader.

The second step in Jabri's interpretative strategy involves reconnecting the subject with the object. Whereas Jabri conceives "separation" as a process, he sees "reconnection" as an imperative. Such a position is consistent with Jabri's intellectual commitment to a decolonizing project that conceives the re-appropriation of the past as the primary modernizing move, and with his ideological affinity to Arab nationalism. Indeed, the upshot of Jabri's entire project is the production of continuity (*istimrāriyya*) with the present on different terms:

[*turāth*] is a part of ourselves that we have "extracted," not so that we can discard it, gaze at it as an anthropologist would his "civilizational" or "structural" constructs, or reflect on it as a philosopher would his abstract ideals. We separate it from ourselves *in order to reclaim it in new ways*....to make it contemporary to us through making it understandable (*mafhūm*) and reasonable (*ma'qūl*), as well as ideologically and intellectually available for use in the present (and why not if we put it to use rationally and critically)? (Jabri 1991, 29; emphasis added)

Jabri's investment in "rationalism" notwithstanding, one thing to note about the reconnection process is his valuation of the affective bond that ties contemporary Arab readers to what they see as their cultural heritage, and of the impossibility of a "subject-object" relationship between the postcolonial Arab subject and *turāth*. While Jabri's definition of *turāth* associates it with a colonially-induced affective charge, his conception of the "reconnection" process implies that the problem does not consist in being affectively connected to pre-colonial traditions, but in the kind of affect underlying that connection. Instead of fervent or anguished loyalty, superficial homage, or reactive rejection, all of which result from the aforementioned status of the colonizer as enemy and model, Jabri urges a considered, reflective belonging based on a close and expansive reading of the trajectory of knowledge-production in the Islamic tradition.

The decolonizing impetus of this reflective-affective reconnection does not only stem from its attempt to neutralize the effect of colonialism on a subject's relationship to pre-colonial knowledge traditions. It also resides in the twofold challenge this reconnection poses to the post-Enlightenment conception of the subject-object distinction as the "fundamental presupposition" for knowledge-production (Quijano 2007, 172). First, Jabri's separation-connection scheme does not posit the postcolonial knowing subject as a self-sufficient being examining an external object, but as one whose subjectivity is *constituted* by that object. Second, unlike the subject of European Enlightenment, the postcolonial subject is not a "bearer of reason" for whom emotion mars the process of true understanding (173). Rather, that subject's interest in attaining a "more rational" comprehension of its (constitutive) object is a product of, and eventually productive of, an

affective bond with it. This reading is decolonizing in that it upturns both, the "fusion" between subject (the colonized self) and object (cultural heritage) which Jabri sees as a product of colonial threat, and the Cartesian-Kantian conception of a sovereign subject who, as Susan Hekman notes, stands as the "epistemological grounds for the search for indubitable knowledge, the search that is the hallmark of modernity" (1992, 1098). Additionally, while Jabri's conception of the postcolonial Arab subject's relationship to *turāth* would seem to resemble the postmodern conception of the subject as "the product of the intersection of discourses that structure the linguistic world" (1098), Jabri's diagnostic is different in one significant respect: its objective is explicitly and relentlessly normative. While postmodernism deconstructs subjectivity to better understand its constitution through language and power, Jabri deconstructs the relationship between the postcolonial subject and its pre-colonial heritage in order to actively transform it from one of reaction (or of being acted upon, *infi'āl*) to one of critical ownership that enables action, *fi'l* (Jabri 1991, 17).

The final step in Jabri's interpretative approach is one which he does not include in the methodological section of his work, but which I suggest is crucial to understanding the drift of his project as a whole. This step could be termed: praxis and experimentation. In the conclusion to the second volume of *The Critique of Arab Reason*, Jabri restates that modernity could only be initiated from within a society's culture, not imposed upon it as ready-made concepts, methods or institutions. He then poses a hypothetical question: "but how could we initiate renewal and modernization from within our own tradition?" to which he responds by indicating that there could be no definitive answer to this question, since it is primarily a "practical question, not an epistemological one. It is a question whose answer does not lie in knowledges that could be supplied to the inquirer, but in ongoing, cumulative, and ever-changing praxis (*al-mumārāsa*)" (1999, 568).

A prime example of this praxis-based position is Jabri's identification of the transformative locus of his interpretation of Islamic philosophy. Substantively, Jabri notes that medieval Islamic philosophy featured various appropriations of ancient Greek philosophy, particularly the works of Plato and Aristotle. Consequently, to "an outside observer who would restrict his study to [Muslim philosophers'] output from the standpoint of the cognitive output it disseminates...philosophical thinking in Islam [would seem to be] an inert body, and its contributions faded copies of the Greek originals," or, at best, to be "restaging the divisions" amongst the various schools of Greek philosophy (1999, 39-40). Such is the position Jabri ascribes to Orientalists like Ernest Renan and T.J. De Boer respectively. In contrast, by situating Islamic philosophy in its historical context, Jabri frames it as a "body of thought" (not disparate appropriations of Greek philosophy) unified by the underlying "problematic" of reconciling transmitted knowledge (revelation and the prophetic traditions) and reason (the independent

exercise of human intellect) (1999, 35). Accordingly, the prism through which the contributions of Islamic philosophy should be read is specifically how each Islamic philosopher “vested the same cognitive material [i.e. Greek philosophy] with diverse ideological aims” (39). It is in the “ideological function” of its interpretations of Greek philosophy that the “dynamism and evolution” of Islamic philosophy should be sought (39). More importantly, it is in the ideological role of Greek philosophy within Islamic thought that present relevance could be located, for while “the cognitive content of any [premodern] philosophy is in large part a dead subject incapable of reviving...ideological content is capable of having another life that goes on throughout the ages, in different forms” (122).

With this in mind, Jabri examines the range of ways in which Greek philosophy was brought to bear by Islamic philosophers on the transmission-reason problematic, ranging from attempts to give reason precedence over transmitted data in case of their contradiction, to intellectual projects aimed at fusing the structures of ancient Greek and Islamic religious thought (Jabri 1999, 38). Ultimately, however, Jabri privileges Averroes’s (1126–1198) “critical” position which stipulates that “rationality should be noted from *within* the core of [religion and philosophy]” and by reference to their own standards of evidence and argumentation, with the understanding that each of them aspires to the same goals: “to search for truth...and to incite people to virtue” (104-5).¹⁵ The reason for this privileging is the potential applicability of Averroes’s vision of the relationship between religion and philosophy to the way “[we should] assume our relationship to tradition and...to universal [Western] contemporary thought, which for us represents what Greek philosophy represented for Averroes” (126). Specifically, Jabri indicates that to adopt an Averroist position would be to understand the Islamic tradition and modern European knowledge from within their respective theoretical and historical contexts, to learn how to “recognize what is universal in both—and that it is possible for us to reinvest [it] in order to re-establish our specificity—and what is particular, what is circumstantial to an era or a people which we must know to enrich our experience and our vision of the world” (128).¹⁶

Ultimately then, Jabri locates the pertinence of Averroes’s oeuvre in its capacity to critically re-orient its present-day Arab readers (for whom Jabri stages Averroes’s philosophy as part of their cultural heritage)

¹⁵ Jabri’s interpretations of Islamic philosophy have been critiqued by some of his Arab interlocutors (e.g. Tarabishi 1996-2010), and its findings have been questioned by more recent scholarship on Islamic philosophy and jurisprudence (e.g. Koshul 2004). The point here is not to examine the accuracy of Jabri’s interpretations but to focus on the decolonizing impetus of his method.

¹⁶ Jabri is not the first Arab intellectual to valorize Averroes, but his appropriation thereof is distinct for its focus on the ideological function of Averroes’s philosophy (the consideration of reason and religion as separate and equal modes of truth-seeking) and not (or not mainly or only) its substantive content. For other adaptations of Averroes in contemporary Arab thought, see Kügelgen (1996).

towards their past and towards European modernity. Indeed, Jabri’s own historico-structuralist method would seem to be inspired by Averroist insight. To be sure, Jabri’s adaptation of Averroes features a puzzling inattention to the power-differential between the West and the non-West, the persistence of which animates Jabri’s method in the first place. Relatedly, his assumption about the existence of “universal truths” that could be discerned across time and space overlooks the relationship between the workings of power and the processes of knowledge-production, to which Jabri displays sensitivity elsewhere in his work (for example, Jabri 1991, 26). That being said, what distinguishes this reading from other secular-modernist readings of Averroes in the 1980s–1990s, is its emphasis that what remains most relevant of Averroes’s thought is the practical wisdom (or what Jabri calls the “ideological content”) it offers with regard to approaching the West and the past. This contrasts with readings of Averroes that celebrate him as the initiator of a secular rationalism that separates religious and philosophical spheres of enquiry (Najjar 2004). While Jabri also privileges Averroes’s “critical-rationalist” epistemology, he is attentive that it could only be understood from within the context of an Islamic cosmology that sees the world as ordered according to divine will (Jabri 1986, 535-6).

Jabri’s advocacy of this “ideological” take-away underlines his fundamental commitment to praxis-in-the-present. The decolonial potential of present appropriations of the past lies in examining the theoretical and socio-political plausibility of historically-grounded insights, and not in the wholesale rejection or selective revival of “luminary moments” of Islamic history. Cultivating this critical-historical, yet present-oriented, sensibility is what would enable envisioning the future not by reference to “the past of others, but [by] construct[ing] it from our own reality” (Jabri 1999, 130).

Conclusion: Jabri’s Decolonizing Method in Perspective

In *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, Partha Chatterjee describes the problematic of nationalist thought as being “the reverse of that of Orientalism.” Namely, while the object of nationalist thought “is still the ‘oriental,’ who retains the essentialist character depicted in Orientalist discourse, he is not passive, non-participating. He is seen to possess a subjectivity which he can himself ‘make’” Despite nationalist thought’s construal of the oriental subject as determined by others, “he is still seen as active, autonomous, and sovereign” (1986, 38). One way to understand Jabri’s interpretative method is as an attempt to overcome this paradox in nationalist conceptions of anticolonial subjectivity by seeking to transform that subjectivity from one constituted by others (for Jabri, European and Arab ideological discourses about the Islamic tradition) to one that is self-constituting. Though self-constitution is a modernist ideal of the first order (Hall 2004), the

self-constitution that Jabri advocates is not premised on the possibility of a *tabula rasa* on which a new subjectivity could be inscribed, or on revoking or dismissing the current constitution of the postcolonial subject, which he sees as a complex historical, political, socio-economic, and cultural process (Jabri [1989] 2010, 15–20). Rather, as examined throughout this essay, Jabri's efforts are directed at isolating and reworking the composition of the cultural component of this constitution through method.

This reader-centric approach aims at transforming its postcolonial reader in two ways: The first systematically undoes the reactive (apologetic or rejectionist) relationship of the postcolonial subject to its pre-colonial tradition, and the second reconstructs that relationship on the bases of an adaptation of ideological insight and on the open-ended praxis enabled by that insight. Writing in the aftermath of decolonization but still informed by its aspirations, Jabri's interpretive strategy attempts to balance reflexivity with urgency. It is a political theoretic *and* political act in that it attempts to reconfigure its reader's relationship to the Islamic tradition at a time when that tradition is a central site of political contestation.

While many of Jabri's interlocutors considered his *oeuvre* a uniquely critical, and for some, a groundbreaking, intervention in the field of Islamic studies in Arab academe,¹⁷ political theorists may simply see in Jabri's method one version of codifying their craft, a craft which tends to closely examine "canonical" texts, frame them with varying degrees of historicization in order to make sense of their intervention, and emphasize "the ways in which past texts in the history of political ideas can teach us something about our own intellectual, philosophical, moral, or political predicament" (Runciman 2001, 84). For historians of political thought as for political theorists more generally, the primary center-of-gravity for political theoretical examinations is the historical text itself. This is most clear in readings that attempt to understand historical texts by reference to the text itself (most famously Strauss's "Great Books" approach), or contextualist readings that argue that an accurate understanding of the text requires the examination of the semantic or socioeconomic contexts of its production, as with the Cambridge School and Marxist approaches respectively (Walsh and Fatovic 2016). It is less so in readings that examine canonical texts with an eye to the insights they can lend to present political problems, as with Sheldon Wolin's consideration of the history of political thought as "a form of political education" (2004, 26). While bearing similarity to the latter position, a reader-centric method is animated by a different objective and assumes a different positionality vis-à-vis its audience. It is not only or primarily aimed at

establishing a truer understanding of historical texts, or of drawing on their insight to address current problems. It is mainly aimed at transforming its reader's relationship to the pre-colonial traditions of which those texts are part. Relatedly, it is not meant for an academic or intellectual audience situated in the Global North (as are most works of postcolonial theory for example), but for the Arabic-reading general public. The structuralist, historical, ideological, and practical components of this method should all be understood through the lens of the ways in which they contribute to shifting its readership's sense of self through transforming its sense of its constitutive past.

Jabri's concern with transforming the postcolonial reader's orientation towards pre-colonial traditions is also reminiscent of comparative political theory's rightful insistence on the interpreter's development of a deep comprehension of the historical, linguistic and intellectual contexts in which the text/thinker under study is situated prior to offering an interpretation of that text/thinker. At times, this deep comprehension takes the form of a "fusion of horizons" in the hermeneutic tradition of Gadamer (Dallmayr 1996; Euben 1999), at others, an existential hermeneutic of immersion in, and practice of, a text's ideas (Godrej 2009), and still at others, it requires "the practice of specific methods of inquiry before the interpreter could acquire new substantive understanding" (Jenco 2007, 753). Though all these modes of interpretation entail a certain measure of self-transformation in the interpreter, their objective (and consequently the measure of self-transformation they require with regards to fulfilling their interpretative task) is to attain as accurate an understanding as possible of the historical text/practice in question given the distance in space, time, and intellectual formation that separates them from the text, as well as the intricacies of the cross-cultural encounter in which they are engaged. In contrast, the main aim of the reader-centric method is to *transform* its reader through offering a contextually sensitive, immanent interpretation of the historical text. In other words, whereas the comparative political theorist transforms herself to the extent needed to better grasp the text at hand, Jabri's postcolonial reader is transformed through her application of the interpretive process itself. The focal point of this interpretative method is to restore to the postcolonial subject a sense of historicity that serves to "bring it" to the present and equip it to change that present, while critically anchoring it in its multiple pasts: an intellectual and religious tradition which it experiences as living, the anticolonial imagining of an independent and powerful Third World, and a time of postcolonial disillusionment.

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¹⁷ Jabri's most ardent critic, the Syrian intellectual Jurj Tarabishi's famous comment on the first volume of Jabri's (1984) *Critique of Arab Reason* is: "this book is astounding! It does not only educate its reader; it transforms him" (2015). For an account of the major engagements with Jabri's work, see the conference proceedings from the Center of Arab Unity Studies (2012).

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