Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry, 5(1), pp 1–19 January 2018.
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Radwa Ashour, African American Criticism, and the Production of Modern Arabic Literature*

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In 1973, at the suggestion of her mentor Shirley Graham Du Bois, the Egyptian scholar, activist, teacher, and novelist Radwa Ashour enrolled at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, to study African American literature and culture. Ashour's 1975 dissertation "The Search for a Black Poetics: A Study of Afro-American Critical Writings," along with her 1983 autobiography, Al-Rihla: Ayyam taliba misriyya fi amrika [The Journey: An Egyptian Woman Student's Memoirs in America], *specifically engage with debates that emerged at the First International Congress of Negro Writers and Artists in September 1956 between African Americans and others from the African diaspora (most notably Aimé Césaire) regarding the applicability of the "colonial thesis" to the United States. This article argues that Ashour's early engagement with African American cultural politics are formative of her fiction, particularly her 1991 novel,* Siraaj: An Arab Tale, *which examines overlapping questions of slavery, empire, and colonialism in the Arab world.*

Keywords: Radwa Ashour, *Siraaj: An Arab Tale*, Shirley Graham Du Bois, Ekueme Michael Thelwell, First International Congress of Negro Writers and Artists, colonialism

"The purpose of our writing is to create the nation."

—Amiri Baraka (1969)[1]

In fall 1973, Radwa Ashour, an Egyptian scholar and activist, enrolled in the PhD program in English at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, to study African American literature. Her decision to travel to the United States was borne of her own

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* Acknowledgements: The author thanks Ebony Coletu, Perin Gurel, and Michelle Hartman for their brilliant comments on an earlier version of this article.

1 Amiri Baraka [as Ameer Baraka], " 'We Are Our Feeling': The Black Aesthetic," *Negro Digest* 18.11 (September 1969): 5, quoted in Radwa Ashour, "The Search for a Black Poetics: A Study of Afro-American Critical Writings" (PhD dissertation, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1975), 154.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.44 Published online by Cambridge University Press

strong political commitments. In her memoir, *Al-Rihla: Ayyam taliba misriyya fi amrika* [*The Journey: An Egyptian Woman Student's Memoirs in America*], Ashour makes it clear that she believes that African American culture provides a model of social engagement relevant to Egypt. When she first meets Ekueme Michael Thelwell, who in 1970 founded the W. E. B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies, "I told him that I wanted to study Afro-American literature because of my interest in the relationship between literature and the reality of people's struggles. I also said that I taught in an English literature department, but didn't want to become someone so embroiled in their research that I spent my whole life and all my efforts studying things which are not at the heart of the urgent issues I'm preoccupied with—the most pressing causes of our times."[2] Like Baraka, whose Maulana Karenga–influenced essay " 'We Are Our Feeling': The Black Aesthetic" she quotes in her 1975 dissertation, "The Search for a Black Poetics: A Study of Afro-American Critical Writings," Ashour holds a deep appreciation for the role of the literary arts in a larger nationalist project. Uniquely for Ashour, her engagement with this critical tradition provides a concrete foundation for her influential later work including her 1991 novel, *Siraaj: An Arab Tale*, which is an account of Arab involvement in a slave rebellion on a fictional East African island in the late nineteenth century. These interfaces are the subject of this article, which argues that deeply rooted Egyptian engagement with African American political culture during the 1960s and 1970s shaped Ashour's literary innovations in *Siraaj*, a novel in which she creates a textual milieu for examining overlapping questions of slavery, empire, and colonialism in ways that draw, sometimes uneasily, upon an African American racial analytic.

At Amherst, Radwa Ashour made connections with writers, intellectuals, and activists that would prove to be profoundly influential for her career as a scholar, teacher, novelist, and activist. Those connections were the impetus for her dissertation, the preface of which explains, "I not only identified with Black people in this country but was also aware of the problems and needs of a nation struggling against the impact of the colonial situation."[3] There is nothing superficial in the international political appeal of the civil rights movement; Ashour actively engages with the cultural and intellectual debates that surrounded the movement in ways that would ultimately prove to be instrumental in her fiction. She explains, "The issues raised by Afro-American writers were very relevant to me because they helped me answer some of the critical questions related to modern Arabic literature."[4] Ashour's transnational formulation of Arabic literature is precise. As a geopolitical venue, it expands beyond her Egyptian homeland to include, centrally, Palestine, which is essential to her work and consciousness, and no doubt further reinforced by her marriage to and partnership with Palestinian writer and activist Mourid Barghouti. Ashour not only acknowledges the value of African American criticism for understanding Arabic literature, but she also understood the importance of her two years in the United States well enough to make them the exclusive subject of an autobiography.

2 Radwa Ashour, chapter 1 of *The Journey*, 1983, trans. Michelle Hartman, *Comparative American Studies* 13.4 (December 2015): 215.

3 Ashour, "The Search for a Black Poetics," v.

4 Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.44 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Though *The Journey* appeared in 1983, before the start of her decorated career as a novelist, Ashour's years in the United States remained an absence in the minds of English language readers at least until its recent translation by Michelle Hartman.[5] Eight years before *The Journey*, "The Search for a Black Poetics" demonstrated Ashour's appreciation of the multidirectional flows of knowledge in a way that expands our understanding of the networks of influence and exchange that have been central to recent conversations about the transnational circuits of American studies and Afro-Arab solidarities.[6]

At a time in the 1970s when African American activists and intellectuals were continuing to debate the "colonial thesis," Ashour entered headfirst into this debate in the opening pages of her doctoral dissertation, which begins with a speech by Aimé Césaire at the First International Congress of Negro Writers and Artists in Paris in 1956, an event of crucial importance for thinking about the role of culture in the anticolonial struggles of the post-Bandung world. At the congress, Césaire's assertion that African Americans were, like their African and Caribbean counterparts, victims of colonialism was criticized by the US delegation headed by John Davis. As Ashour writes, Davis and Mercer Cook rejected Césaire's characterization of the US "minority" problem as colonial.[7] In remarks included in the congress proceedings published by *Présence Africaine*, Césaire replies to Cook in great detail:

> If the situation is not typically colonial, there is, all the same, a fact which you cannot deny; it is that this situation, however special it may be, is linked to a specific historical situation. Whether you like it or not, it is linked to the fact that America was, at the beginning of her history, a colonial territory, and that at a given moment, as in the Antilles and as in this Hemisphere, Negroes from Africa were introduced for the needs of the plantations.
>
> In other words, if you are not in a colonial situation, you are in a situation which, as Senghor just now very rightly said, is a *sequel* of slavery—and therefore, in the last analysis, a sequel of the colonial regime. And I think that this is undeniable, and is not passing a derogatory judgment on American democracy, to say that slavery has left its traces—which those people are trying to eradicate—but has nevertheless left traces which still persist to-day in the history of the United States.
>
> It seems to me that this phenomenon of racial segregation is very typically a survival, a sequel of slavery, and therefore of the colonialism of the XVII and XVIII centuries.[8]

5 For a short excerpt previously translated by Ghada Sobaie, see Kamal Abdel-Malek, ed., *America in an Arab Mirror: Images of America in Arabic Travel Literature. An Anthology, 1895–1995* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 117–19.

6 See, for example, Hisham Aidi and Manning Marable, eds., *Black Routes to Islam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Sohail Daulatzai, *Black Star, Crescent Moon: The Muslim International and Black Freedom Beyond America* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Keith P. Feldman, *A Shadow over Palestine: The Imperial Life of Race in America* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Alex Lubin, *Geographies of Liberation: The Making of an Afro-Arab Political Imaginary* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Greg Thomas, "Blame It on the Sun: George Jackson and the Poetry of Palestinian Resistance," *Comparative American Studies* 13.4 (December 2015): 236–53.

7 Ashour, "The Search for a Black Poetics," 2–3.

8 "First International Congress of Negro Writers and Artists," September 19–22, 1956, *Présence Africaine* 8–10 (June–November 1956): 225.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.44 Published online by Cambridge University Press

For her part, Ashour sides with Césaire, interpreting African American literature as "an integral struggle against white colonial cultural imposition," a formulation that acknowledges colonialism as a racial enterprise.[9]

The International Congress of Negro Writers and Artists was a signal moment for Ashour, who also mentions it in *The Journey* when recalling a conversation with Shirley Graham Du Bois about Egyptian politics and the regime of Anwar Sadat. According to Ashour, Graham Du Bois "lamented, 'My assumption was that this man would be an authentic extension of Abdel Nasser. He's half Black, as you know, and this encouraged me.' " Ashour replies with cordial criticism of Graham Du Bois's racial analysis: " 'What twisted logic is that, my old friend? Half Black, or half blue, color has nothing to do with this issue.' "[10] Despite her strong critique of colonialism and racism, Ashour rejects any possible significance to Sadat's race, which is especially unfortunate at a time when, in the Egyptian context, it would have productively resonated with the claims of Nubian communities that were forced to relocate by the Egyptian government in 1963–1964 to accommodate the construction of the Aswan Dam, a project that effectively sought to suppress local identities under a nationalist banner.[11] Indeed, "The Egyptian government's approach to these [indigenous and minority] groups has rather been what is laid out in Article 1 of the 1971 Constitution: 'Egyptian people are part of the Arab Nation and work for the realisation of its comprehensive unity.' "[12] Such calls for national unity typically leave minimal space for discourse about racial minorities.

Following her exchange with Graham Du Bois, Ashour reflects on the telegram that her interlocutor's late husband sent to the Paris congress, cautiously warning the delegates of the Trojan horse of African capitalism amid emerging independence movements: "I trust the black writers of the world will understand this and will set themselves to lead Africa toward the light and not backward toward a new colonialism where hand in hand with Britain, France and the United States, black capital enslaves black labor again."[13] W. E. B. Du Bois realizes that colonialism is not defined solely by the race of the antagonist, which might explain the appeal of this passage to Ashour. In *The Journey*, Ashour's subsequent thoughts reiterate: "My dear friend, widow of the great activist—these issues have nothing to do with color!"[14] She appears to be lauding W. E. B. Du Bois's prescient anticolonial politics, particularly his anticipation of the expanding neocolonialism that plagued much of Africa in the

9 Ashour, "The Search for a Black Poetics," vii.

10 Radwa Ashour, chapter 8 of *The Journey*, 1983, trans. Michelle Hartman (Northampton, MA: Interlink, forthcoming 2018).

11 Hussein M. Fahim, *Egyptian Nubians: Resettlement and Years of Coping* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1983), 45. Although Nubian leaders were consulted, Hussein M. Fahim acknowledges, "There was no direct Nubian participation in the government's formulation of plans." Fahim, *Egyptian Nubians*, 45. For her part, Graham Du Bois celebrated the Soviet cooperation that resulted in the construction of the dam without acknowledging its negative impact on many Nubians. Vaughn Rasberry, *Race and the Totalitarian Century: Geopolitics in the Black Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 278.

12 Maja Janmyr, "Human Rights and Nubian Mobilisation in Egypt: Towards Recognition of Indigeneity," *Third World Quarterly* 38.3 (2017): 722.

13 "First International Congress of Negro Writers and Artists," 390. See also Ashour, chapter 8 of *The Journey*, trans. Michelle Hartman.

14 Ashour, chapter 8 of *The Journey*, trans. Michelle Hartman.

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decades since his remarks. She agrees with his assertion that Black leadership alone is not sufficient to upend colonial exploitation. Although W. E. B. Du Bois may argue that capitalism, above everything including "color," is the fundamental cause of the injustice of colonialism and other forms of oppression, his address to "Black writers" implies—much as his widow did regarding Sadat—that a shared "color" contains the possibility of a common political outlook and solidarity. W. E. B. Du Bois's dispatch is exemplary of the longstanding coexistence of racial consciousness and anticolonialism that imbues Graham Du Bois's rhetoric as it does so much of the African American tradition, which was no doubt familiar to Ashour. As the congress marked a turning point in diaspora cultural politics for many of those in attendance, it later provided an intellectual touchstone for Ashour as she attempted to understand the relationship of African American culture to the anticolonial world.

Though invited to the Paris congress, W. E. B. Du Bois was unable to attend: "I am not present at your meeting today because the United States government will not grant me a passport for travel abroad. Any Negro-American who travels abroad today must either not discuss race conditions in the United States or say the sort of thing which our state Department wishes the world to believe. The government especially objects to me because I am a Socialist."[15] Whether his words are a deliberate swipe at the US delegation, which was suspected—correctly—of working for the CIA, they point toward an association whose rhetoric made Davis and Cook uncomfortable.[16] As Davis explains in his response to Césaire, "What American Negroes want—I should make this very clear—and have been fighting very hard for and with great sacrifices, both personal and in terms of blood, is for the complete equal status as citizens; and since 1936 we have been making tremendous progress in this regard. We do not look forward to any self-determination in the belt if this is what Mr. Césaire had in mind."[17] John Davis is alluding to the Black Belt thesis associated with African Americans in and around the Communist Party in the late 1920s and 1930s who advocated for an independent state across the South (though the demand was excluded from the party's official platform by 1936).[18] Davis's rejection of "self-determination in the belt" is effectively a disavowal of communism, a position that W. E. B. Du Bois would have expected to hear from those African Americans who the state allowed to travel.

In an account of the 1956 Paris conference published in the CIA-funded, Stephen Spender–and Irving Kristol–edited, British journal *Encounter*, James Baldwin makes it clear that Du Bois's communiqué

> also very neatly destroyed whatever effectiveness the five-man American delegation then sitting in the hall might have hoped to have. It was less Du Bois' communication which did this than the incontestable fact that he had not been allowed to leave his

15 "First International Congress of Negro Writers and Artists," 390.

16 Hugh Wilford, *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 201–02.

17 "First International Congress of Negro Writers and Artists," 217.

18 Gerald Horne, *Black Liberation/Red Scare: Ben Davis and the Communist Party* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1994), 68–70.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.44 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> country. . . . It was a fact which increased and seemed to justify the distrust with which all Americans are regarded abroad, and it made yet deeper, for the five American Negroes present, that gulf which yawns between the American Negro and all other men of colour.[19]

When Baldwin included his report "Princes and Powers" in *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961), his revised account shifted in favor of the American delegation, with which he had always felt an affinity. In that account, the US delegation is merely "compromised" (not "destroyed") and Du Bois's message is reclassified by Baldwin as "extremely ill-considered."[20] Baldwin also inserts a comment on the challenge of "explain[ing] just how the reasons for Du Bois' absence differed from those which had prevented the arrival of the delegation from South Africa."[21] In a letter to his White editor and friend Sol Stein, who was previously executive director of the anticommunist American Committee for Cultural Freedom, Baldwin candidly acknowledged "a certain, unsuspected condescension I've got in me towards Africans" that he knew was indefensible. "Princes and Powers," he explains, "mirrors my confusion."[22] For his part, Stein found the article, Lawrence P. Jackson explains, to be "soft on communism" and on Du Bois.[23] Despite the increasing willingness of Baldwin to disavow Du Bois, Stein remained unhappy with what he perceived as Baldwin's increasing focus on race: "You look at it much too much in terms of black and white, and I thought you didn't particularly care for these colors."[24] In their correspondence, Baldwin argues against Stein's defense of the State Department's decision to deny Du Bois a passport.[25] For Baldwin, the congress marked a significant turning point away from figures like Stein and toward a much more direct engagement with Black nationalism.

Although Ashour shares Césaire's point of view regarding colonialism and the United States, she is not comfortable with Graham Du Bois's consideration of race in the Egyptian context. Much of Ashour's own critical project, throughout *The Journey* and elsewhere in her dissertation and her fiction, is predicated on the applicability of African American literature, culture, and politics to the Arab world. Given this consistent predilection, her unwillingness to entertain the racial analytic proposed by Graham Du Bois (whose ideas about Black Egyptians are based on several years of living in Cairo) suggests that the particular appeal of African American culture lies more in its broad-based engagement with colonial histories of oppression than with the particular contours of racism within the modern state. Racial tensions are central to the forms of transnational identification that animate Shirley Graham Du Bois's son David Graham Du Bois's 1975 novel . . . *And Bid Him Sing*, which explores the lives of African Americans in Cairo in the 1960s with great nuance that allows for the

19 James Baldwin, "Letter from Paris: Princes and Powers," *Encounter*, January 1957, 53. See also Lawrence P. Jackson, *The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934-1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 447.

20 James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Dell, 1961), 27–28.

21 Ibid., 28.

22 James Baldwin and Sol Stein, *Native Sons: A Friendship That Created One of the Greatest Works of the Twentieth Century:* Notes of a Native Son (New York: Ballantine, 2004), 82.

23 Jackson, *The Indignant Generation*, 452–53.

24 Baldwin and Stein, *Native Sons*, 94. In his later years, it seems like Stein did turn to racial analysis, if only to ridiculously bemoan the lack of White people at Baldwin's sixtieth birthday party. Ibid., 24.

25 Ibid., 99. Stein described Du Bois "as an advocate of and apologist for slavery." Ibid., 105.

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possibility of solidarity without its presumption. Ashour may be correct that Shirley Graham Du Bois's optimism regarding Sadat was unwarranted; however, her reaction to it implicitly acknowledges the limitations of her own methodology in a manner similar to what Ebony Coletu describes in her account of Alex Haley's *Roots* whose "embrace . . . as a story about racism and slavery elsewhere, has the effect of obscuring local histories of slavery and racism in Africa and in Egypt specifically."[26] Ashour acknowledges the limits of the racial analysis that she finds so useful elsewhere. Although her academic project is explicitly based on the relevance of African American culture to Egypt, she deflects the rhetoric of race by adopting, in the case of Sadat, an Egyptian nationalistic perspective. In Egypt, as Jemima Pierre writes regarding Ghana, the ongoing racial politics of colonialism were effectively "hidden beneath the new politics of the state," allowing little space for Ashour to apply the kinds of racial analysis that she deftly negotiates in her dissertation.[27]

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Ashour's dissertation was the product of her studies at the University of Massachusetts, which she entered as a sophisticated political intellectual with extant ties to the African American struggle. She agreed to attend the University of Massachusetts only after Shirley Graham Du Bois assured her of the department's "anti-colonial, liberation-oriented outlook" and "recommended me for a departmental scholarship, telling them that I was a serious Egyptian researcher, a professor at Ain Shams University, and also a politically progressive writer."[28] This occurred at the same time that Graham Du Bois arranged to sell her husband's personal papers to the university that had recently established the field-defining W. E. B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies, named after a local hero.[29] Graham Du Bois had been based in Cairo since 1968, which followed several years in Ghana, where she was associated with Kwame Nkrumah and the country's African American diasporic community. In 1966, after the overthrow of Nkrumah, Graham Du Bois departed Ghana, where she had moved in 1961 with her husband W. E. B. Du Bois (who passed away in 1963), and eventually settled in Egypt, where her son was living.[30] During this period, Israel's 1967 invasion of Egypt and its expanding occupation of Palestine made Shirley Graham Du Bois increasingly insistent on linking the Arab world with the wider African diaspora, arguing quite clearly in a series of articles in *The Black Scholar* that "Egypt is Africa."[31] In her writings, she does much more than proudly assert an often-distorted geographical fact. She also uses the cultural nationalist rhetoric of the era to describe the current political crisis in the Middle East and North Africa, while

26 Ebony E. A. Coletu, "A Complicated Embrace: Alex Haley's *Roots* in Egypt," *Transition* 122 (2017): 142.

27 Jemima Pierre, *The Predicament of Blackness: Postcolonial Ghana and the Politics of Race* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 43.

28 Ashour, chapter 1 of *The Journey (Comparative American Studies)*, 214.

29 Gerald Horne, *Race Woman: The Lives of Shirley Graham Du Bois* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 258.

30 Ibid., 210–11.

31 Shirley Graham Du Bois, "Egypt Is Africa (1 of 2 parts)," *The Black Scholar* 1.7 (May 1970): 20–27; Shirley Graham Du Bois, "Egypt Is Africa (Conclusion)," *The Black Scholar* 2.1 (September 1970): 28–34.

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recognizing Egypt as the bulwark "defending Africa's most important gates against imperialist aggression."[32] In 1970, she delivered an address to the Association of Arab American University Graduates, an organization that was established in 1968 to counter the dominance of Orientalism within area studies of the Arab world and to infuse the academic sphere with a new sense of political urgency, especially around the issue of Palestine.[33] Graham Du Bois, whose political commitments were by this point longstanding, continued to write about these issues from the point of view of the African continent. In articles in *The Black Scholar*, she compares Israel to South Africa and documents the shift of African nations toward solidarity with the Palestinian people.[34] Her discussion of shifts in Palestine solidarity is indicative of her recognition that racial identification is a matter of affinity rather than a fixed category. Her own time in Cairo positioned her to bridge the international Black freedom struggle and the movement for liberation in the Arab world.

Thelwell considers Ashour, who passed away in 2014, to be the department of Afro-American Studies's first doctorate even though she earned her PhD in English.[35] Her role and vision were consistent with a perspective on Black studies that Thelwell described as early as 1969: "The academic community [will] lead the way in the reaching out to the black nations of the Third World and reuniting the black community in American exile with the African and West Indian nations."[36] Ashour's supervisor, Sidney Kaplan, was an established White scholar of African American culture. Her dissertation committee members were C. L. Innes, a recent PhD, whose dissertation on Irish playwright J. M. Synge and Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe marked the start of an important academic career, and Thelwell, the Jamaica-born Howard University graduate, SNCC activist, and writer. Her teachers included Achebe during a period of intense intellectual foment; she was on campus at the time of his February 1975 address "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," which transformed Conrad studies and was a foundational moment in the field of postcolonial literary criticism.[37] Kaplan was founder and editor of *The Massachusetts Review*, the periodical that published Achebe's essay in 1977. Ashour herself wrote a book on African literature entitled *Al-Tabi' yanhad: Al-Riwaya fi gharb afriqiya* [*The Subaltern Rises: The Novel in West Africa*];[38] the book's comparative perspective resembles Ashour's approach to African American literature: "The issues raised by this study are not far from the daily preoccupation of the Arab reader. The problems

32 Ibid., 33.

33 Feldman, *Shadow over Palestine*, 171, 165.

34 Shirley Graham Du Bois, "The Liberation of Africa: Power, Peace and Justice," *The Black Scholar* 2.6 (February 1971): 33, 35–36; Shirley Graham Du Bois, "Confrontation in the Middle East," *The Black Scholar* 5.3 (November 1973): 34.

35 Ali Crolius, "Profile: An Egyptian in Amherst," *UMASS: The Magazine of the University of Massachusetts,* fall 1999, http://www.umass.edu/umassmag/archives/1999/fall_99/fall99_ugath.html; "Alumni," *W. E. B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies, University of Massachusetts, Amherst*, http://www.umass.edu/afroam/alumni-afroam, accessed November 3, 2016.

36 Michael Thelwell, "Black Studies: A Political Perspective," 1969, *Duties, Pleasures, and Conflicts: Essays in Struggle* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 138–39.

37 Ashour herself published a scholarly study of Conrad in 1983. See Radwa Ashour, "Significant Incongruities in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," *Neohelicon* 10.2 (September 1983): 183–201.

38 Ferial Ghazoul, "Folktales in(to) Postcolonial Narratives and Aesthetics," in *Locating Postcolonial Narrative Genres*, eds. Walter Goebel and Saskia Schabio (New York: Routledge, 2013), 136.

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African writers face are the same as those of Arab writers whether they are political, results of the colonial situation and progenies of national liberation phase, or are creativity problems connected to the writer's stance toward his own African heritage or the European literary tradition that produced the form of the novel."[39] As a literary scholar engaging African diaspora traditions, she maintains a comparative framework that consistently returns to the Arab world.

Ashour's close relationship with Thelwell and Graham Du Bois connects her to Kwame Turé (Stokely Carmichael), SNCC leader, pioneering Black Power advocate, and Thelwell's classmate at Howard in the early 1960s. Thelwell collaborated with Turé on the 1966 essay "Toward Black Liberation," and later on his memoirs *Ready for Revolution*. Ashour arranged for Turé's writing to be translated into Arabic and published by the Egyptian Supreme Council of Culture; despite her efforts, however, the project was never completed.[40] Like Ashour, Turé was mentored by "Shirley Graham Du Bois who invited him to attend the 8th Congress of the then ruling Democratic Party of Guinea (RDA). There, he met the RDA's Ahmed Sekou Toure and President Kwame Nkrumah, and a whole new political perspective began to take shape in his mind."[41] These connections expanded his political horizons, and "Nkrumah impressed on the young Carmichael the importance of internationalising the African-American struggle for justice."[42] Turé soon emerged as one of the most prominent African American activists to incorporate Arab nationalism and Palestinian liberation into the agenda of the Black Freedom Movement after the 1967 war.[43] Furthermore, Turé and Charles Hamilton's classic 1967 volume *Black Power* is perhaps the most prominent application of the colonial model to understand the plight of African Americans in the United States. Coming from Egypt and the Arab world, where there is a well-established critical discourse around colonialism, Ashour found this analysis appealing and assimilated its language into her study of Black poetics.

Ashour was undoubtedly introduced to Turé's work while she was still in Cairo. It seems likely that, as a regular contributor, Graham Du Bois had copies of *The Black Scholar* on hand, where Ashour (and other Egyptian intellectuals) may have read and discussed them. Turé's article "We Are All Africans" (a speech written for the 1969 opening of Malcolm X Liberation University in Durham, North Carolina) appeared in the same April 1970 issue of *The Black Scholar* as the first installment of Graham Du Bois's "Egypt is Africa."[44] One month earlier, *The Black Scholar* organized a special

39 Radwa Ashour, trans. and quoted in Helmi Sharawi, "The African in Arab Culture," *Imagining the Arab Other: How Arabs and Non-Arabs View Each Other*, ed. Tahar Labib (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2008), 149.

40 Gamal Nkrumah, "Rendezvous with History," *Al-Ahram Weekly* 437, July 8–14, 1999, http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/Archive/1999/437/bk9_437.htm. At one point, Mouird Barghouti had hoped to translate Turé's writings. Ashour also approached Shaaban Mekkawi, who translated Howard Zinn's *People's History of the United States*, to translate Turé. Mekkawi, who passed away before he was able to undertake the project, was Ashour's graduate student; Thelwell served on his dissertation committee. Special thanks to Tahia Abdel Nasser for helping me to reconstruct this history.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Lewis Young, "American Blacks and the Arab-Israeli Conflict," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 2.1 (Autumn 1972): 78–79; Feldman, *Shadow over Palestine*, 74–75.

44 Stokely Carmichael, "We Are All Africans," *The Black Scholar* 1.7 (May 1970): 15–19.

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issue around the question "Black Cities: Colonies or City States?" A variation of this question regarding the possibilities and limitations of applying the colonial analysis to the United States would animate Ashour's dissertation. Through Graham Du Bois's *Black Scholar* writings, Ashour also encountered the poetry of Langston Hughes ("The Liberation of Africa" includes "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" in its entirety).[45] Hughes's "Harlem" is included in Ashour's *The Journey* as a model of the political possibilities of African American literature.

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Ashour's simultaneous attraction to African American literature, history, and culture and her discomfort with certain modes of racial analysis may help explain the appeal of Césaire's argument that US slavery, though not identical to colonialism, is a direct product of it.[46] This kind of entanglement finds literary shape in Ashour's brilliant 1992 novel, *Siraaj*: *An Arab Tale*, with its blended narrative of slave rebellion and anticolonialism, which marks her understanding of African American studies as a diasporic field and practice. *Siraaj* is invested in the intersections and disjunctures of slavery, colonialism, history, and the possibilities (and limitations) of transnational and interracial solidarities. The short novel details the organizing of an uprising by Africans who are enslaved on a plantation on the "Jewel of the Arabian Sea," a fictional east African island that is similar in location and history to Zanzibar.[47] The novel's free Arab laborers such as Amina, a baker in ruling sultan Nu'maan's court, and her son Said, a part-time fisherperson, hold positions of privilege relative to the enslaved population. Their lives are not without exploitation and tragedy; Said's father Abdullah died working as a pearl diver before his son was born. At the age of fourteen, Said sailed with a crew to Alexandria, Egypt, during Ahmed Orabi's unsuccessful nationalist rebellion, which the British responded to with a bombing campaign and occupation in 1882.[48] (This was only five years after Egypt's 1877 abolition of the African slave trade.[49] It also makes Said the same age as W. E. B. Du Bois, who was born in 1868.) The Orabi revolt had direct links to US slavery. The precipitating financial crisis was the result of excessive spending by Khedive Ismail, who ruled from 1863–1879, during a cotton boom that was occasioned by disruptions to US production and exports during the Civil War.[50] The conflict between Egypt and Britain was seen by at least one African American newspaper as an opportunity for the

45 Graham Du Bois, "Liberation of Africa," 32.

46 "First International Congress of Negro Writers and Artists," 226.

47 Radwa Ashour, *Siraaj: An Arab Tale*, 1991, trans. Barbara Romaine (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2007), 10. "Jewel of the Arabian Sea" is Romaine's admittedly "loose translation." See Ashour, *Siraaj*, 11, 85n3 (chapter 2).

48 Though it is often transcribed in English as *'Urabi* or *Urabi*, for the purposes of this essay, I have followed Romaine's spelling of *Orabi* in her translation of *Siraaj* and in Radwa Ashour, "Eyewitness, Scribe and Story Teller: My Experience as a Novelist," *The Massachusetts Review* 41.1 (Spring 2000): 90. For additional historical context on the rebellion, see Juan R. I. Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East: Social and Culture Origins of Egypt's 'Urabi Movement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

49 Eve Troutt Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain, and the Mastery of the Sudan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 1.

50 John Newsinger, "Liberal Imperialism and the Occupation of Egypt in 1882," *Race and Class* 49.3 (2007): 57.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.44 Published online by Cambridge University Press

US cotton industry to compete on more favorable terms.[51] It is also worth noting that the Orabi uprising was followed by the Mahdi revolution in which the Sudan expelled the Egyptian rulers that had controlled their country for six decades.[52] In *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain, and the Mastery of the Sudan*, Eve Troutt Powell reveals a multilayered racial landscape in late-nineteenth-century Egypt when, "writers and nationalists were acutely aware of the discourse on race being conducted in western Europe, and they used it to frame their various perspectives about the Sudan and its people."[53]

Orabi's rebellion had great transnational cultural resonance throughout the African diaspora.[54] For instance, Dusé Mohamed Ali, best known as founding editor of the *African Times and Orient Review* and mentor to Marcus Garvey in London in the years before World War I, claimed to be a witness to the 1882 British bombardment of Alexandria. This association was an integral part of his self-fashioning as someone who promoted African and Asian unity in response to European colonialism.[55] In similar fashion, Ashour places the fictional Said at the scene of the Orabi rebellion in *Siraaj*. After Mahmoud, Said's fifteen-year-old Egyptian comrade, disappears, Said is taken in by the rural family of an Egyptian resistance fighter, Abu Ibrahim, from whose vantage point he witnesses the rebellion. The difficulty that Said experiences in attempting to explain to a family of farmers that his father dove for precious jewels but was not himself wealthy reveals the absurdity of the sultan's system of supposedly "free" labor.[56] Although the example of Egypt is profound for Said, it is presented as only one component of an interlocking system of colonial exploitation that includes military invasion, capitalist exploitation, and slavery, whose local histories must be understood on their own terms.

In *Siraaj*, Nu'maan is wise to the ways that the British colonial regime threatens his own rule, but he opts to enter into negotiations to allow a military base on the island provided that slavery is protected. Similarly, during the era of the Orabi revolt in Egypt, the ruling Khedive Tewfik, Ismail's son and successor, was opposed by the nationalists who found the ruler too closely allied with colonial powers who sought "to sustain Khedival autocracy as the instrument of European, primarily British, control."[57] Early in the novel, Nu'maan's own son Mohammed, upon returning from his studies in England, proposed democratic reforms and the abolition of slavery. For taking these positions, he was imprisoned by his father, which foretells of the sultan's treatment of dissidents. Against this backdrop, when Said returns from Egypt, he becomes involved in a plot by enslaved Africans to overthrow the dictatorial sultan. The issue of slavery becomes paramount and, for Said and his Arab comrades, represents the vanguard of anticolonialism. To fully realize this goal, Said must adapt the lessons of Alexandria in a manner that leads members of the Arab community to foreground the experiences of the African population. In one poignant moment, as

51 Sylvia M. Jacobs, *The African Nexus: Black American Perspectives on the European Partitioning of Africa, 1880–1920* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1981), 180.
52 Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism*, 5.
53 Ibid., 17.
54 See, for example, Jacobs, *The African Nexus*, 180–81.
55 Lubin, *Geographies of Liberation*, 51, 61.
56 Ashour, *Siraaj*, 21–22.
57 Newsinger, "Liberal Imperialism," 64.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.44 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Said watches in amazement as Hafez dances with the enslaved Africans, he is "embarrassed" to acknowledge that "I don't know how" to dance.[58] As the plot develops, however, the novel's main Arab characters—Said, Hafez, Tawaddud, and Amina—all sign on to support the enslaved Africans' rebellion. Dance represents the space where radical forms of solidarity can be imagined, in terms of what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten call "Hapticality, the touch of the undercommons, the interiority of sentiment, the feel that what is to come is here. Hapticality, the capacity to feel though others, for others to feel through you, for you to feel them feeling you, this feel of the shipped is not regulated, at least not successfully, by a state, a religion, a people, an empire, a piece of land, a totem."[59] *Siraaj* represents a form of knowledge that exists beyond the state, and, in important ways, beyond the narration of the text itself, which is deliberately constrained in its own awareness of the rebellion.

Ashour's emphasis on the simultaneity of the slave rebellion and the anticolonial resistance in Egypt preserves Césaire's assertion that "the common denominator was the colonial situation," while moving away from the implications of his chronological conceptualization of its "colonial antecedents."[60] *Siraaj* collapses time so that it can effectively depict slavery and its "sequel" as coinciding. As a novel that plainly marks the slave rebellion as its central crucible, *Siraaj* itself remains somewhat circumspect in that the inner workings of the rebellion are not fully visible to the novel's readers, who may be as surprised as many of the Arab characters to learn of the extensive planning undertaken by the enslaved Africans, who are very much in the fugitive tradition described by Harney and Moten: "Planning is self-sufficiency at the social level, and it reproduces in its experiment not just what it needs, life, but what it wants, life in difference, in the play of the general antagonism."[61] Such self-sufficiency renders the plans for rebellion barely visible, let alone comprehensible, to the sultan, his spies, or the Arab workers, to say nothing of the novel's seemingly detached third-person narrator and its readers. The perspective of the reader approximates that of the Arab population of the island, which is a deliberate element of the sparse novel's storytelling as indicated by its subtitle. *An Arab Tale* marks the text's awareness and consciousness of the ways that its perspective is circumscribed. This ethnic demarcation is a critical part of the formal structure of the novel, which approaches solidarity in a manner that is, by design, one sided. As such the novel can usefully be read less as a broad celebration of solidarity than as an articulation of its challenges. In *Siraaj*, Ashour uses the unknowability of the slave rebellion to create space to acknowledge multiple histories and forms of knowledge that lie outside of hegemonic nationalism.

Ashour explains that in the novel, "The fictional and the historical are brought together, the slave revolt against the Sultan of the island runs parallel with Orabi's uprising which culminates in the British occupation of Egypt. The 1882 bombing of Alexandria and the defeat of Orabi are distanced and pushed to the background whereas the fictional revolt of the African slaves is brought to the foreground."[62] Her conscious

58 Ashour, *Siraaj*, 67.

59 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Brooklyn: Minor Compositions [Autonomedia], 2013), 98.

60 "First International Congress of Negro Writers and Artists," 226.

61 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 76.

62 Ashour, "Eyewitness, Scribe and Story Teller," 90.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.44 Published online by Cambridge University Press

decision to foreground the imagined slave revolt by setting it in relief against the historical backdrop of an Arab nationalist uprising projects a tension that is consistent with the critical discourses she examines in her dissertation, specifically Césaire's efforts to situate the origins of American slavery within the European colonial project. By conflating time, Ashour highlights this linkage while refusing a clear genealogical explanation that allows for the richly anarchic coexistence of the novel's distinct political movements and threads. In *Siraaj*, most of the enslaved population is nameless and invisible with the notable exception of Ammar, who is a friend of Amina and Said. Amina and Ammar are the points of entry to the readers, as they are to the novel's younger generation of Arab activists in the novel who solicit their assistance. Tawaddud uses Amina's kitchen position to gain access to the plantation and, in the process, reveals this interior female domestic space to be a critical site of political resistance. And when Said approaches Ammar to help him get the actual key to liberate the sultan's political prisoners, Ammar goes beyond the call and volunteers to help. In the end, Ammar, whose name means "righteous," is martyred along with the other rebels, with only Amina surviving to tell their story (which includes that of Mahmoud) and her own. This legacy ensures that their deaths are not in vain. The novel concludes with Amina speaking to the stars, with the narrator's insistence, "And she goes on with the story."[63] The "story" of the rebellion continues and its outcomes lie in a future emboldened by ongoing struggle. With Amina as the lone survivor, Ashour recognizes the instrumental role of her continued storytelling as a corollary of her fiction itself.

The purposefully limited perspective recalls, in some regard, Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*, which was likely familiar to Radwa Ashour because Kaplan was a Melville scholar who authored important work on slavery in the novella. *Benito Cereno* focuses on what Kaplan calls the "elective affinities" of two White men, an American and a Spaniard, in the face of a slave uprising that is unimaginable to the American ship captain Amasa Delano, who briefly, if unwittingly, provides support for Babo's rebellion.[64] Babo himself, the mastermind, remains a minor character relative to Delano and his Spanish counterpart, Benito Cereno, whose command was overthrown by Babo and his comrades. Kaplan explains, "Delano, through whose eyes events are for the most part seen, was to represent the naive commentator, allied to Don Benito by race and sympathy, [and] who grows to knowledge as he learns the 'truth' behind the masks."[65] In Ashour's novel, Nu'maan's British colonial allies are more self-aware versions of the American Delano, motivated by opportunism and self-interest that prevent them from taking up any principled opposition to slavery. As in the Orabi rebellion, "With few exceptions, the British community in Egypt colluded in defending its own interests—which included 'finance, trade, investments, and their own' position."[66] The British settlers on the Jewel of the Arabian Sea abandoned their

63 Ashour, *Siraaj*, 82.

64 Sidney Kaplan, "Herman Melville and the American National Sin: The Meaning of *Benito Cereno*," *American Studies in Black and White: Selected Essays, 1949–1989*, ed. Allan D. Austin (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 174.

65 Ibid., 173.

66 Marco Pinfari, "The Unmaking of a Patriot: Anti-Arab Prejudice in the British Attitude towards the Urabi Revolt (1882)," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 34.2 (Spring 2012): 94.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.44 Published online by Cambridge University Press

own expressed moral principles, much as their historical counterparts did in early 1880s Egypt amid a British campaign to move "the debate on the Egyptian nationalistic movement away from the moral high ground it originally achieved."[67]

When Nu'maan himself is confronted with the rumors of a rebellion, he calls on the mysterious "Siraaj," who mistakes him for his father Sultan Khalid and recalls singing at the circumcision ceremony of Aliaddin, the older brother who Nu'maan killed to ascend to the throne. Siraaj then asks for a husband, a ewe, and a house from Nu'maan, who "all but fell over backward from laughing so hard" at the elderly and immobile woman.[68] As difficult as it is for Nu'maan to imagine an uprising, it is even more difficult for him to take this older woman seriously. For readers, her presence is equally fleeting and mysterious; the most pronounced hint of her importance is the title of the book. Nu'maan is dismissive of Siraaj much as Delano dismissed the signs that Babo was in revolt. The inability of the characters to recognize the slave uprising and the decisions of Ashour and Melville to represent these movements in circumspect ways challenge the novellas readers to imagine a rebellion beyond what many of its characters can see or even consider possible. (Another possible influence is Martin Delany's *Blake*, a novel whose transnational rebellion similarly brings together enslaved and free people and which Ashour may have read at Amherst.[69]) Nu'maan seems particularly incapable of imagining a woman at the head of an insurrection. The sociopolitical ecosystem that Ashour creates in *Siraaj* includes women and men—enslaved Africans, Arab laborers, Egyptian nationalists, British imperialists, and a ruling sultanate resembling Oman, which occupied Zanzibar for two centuries until Britain took control in the late nineteenth century. The diffuse and multilayered geography of the novel enables its antislavery and anticolonial struggles to function as parts of a court fable that combines history and fiction. This mode places the landscape outside the strictures of the modern nation-state thereby making liberal claims for inclusion impossible and affirming the need to smash colonialism.

The colonial thesis provides a counterpoint to the claims of minority rights that emerge after World War I by recognizing the more fundamental illegitimacy of a state whose rule can only be resisted by being overthrown. After World War I, the modern nation-state paradigm expanded to provide space for certain local identity formations—racial, ethnic, religious, or otherwise—to make claims for rights under the category of the "national minority."[70] Under this model, the appeal for minority rights is predicated on recognition by the nation-state, whose authority is ultimately reified by this very critique. This "minority" appeal was effectively the position of the American delegation at the 1956 Paris congress that elicits the conflict with Césaire. James Baldwin describes this distinction. According to him, those living under colonial rule have "no recourse whatever against oppression other than overthrowing the machinery of the oppressor. We [African Americans] had been dealing with, had been

67 Ibid.
68 Ashour, *Siraaj*, 60–61.
69 Ashour's fellow University of Massachusetts student Allan D. Austin completed a dissertation on *Blake* in 1975 under the direction of Kaplan. See Allan D. Austin, "The Significance of Martin Robison Delany's *Blake, or the Huts of America*" (PhD dissertation, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 1975). Austin later published an anthology and a monograph on *African Muslims in Antebellum America*.
70 Lubin, *Geographies of Liberation*, 65.

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made and mangled by, another machinery altogether. It had never been in our interest to overthrow it. It had been necessary to make the machinery work for our benefit."[71]

National sovereignty is a necessary prerequisite for African American rights to be conceived as the civil rights of a minority deserving of recognition by an otherwise legitimate state. By eliding the nation-state as the primary marker of difference, *Siraaj* seems to reject state nationalism in favor of a form of transnational anticolonial solidarity evident, for instance, in Ashour's decision to set the uprising on the generically named fictional island "Jewel of the Arabian Sea." The novel's partially fictional setting facilitates its articulation of a nationalism that is not confined to the modern nation-state. Ashour not only recognizes the importance of modern Egypt as a site of anticolonial resistance within an otherwise mythical landscape, but she also understands the intimate relationship between writing and the nation as an imagined space distinct from the nation-state. Ashour herself describes *Siraaj* as "a modest attempt to modify the boundaries of the novel genre incorporating and adapting traditional narrative forms."[72] Baraka's assertion that "The purpose of our writing is to create the nation" provides context for her decision to fictionalize the East African setting in implicit juxtaposition to a key moment from modern Egyptian history. Ashour insists that *Siraaj* "is not an allegory. The setting is not a wrapping, I do not use the past as an allegorical substitute for the present. I also do not write about history for history's sake."[73] In effect, Ashour argues for the ongoing material relevance of history, which in her view is neither allegory nor history.

Ashour's use of the Orabi rebellion might productively be seen as grounded in what Jennifer Wenzel terms an "anti-imperialist nostalgia." Building on Renato Rosaldo's conception of "imperialist nostalgia," Wenzel introduces anti-imperialist nostalgia as "a refusal to discard or disavow the past's visions of the future, even while recognizing the inexorable difference between the present and the past. This recognition would allow anti-imperialist nostalgia to move through and beyond the past into the future, trapped neither by forgetting the past nor by romanticizing it."[74] In this manner, the efforts of the Egyptian people under Orabi remain salient despite their ultimate inability to expel the British. In the end, this history renders *Siraaj* "a tale of a defeated revolt" that nonetheless manages to uplift an Egyptian national project and its legacies.[75]

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The form of "anti-imperialist nostalgia" on display in *Siraaj* is based on an acknowledgment of the ongoing relevance of history, which is a tenet shared with much African American literature. In "The Search for a Black Poetics," Ashour argues, "the rediscovery of the African past and of the people's lore is a necessary and progressive step away from the alienation caused by the colonial situation."[76] Ashour,

71 Baldwin, "Letter from Paris," 53; Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 29–30.

72 Ashour, "Eyewitness, Scribe and Story Teller," 90.

73 Ibid., 91.

74 Jennifer Wenzel, "Remembering the Past's Future: Anti-Imperialist Nostalgia and Some Versions of the Third World," *Cultural Critique* 62.1 (Winter 2006): 7, 15.

75 Ashour, "Eyewitness, Scribe and Story Teller," 90.

76 Ashour, "The Search for a Black Poetics," 32.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.44 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as a novelist, and Said, as a character, shift away from the feelings of alienation by grounding themselves in the anticolonial efforts of Orabi and in the uprising of enslaved Africans, even though it remains opaque to the narrator. The novel's simultaneous representation of multiple forms of nationalism is consistent with Ashour's understanding of African American literature, which is itself viewed through an Arabic literary lens: "A historical perspective is obviously a pre-requisite for the creation of a Black national literature which demands that the writer rethread the pearls of the broken necklace, bring together the African heritage, the American experience and his vision of the future."[77] Her necklace metaphor comes from the classical Arabic poetic tradition in which "the term *simt* or *asmāt* 'the string of a necklace,' referring to a rhyme scheme . . . which bind[s] it together, in the same way that the string of a necklace runs through all of its beads or pearls, and holds them together."[78] Ashour's unwillingness to fully represent slavery in *Siraaj* demonstrates her awareness of the missing beads whose absence leaves the novelist, like Toni Morrison in *Beloved*, to reconstruct this history in a way that is ever mindful of its profound archival gaps.

The relationship of these multiple histories to one another, like the beads, requires formal experimentation of the sort that is apparent in *Siraaj* and represents one way that Ashour brings together her understanding of Arabic and African American traditions. Of the three distinct approaches that Ashour locates within the African American critical tradition—cultural nationalism, Marxism, and an Ellisonian American aesthetic tradition—she is "inclined to think that a critical theory grafting the cultural nationalist approach to the Marxist approach to Black life and culture may be the path of the future, helping Black writers to understand the nature of the forces which shape their lives."[79] In her analysis, the cultural nationalist trajectory is "rooted in the New Negro Renaissance of the Twenties and comes to its flowering in the Black Aesthetic of the Sixties."[80] For her, the dialectical materialism of the Marxist tradition provides a bulwark against the kinds of romanticism that might otherwise endanger the cultural nationalist approach.[81]

Ashour's critical work is informed by the brilliant Black Arts poetics of Stephen Henderson, who himself accepts commonplaces about earlier African American writings about Africa: "In sum, if the concern in the twenties was largely romantic, in the sixties, though at times not unromantic, it has been chiefly political."[82] Where Henderson juxtaposes an earlier romance of Africa with the politics of the 1960s, Ashour imagines a different type of fiction—the antiromance of colonialism and slavery as distinct from the romance of anticolonialism and antislavery. Ashour's later fiction rejects the romantic in favor of the kinds of political engagements that are grounded in the critique of colonialism that her dissertation locates at the center of African American poetics. After grappling with cultural nationalism in the African American context, Ashour elects to ground *Siraaj* in the

77 Ibid., 148.

78 J. A. Abu-Haidar, *Hispano-Arabic Literature and the Early Provencal Lyrics* (London: Curzon, 2001), 6.

79 Ashour, "The Search for a Black Poetics," 175.

80 Ibid., 173.

81 Ibid., 174, 157.

82 Stephen E. Henderson, "Introduction: The Form of Things Unknown," *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References* (New York: William Morrow, 1973), 25.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.44 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"unromantic" settings of quashed rebellion. In her 1983 autobiography, Ashour demonstrates a personal appreciation for the historical dilemma that will be at the heart of Morrison's 1988 novel *Beloved*: "Slaves at times are faced with a terrible truth: We might even kill our own newborn babies because one day they will grow up and the racist law will make them property."[83] Ashour might have encountered the Margaret Garner case, which is the historical basis for *Beloved*, during her studies at Massachusetts; Morrison included material on Garner in *The Black Book* (1974), a "scrapbook," compiled mainly from the collection of Middleton A. Harris, the publication of which she oversaw while employed as an editor at Random House.[84] Ashour's reflections on slavery, including her use of the first-person plural to describe the experience, strongly imply an affinity. Furthermore, in *Siraaj*, Amina sacrifices her teenage son to the uprising. In several respects, *Siraaj* appears to engage with the resurgent tradition of slavery fiction, exemplified by *Beloved*, which was published (and translated into Arabic) a few years before *Siraaj*. The examination of slavery and its legacies that animates much of African American literature also animates *Siraaj*.

In *Siraaj*, Ashour uses Said's experiences in Alexandria to superimpose an anticolonial framework over the history of slavery and the slave narrative that is, within the US context, widely understood as a fundamentally racial institution. Without a doubt, Ashour's understanding of slavery is shaped by the US experience that she studied so carefully. As Hartman explains, in *The Journey*, Ashour

> encourages her Arab readers' criticism of the war in Vietnam, the quotidian racism and prejudice found in sectors of US society, the US government's role in the plight of the Palestinians, and the violence, poverty and death visited upon the racialized and marginalized of the United States, she also enjoins these readers to see a more nuanced picture of the US through her text. For example, she draws attention to the diversity of the US as well as to other positive aspects of its society. Though she herself admits her difficulty in looking at the US with an "objective" (*mawdū'ī*) eye, she insists on this complexity. I suggest that *Al-Rihla*'s message is that a more thorough understanding of US society will be the only way to begin to engage the problems related to the society.[85]

For example, near its conclusion, *The Journey* includes a lengthy excerpt from Frederick Douglass's famous address "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" that Ashour and Barghouti encounter in the July 4, 1975, edition of the *New York Times*. They are both deeply moved by Douglass's words, and Ashour concludes her passage with Douglass's words: "Go where you may, search where you will, roam through all the monarchies and despotisms of the old world, travel through South America, search out every abuse, and when you have found the last, lay your facts by the side of the

83 Ashour, chapter 2 of *The Journey*, trans. Michelle Hartman.

84 Middleton A. Harris, with Morris Levitt, Roger Furman, and Ernest Smith, *The Black Book*, 1974 (New York: Random House, 2009), 10. For more on *The Black Book*, see Howard Rambsy II, "Middleton A. Harris, Toni Morrison, and *The Black Book*," *Cultural Front* (blog), February 21, 2015, http://www.culturalfront.org/2015/02/middleton-harris-toni-morrison-and.html.

85 Michelle Hartman, " 'Besotted with the Bright Lights of Imperialism': Arab Subjectivity Constructed against New York's Many Faces," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 35.3 (2004): 294–95.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.44 Published online by Cambridge University Press

everyday practices of this nation, and you will say with me, that, for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival."[86] Then Ashour appends Douglass's speech with a line from the Qur'an (Yusuf 26): "This is like evidence given by a witness against his own people." She looks to African American literature for a condemnation of the United States and its imperial project, which she then situates within an Islamic tradition that uniquely values the kind of critical testimony that Douglass provides as an American citizen subject.

Throughout *The Journey*, as Hartman notes, Ashour translates the writings of Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Langston Hughes into Arabic. A few pages before she translates Hughes's poem "Harlem" with its famous opening "What happens to a dream deferred?" into Arabic, she cites T. S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" in its original English.[87] "In this way," Hartman explains, "Eliot remains an 'other' within Ashour's text, but Hughes and Douglass form a part of the implied 'self.' In providing this translation, Ashour ventriloquizes Black writers and allows them to speak to Arab audiences in Arabic through her voice."[88] Furthermore, Hartman explains, Ashour's translation of Hughes is in Modern Standard Arabic, not colloquial Arabic, which ultimately "preserve[s] its meaning and not its art."[89] Even though Ashour does not attempt to replicate the vernacular affect of Hughes's verse in her Arabic translation of "Harlem," she does apply other lessons from African American literature in her fiction, which enacts the synthesis that she anticipates in "The Search for a Black Poetics": "The flowering of an Afro-American national literature will be a gift of Black people to the peoples of the Third World who will recognize themselves in it."[90] Ashour recognizes the ways that African American literature can serve to inspire international liberation movements. Similarly, the autobiographical persona *Radwa* in Ashour's brilliant 2011 hybrid novel *Specters* describes her experience teaching African American literature in an Egyptian university, where the students "can identify with the oppressed . . . oppression and the struggle for liberation are for the emotional life of this generation the tautest of bowstrings."[91] *Specters* combines autobiography, fiction, and history in ways that recall *Siraaj*. Shagar, *Radwa*'s double in the novel, is a historian of the 1948 Zionist massacre of Palestinians at Deir Yassin, and the history of the Palestinian struggle against Israeli violence saturates a world in which Ashour continued to imagine a vital role for African American literature.

Ashour's innovations in *Siraaj* recall *Beloved*, which is based in Garner's life but is not chronologically bound by that story. For Ashour, this approach is visible in some of the ways that she, throughout her work, consciously manipulates established boundaries of literary genre. African American criticism and pan-African discourse (with Césaire front and center) shape Ashour's own literary innovations in the Arab

86 Ashour, chapter 13 of *The Journey*, trans. Michelle Hartman; Frederick Douglass, "1852: What, to the American Slave, Is Your 4th of July?," *New York Times*, July 4, 1975, 23. For the full speech, see Frederick Douglass, "What to the American Slave Is the Fourth of July?" *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, ed. Ira Dworkin (New York: Penguin, 2014), 119–47.

87 Michelle Hartman, "Dreams Deferred, Translated: Radwa Ashour and Langston Hughes," *CLINA* 2.1 (June 2016): 68.

88 Ibid., 69.

89 Ibid., 70.

90 Ashour, "The Search for a Black Poetics," 176.

91 Radwa Ashour, *Specters*, trans. Barbara Romaine (Northampton, MA: Interlink, 2011), 134–35.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2017.44 Published online by Cambridge University Press

nation (à la Baraka) as seen in *Siraaj*. Her work is neither one-dimensional nor a facile appropriation of the most popular representations of the civil rights movement. On the contrary, her engagement is the product of more fully grounded networks of exchange and creative forms of expression that grapple with the critical questions that animate African American intellectual life in the post–World War II/post-Nakba era. Her experimentation is part of a commitment to the Arabic novel, and in *Siraaj*, she grounds her form for Arabic fiction within a real history of uprising. Ashour's literary practice is built on the metaphorical eclectic necklace beads shared by Arabic poetry and African American history, which bring together different materials and genres, as she does in *Specters*, in ways that are as beautiful as they are profound. A quarter century after making similar arguments about African American literature in her dissertation, Ashour echoes the late Barbara Harlow's conception of "resistance literature": "The rise of the Arabic novel is unthinkable outside the context of the struggle for national liberation and its pertinent questions of national history and identity. The relation of the present to the past has been of central importance."[92] Ashour's words about the modern Arabic novel resonantly echo a tension that she locates in her inspired reading of African American criticism, which offers new insights into the transnational circuits of distinct national spheres of literature and criticism.

92 Ashour, "Eyewitness, Scribe and Story Teller," 89. See Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

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