

This is the author's accepted manuscript/postprint version of the article published in the journal *Utopian Studies* (35.1. 2024: 187-208). The version of record (published version) can be accessed via the following link: <https://doi.org/10.5325/utopianstudies.35.1.0187>

## Settling the Desert, Unsettling the Mirage

### Urban Ecologies of Arab- and Gulf Futurisms in Ahmed Naji's *Using Life*

Merve Tabur

University of Oslo; Utrecht University

ORCID: 0009-0003-2687-8276

#### Abstract

Contemporary Arabic speculative fiction, particularly following the Arab Spring uprisings, is often interpreted as part of an emerging trend of Arab dystopias responding to political upheaval. These texts' ecological concerns, which produce diverse conceptions of futurity, are understudied. This article examines how urban futures are envisioned in an Egyptian speculative fiction text, Ahmed Naji's *Istikhḍām al-ḥayāh* (2014; *Using Life*, 2017). Putting *Using Life* in dialogue with discussions on Gulf futurism and Arabfuturisms, the article first examines the text's depiction of hegemonic techno-futurist visions, aimed at manifesting a global utopian future through urban design and development projects. The author argues that this futurist discourse, which has affinities with Gulf futurism, operates through the dual enframing of nature and history, and then demonstrates how the text resists this techno-futurist vision through an assemblage aesthetics that echoes Sulaiman Majali's Arabfuturism(s) manifesto. The novel's assemblage aesthetics, which is central to its conception of counter-futures, redefines the human relationship to urban ecologies and to literature through an emphasis on embodiment.

Keywords: Arabic speculative fiction, Egyptian literature, Arabfuturisms, Gulf futurism, counter-futures, urban ecology

## Introduction

Imaginations of the city have long been central to visions of the future in speculative fiction (SF).<sup>1</sup> Since the nineteenth century, SF creators have problematized city life, which they regarded as the litmus test for modernity, to critique or to applaud the effects of technological and scientific developments. The SF city is often paradoxically depicted as both the birthplace and the graveyard of the future—be it the gloomy vertical city of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), organized around the principle of class segregation, the neon-lit cyberpunk city of William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984), run by mega-corporations, or the green mini-city of Ernest Callenbach’s *Ecotopia* (1975), committed to sustainability. Depictions of future cities in SF have been informed by historical projects of urban design as early as Jules Verne’s posthumously published *Paris au xx<sup>e</sup> siècle* (1860; *Paris in the Twentieth Century*, 1994), which critically responded to Haussmann’s renovation of Paris.<sup>2</sup> Despite their utopian underpinnings and confidence in technological solutions, such projects and their SF manifestations often reproduce dystopian visions of the city—an ecosystem marked by environmental degradation, economic inequality, and political oppression.

Today ambitious projects of urbanism in the Middle East, exemplified by Gulf futurism, aim to materialize such SF visions of the future city. First coined by Qatari-American artist and writer Sophia al-Maria (b. 1983) and Kuwaiti musician and artist Fatima al-Qadiri (b. 1981), Gulf futurism refers to the prevailing techno-futurist imaginary and aesthetics in the Arabian Gulf region since the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> As a diagnostic and critical term, Gulf futurism refers to the top-down attempts at projecting oil-rich Gulf countries into a high-tech future. Resting upon oil extractivism, migrant labor, class segregation, and hyperconsumerism, Gulf futurism manifests primarily in grandiose urban design projects. These projects rely heavily on discourses of sustainability and peaceful living. A striking example from Saudi Arabia, the Line, envisions “a revolution in urban living” in the form of

a smart and sustainable vertical city housing nine million people.<sup>4</sup> The Line is part of a larger project to transform the desert into a high-tech urban area, the NEOM,<sup>5</sup> which is funded by Saudi Arabia and led by experts from the UK and Australia. These megadevelopment projects and buildings, such as Dubai's Burj Khalifa or the Museum of the Future, are conspicuous manifestations of Gulf futurist aesthetics.

These visions of the ideal city, which are shaped by modernist imaginings of urbanity from the Global North, also inform the futures of cities in the Mediterranean basin, such as Cairo. Exalted throughout the centuries as “the mother of the world” and deemed the cultural capital of the Arabic-speaking world, Cairo (and its historical influence in the region) is now challenged by Gulf futurism. As the largest urban agglomeration in Africa, Cairo faces many ecological issues, such as air and water pollution, drought, traffic congestion, and improper waste disposal, among others. Growing concerns with the city's precarious future has led the Egyptian government to initiate massive urban design projects to rebuild Cairo, construct satellite cities, and move the administrative capital to a newly built city in the desert.<sup>6</sup> However, these projects of “fantastic urbanism,” which are, as Ali Alraouf argues, “employed to manufacture legitimacy for the present governing regime” and “to confuse the short-term memory of an oppressed population,” often bypass environmental justice concerns and serve neoliberal interests.<sup>7</sup> Gated communities such as Dreamland, La Rêve, and Beverly Hills embody futuristic fantasies of utopian desert life among technologically sprouted greenbelts that only the wealthy can access. Envisioned as a cosmopolitan hub with sleek skyscrapers, large avenues, green spaces, and gentrified communities, Cairo 2050 is unlikely to address the needs of inhabitants for whom informal housing offers more sustainable solutions.<sup>8</sup> Despite their utopian ambition to resolve environmental issues, these projects, which dovetail Gulf futurism, often fail to deliver the futures they promise as they ignore the lived experiences and demands of the people.

Ahmed Naji's (b. 1985) *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh* (illustrated by Ayman al-Zorkany, 2014; *Using Life*, 2017) is a satire of top-down techno-futurist projects that lay claim to the futures of cities in Egypt and elsewhere. The text opens with an apocalyptic scene in the near future, depicting a series of environmental catastrophes that lead to the destruction of Greater Cairo.<sup>9</sup> Subsequently, the protagonist-narrator Bassam Bahgat, writing the book twenty-three years after these catastrophes, reminisces about the events leading to the destruction and reconstruction of Cairo. As he walks the reader through the Cairo of his youth, Bassam mentions that he was hired by a secret society to produce "documentary fantasy" films about the future of the Nile and Cairo.<sup>10</sup> He then gradually reveals how the environmental collapse of Cairo was engineered by a radical faction of this transnational secret society—the Society of Urbanists.

*Using Life* joins other contemporary Egyptian SF texts in portraying a troubled Cairo. Ahmed Khaled Tawfīk's *Yūtūbiyā* (2009; *Utopia*, 2011) depicts a segregated city where the wealthy live in gated communities and hunt down impoverished "others." Mohammad Rabie's *Uṭārid* (2014; *Otared*, 2016) also depicts a socially and economically divided Cairo: while the East is occupied by foreign mercenaries, the West is occupied by resistance forces who engage in violent acts. Other works, such as Ahmed Alaidy's *An takūn 'Abbās al-'Abd* (2003; *Being Abbas el Aba*, 2006) and Eslam Mosbah's *Īmūz* (2010; *Status: Emo*, 2013), problematize the changing nature of urban identities in the face of growing authoritarianism, political disenfranchisement, neoliberalization, and American imperialism. These texts depict a troubled generation of Cairene youth, marked as much by consumerism, alienation, violence, drug use, and toxic masculinity as they are by resistance to authority and tradition. Many of these SF texts, including *Using Life*, share common themes and concerns: dialogue with global popular culture; an awareness of the multiple registers of Arabic language; use of English; a concern with urban youth and their active engagement with social media. Despite

their critique of social and political realities, these texts often refrain from offering detailed visions of political action or commitment and do not closely engage ecological issues and urban design. Among contemporary Egyptian SF texts, *Using Life* offers a unique perspective in its concern for the environmental futures of Cairo.

Finished shortly before the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, *Using Life*, reflects the feelings of discontentment and hopelessness that burst out through the uprisings. Although the Arab Spring was a crucial moment for rethinking utopia and dystopia in the Egyptian context, Arabic SF had been a cultural phenomenon long before this moment of political upheaval. However, like many other Arabic SF texts that were translated into English following the Arab Spring and seen as part of an emerging literary trend, *Using Life* is often categorized as a (critical) dystopia. But this judgment leaves the text's generic hybridity, its critique of utopia, and its dialogue with futurisms neglected.<sup>41</sup> In fact, interweaving various genres, modalities, and linguistic registers, *Using Life* resists conventional genre categorizations, such as utopia, dystopia, and science fiction.

I approach *Using Life* therefore as a text with a conception of ecological futurism that is in conversation with Arab- and Gulf futurisms. Specifically, I examine the text's divergent conceptions of urban futures by thinking with and through a multivalent Arabic term that recurs throughout the narrative: *ta'mīr* (to construct, to reconstruct, to let live). First, I examine the text's depiction of the Urbanists' futurism, which is aimed at building a utopian future through massive and often aggressive urban design and development projects. I argue that this futurist discourse, which dovetails Gulf futurism, generates utopian "mirages" through the dual enframing of nature and history. In the second section, I examine how the text's assemblage form and aesthetics of embodiment unsettle these mirages and generate visions of what Afrofuturism theorist Kodwo Eshun calls "counter-futures." Extending Eshun's definition of Afrofuturism as a "program for recovering the histories of counter-

futures,” I examine *Using Life*’s counter-futurist aesthetics as a reconfiguration of past and future possibilities in a creative assemblage that, like Eshun’s Afrofuturist narrative, challenges hegemonic dystopian discourses of futurism, and seeks new forms of self-representation.<sup>12</sup> I argue that an aesthetics of embodiment, which redefines the human relationship to urban ecologies and to literature, is central to the text’s counter-futurism. Furthermore, by putting *Using Life* in conversation with “Arabfuturism(s),” a term coined by Scotland-based artist and poet Sulaiman Majali in a 2015 manifesto, I demonstrate how the book’s counter-futurist aesthetics negotiates the concerns of Arabfuturisms with challenging the dystopian imaginary of Gulf futurism.

### **Settling the Desert: Techno-futurist Utopia from Saint-Simonianism to Gulf Futurism**

The Society of Urbanists is a transnational secret society led by urban designers and futurists. The Urbanists have a two-pronged global utopian mission: “to establish peace internally” through social engineering and “externally” through radical urban development projects.<sup>13</sup> These projects, aimed at the strict regulation of human and nonhuman forces of nature, conceive peace as an idealized state of control and standardization, with no room for contingency. As Jussi Parikka argues in his discussion on Gulf futurism, this form of managerial future is “not a future to aspire towards (a people-to-come), but a future that was already prescribed, premediated and integrated as a temporal infrastructure.”<sup>14</sup> The Urbanists and Gulf futurists share a common goal to be achieved through techno solutions—the foreclosure of the future through erasure of the past and control over nature. This vision is apparent in many Gulf futurist urban design projects, which demolish neighborhoods with rich cultural histories in order to gentrify them.<sup>15</sup> Both the Urbanists and Gulf futurists advertise their techno-fixes, which are devoid of social and environmental justice concerns, as sustainable solutions. While for Gulf futurism the solution is to use as many natural and

technological resources as possible to sustain a verdant Line City or a ski resort in the desert, for the Urbanists, the solution is to geo-engineer climate disasters to destroy and then reconstruct Cairo. Both are equally unsustainable, yet confident in the combined power of technology, engineering, and architecture to “accelerate the wheel of evolution” into a fully controlled future.<sup>16</sup>

Although the Urbanists’ utopia carries many affinities with Gulf futurism, Najji underlines that futurist urban design in Egypt is a historically recurrent phenomenon. The Urbanists also carry many similarities with the historical group, the Saint Simonians, as signaled in a footnote linking founder Henri de Saint Simon to the Urbanists’ president.<sup>17</sup> This nineteenth-century French utopian collective was composed of technocrats whose grand ambition was to establish a peaceful, integrated, and technologically advanced global society—a plan they called “Universal Association.”<sup>18</sup> When they arrived in Egypt in 1833 to discuss their Suez Canal plans with Governor Muhammad Ali (1769–1849), the Saint Simonians were guided by a desire to build commerce, transportation, and communications networks particularly in the Mediterranean region.<sup>19</sup> Defined by Saint Simonian Michel Chevalier as the “Mediterranean system,” this utopian enterprise envisioned the Mediterranean as “the nuptial bed of the Orient and the Occident,” a network linking the economies and cultures of the countries in the region.<sup>20</sup> Their fetishization of the “Orient” as an undeveloped landscape that would help materialize dreams of global interconnectivity betrayed the orientalist and colonial underpinnings of their enterprise.<sup>21</sup> The Urbanists and the Saint Simonians shared the belief that technological advancement and massive engineering projects would serve as the foundation of global peace.

The Gulf futurist and Saint Simonian visions of development rest upon the logic of construction *de novo*: The future is built upon a tabula rasa, envisioned as vacant deserts and demolished neighborhoods with unrealized potential. This emphasis on construction

projects to bring the future to places where there was none is reflected in the Urbanists' goal "to settle the Earth" (*ta 'mīr al-ard*).<sup>22</sup> A recurrent word throughout the novel, *ta 'mīr*, carries multivalent meanings: to build; to populate; and to reconstruct. All of these valences highlight the centrality of civil engineering and architecture to the Urbanists' techno-futurism.<sup>23</sup>

Examining the term's web of meanings further reveals that *ta 'mīr* is derived from the root 'amr (life, age) and is a verbal noun of 'ammara (to let live).<sup>24</sup> The Arabic word for colonization, *isti 'mār*, is derived from the same root, linking urban design to the Urbanists' extractivist philosophy. These etymological connections between construction, extraction, and making live point to the Urbanists' wider project of managing life to channel its flow.

My reading of *Using Life* works with the multivalent concept of *ta 'mīr*, in order to examine the novel's several discourses on futurity, which indicate distinctive and often clashing modes of life making. In a future where every aspect of life is heavily regulated and standardized, the uncontrollable flow and materiality of life becomes a barrier to the Urbanists' utopia. An unregulated, hence un-enframed nature is the first barrier to the *ta 'mīr* of the Urbanists' utopia. Enframing, as Martin Heidegger argues, entails the instrumentalization of nature as "standing-reserve" through technoscientific methods of extraction and construction.<sup>25</sup> Timothy Mitchell, building upon Heidegger, argues that in nineteenth-century Egypt, architecture served a disciplinary function as a colonial technology of enframing.<sup>26</sup> Colonial architecture transformed unstructured spaces into easily navigable and legible places, organized according to the logic of the exhibition.<sup>27</sup> The environment, which previously did not stand in for anything but itself, now signified order, progress, and civilization, following its enframing through architecture. According to this colonial logic, which persists in the Urbanists' utopian vision, nature is only a "standing-reserve" of matter waiting to be ordered through technological manipulation. Enframing as such reduces the material complexity of nature into governable (architectural or representational) abstractions.



The Urbanists' first aim, then, is to overcome the first barrier, an unregulated nature, through its technological and discursive management. Taking *ta 'mīr* to its extreme by engineering climate disasters, the Urbanists turn megapolises such as Cairo into clean slates to be built from scratch. Such violent manipulation of urban ecologies brings about a totalized world of simulations wherein humanity achieves full mastery over nature.

Commenting on the state of this Promethean future, Bassam writes:

the whole world was now more or less the same: no room for rebellion, no space for screaming. The forests had been masterfully redesigned, and temperatures kept carefully under control. Machines dug deeper below the planet's surface in order to harvest her secrets. Peacocks were placed under strict surveillance, as the number of endangered species increased with every passing hour. Chaos itself was reined in and confined to predetermined areas, or incorporated into the Great Wheel itself, helping to keep things moving along calmly in the interest of a global, well-maintained equilibrium.<sup>28</sup>

The Urbanists' enfaming of nature eliminates contingency and resistance while reinforcing uniformity, predictability, and control. As the Society's utopian mission "to establish peace internally and externally" illustrates, this transformation takes place in the organization of both the environment and of human consciousness.

Although the Urbanists' utopia is founded on a utilitarian and extractivist approach to nature, environmentalist discourse figures heavily in its justifications. In the Urbanists' environmentalism, green, with its connotations of futurity, abundance, and technological progress, becomes the symbol of utopian life-making, while the yellow of the desert symbolizes lifelessness and primitivity. Bassam writes that "this whole idea of 'fighting

yellowism' under the pretense of appeasing the great green goddess is therefore nothing but a savage transgression against the natural order of things"<sup>29</sup>—drawing attention to the violence of enforcing technologically sprouted greenery as an artificial life support on the desert ecosystem. Green discourse, he argues, does not only restructure the Egyptian landscape but also reconfigures the Arabic language by generating new adjectives and verbs that shape people's conception of nature.<sup>30</sup> Such greenwashing manifests in Gulf futurist projects such as NEOM, which lies at the center of another novel by Naji, *And Tigers to My Room* (*Wa'l-numūr li-ḥujratī*, 2020), signaling his continued interest in Gulf futurism. NEOM's emphasis on "green energy," "climate resilience," and "sustainable food production" replaces environmental justice concerns with an aesthetics of color at the service of *ta'mīr*.<sup>31</sup> Green plays a particularly important role in envisioning the desert as a site of futurity in Egypt. A critical example of "greening the desert" in the 1990s is the Toshka/New Valley project, which was described by President Hosni Mubarak as the "the conquest of the desert."<sup>32</sup> This failed resettlement project entailed the construction of ambitious irrigation infrastructures that would render the Western Desert of Egypt arable and create an alternative to the Nile valley.<sup>33</sup> By linking the fictional slogan of "Let's fight yellowism!" to the historical slogan of the '90s, "We want it to remain green," Naji underlines the continuity between earlier and contemporary projects aimed at the *ta'mīr* of the desert as part of a futurist national development agenda.<sup>34</sup>

If external enframing entails the reining in and redefinition of nature, internal enframing entails the control of the past by restructuring cultural memory. Both forms of enframing identify *ta'mīr* as a violent process of severance from the past, which the Urbanists deem too erratic to maintain its vision of peace. The second barrier to *ta'mīr* in *Using Life* is thus historicity. Historical ruins, memories, and nostalgia challenge the Urbanists' desire for a fully controlled future as the remains of the past allow for unpredictable temporal

dislocations and affective eruptions. In this future, not only are nostalgic acts such as listening to old songs considered dangerous but “there is no room for revenge” as revenge necessitates the persistence of memories.<sup>35</sup> When Bassam writes that “Cairo is arranged as a collection of historical circles, where it’s easy to go to the future, but difficult to return to the past,” he is commenting on how urban development projects efface the architectural and cultural memories of the city.<sup>36</sup> Reduced to a simulacrum, the city no longer corresponds to lived experiences. It rather manifests as false memories and spectacles of ruins such as “artworks resembling ancient antiquities” or “staircases to nowhere,” which underscore the ahistoricity and futility of futuristic discourses underlying urban development projects.<sup>37</sup>

The Urbanists’ dual enframing of nature and history “to propel Egypt and the entire region into the future” leads also to the institutionalization of cultural amnesia in linguistic and artistic expressions.<sup>38</sup> Cairenes of the future speak a mixture of English, French, and Chinese—with only “traces of Arabic.”<sup>39</sup> The erasing of the Arabic language and script by imperial languages and the Latin script highlights the severance of Arab youth from national and regional histories while Egyptians’ integration into a seemingly cosmopolitan future is celebrated by the Urbanists: “People are finally proud of their diversity, . . . We’ve gotten rid of the past and created a future that, while not totally perfect, promises some real light at the end of the tunnel.”<sup>40</sup> As linguistic markers of the Egyptian past fade, a standardized visuality mediates history through kitschified images of nostalgia. In future Cairo, Bassam encounters an artwork at an exhibition that depicts “a green sun and a clock stopped at a quarter past nine” alongside the sentence “Time Has Run Out,” written in Arabic.<sup>41</sup> He doubts whether the artist or the visitors are “able to read the [old] Arabic script” or ascertain that the sentence refers to a song by the iconic Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum.<sup>42</sup> In the absence of embodied memories of Arabic, the linguistic remains of the past become free-floating signifiers of a nostalgia that is experienced primarily as visual aesthetics. The Arabic script turns into pure

geometric form, intriguing to look at but unable to signify meaning.<sup>43</sup> The images serve as globally recognizable visual cues to the Arabic song title. These visuals, despite their attempt at nostalgia for a lost past, ultimately encapsulate the Urbanists' futurist dream: the end of historical time (the stopped clock) as humanity achieves total control over nature (the green sun). *Using Life* thus identifies the foreclosure of nature and history in the future as issues directly related to the shifting cultural politics of language and visuality.

The techno-futurist conception of *ta 'mīr*, which I have examined in this section, does not produce tangible solutions to present-day issues. Its vision of utopia becomes a mirage that fails to materialize a different future: "We're in it [the future] now, and I am sick of it. It's the past with a different name. It's copies of the same, parading as a fresh start."<sup>44</sup> Under the umbrella of the fictional Society of Urbanists, Najm offers a historical view of the continuity between the past, present, and future designers of Egypt who envision the country as the fantasy space for the materialization of techno-utopia while dismissing environmental and social justice concerns. The extractivist nature of *ta 'mīr*, the desire to "settle the Earth," persists as history repeats itself, from the nineteenth-century Orientalist fantasies of settling the Egyptian desert to Gulf futurist engineering of high-tech desert utopias today. *Using Life* may open with an apocalyptic depiction of Cairo's climate futures, yet the book does not project environmental catastrophe into a distant future cut-off from the past. It offers a speculative environmental history that situates the future ecological disaster within longer histories of colonialism, neoliberalization, and global capitalism.

As the book's title and the etymological roots of *ta 'mīr* demonstrate, *Using Life* is primarily concerned with different ways of responding to life—the experience, expenditure, and transformation of entangled processes involving organic and inorganic matter. The goal of "using life," which underlies many techno-futurist projects today, often aims at the subsumption of life's contingencies and singularities under a globally legible and totalized

system of abstraction—what Jean-Luc Nancy calls the logic of “general equivalence.”<sup>45</sup>

Critiquing the constant rerouting of what is with what could be, Nancy calls for a move away from “general equivalence and from its evaluation of past and future times, from the accumulation of antiquities and construction of projects” to a present “that opens to this esteem of the singular.”<sup>46</sup>

Yet, the techno-futurist imaginary of the Urbanists, as is the case with Gulf futurism, overwrites the present and the singular with standardized visions of the future. Instead of addressing social and environmental justice in the city, the Urbanists produce “mediate and totally unrealistic solutions to the city’s current crises.”<sup>47</sup> Using the “documentary fantasy” genre, which “rather than capturing scenes from current reality . . . was supposed to document an imaginary event,” the Urbanists perpetually ignore the call of life in the present.<sup>48</sup> In their attempts to foreclose the flows and contingencies of life and to sever human consciousness from the messy constraints of matter and time, the Urbanists ultimately establish an idealist utopia—a fully controlled virtual order of stasis, detached from material reality. *Using Life* thus illustrates how building the future through the logic of general equivalence, using different forms of architecture—i.e., infrastructures, narratives, data—as mechanisms of abstraction, reduces the material complexity of life into standardized forms, which fail to produce transformed presents.

### **Unsettling the Mirage: Arabfuturisms, Assemblage Aesthetics, and Embodiment**

*Using Life*’s plot dwells primarily on the secret operations of the Urbanists, which lead to the destruction and reconstruction of Cairo. The storyline does not offer an explicit vision of political engagement or of utopian imagination outside the Urbanists’ futurism. Furthermore, the protagonist-narrator Bassam, who worked for the Urbanists as a documentary filmmaker, occupies a politically and ethically ambiguous position. Despite his intention to expose the

hidden agenda of the Urbanists in his old age, he is also complicit in Cairo's destruction for having worked for them in his youth. Throughout the narrative, Bassam comes across as a disillusioned youth, a passive collaborator, an erudite and nostalgic man, but never as a committed intellectual or an activist aspiring for social change. Since the text does not depict a viable vision for social transformation and a clear roadmap for political action, it can be read as a "novel of the closed horizon" (Sabry Hafez) or as "post-political as opposed to apolitical" (Youssef Rakha).<sup>49</sup> Indeed, in an interview, Naji says he does not "care so much about political change but more about the effect of political change on the people and on the city."<sup>50</sup> He reveals that he did not revise the novel after the 2011 Egyptian Revolution as he did not think anything would change: "What I predicted in this novel is that Cairo doesn't have a future."<sup>51</sup> In the text, Bassam echoes Naji's disillusionment with political change when he comments on how politics has become "a form of business management."<sup>52</sup> He traces the intellectual roots of his hopelessness to Michel Foucault and Hannah Arendt, who have taught him "there was no longer any hope."<sup>53</sup> Portraying the disenchantment of Egyptian youth with political ideologies that fail to manifest the futures they promised is thus a central concern of *Using Life*'s counter-futurism.

The text employs a rhetoric of irony to counter the Urbanists' futurism. Pointing to the development of a new political aesthetics of "exposing" or "making a scene" (*faḍīḥah*) in contemporary Arabic fiction, Tarek El-Ariss identifies *Using Life* as a "leaking" novel that performs the revelation of hidden truths.<sup>54</sup> Although Bassam's political and ethical stance toward the Society remains ambivalent, his leaks create a sense of irony in the text, linking *Using Life* to, what Nicole Seymour calls, "bad environmentalism." Bad environmentalist works employ "irony, absurdity, perversity, and the like" and adopt an irreverent tone that can create a politically ambivalent environmentalist discourse in the text.<sup>55</sup> *Using Life* adopts such a "bad environmentalist" attitude in its ironical, and at times comical, treatment of the

Urbanists as a preposterous group committed to devise “immediate and totally unrealistic solutions to the city’s current crises.”<sup>56</sup> Here bad environmentalism serves as a narrative strategy to expose how hyperreal urban futures are modeled after fantasy images rather than historical realities.

The text offers an ironic and hyperbolic vision of a world in which it has become impossible to imagine a future that is not designed and regulated according to the demands of global capitalism. In its treatment of the shortcomings of techno-futurist utopias, *Using Life* bears similarities to the works of Sophia al-Maria and other artists from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) art collective, who mobilize Gulf futurist aesthetics ironically to critique it,<sup>57</sup> pushing the Gulf futurist imaginary to its extreme in order to expose its contradictions and failings. As Gulf futurism does not offer emancipatory visions of the future, it has been criticized by Rahel Aima for offering “no new imagery to displace the hegemonic ones in power.”<sup>58</sup> Due to its extensive use of irony and hyperbole, one could argue that *Using Life* also mirrors the hegemonic futurism it challenges without offering more hopeful visions. Ultimately the book depicts the Urbanists’ victory: Not only do they succeed at destroying Cairo to rebuild it, but they become a conglomerate of the most powerful corporations in the world.<sup>59</sup> The text’s resistance to prescribing an alternate utopia highlights on the one hand the challenge of imagining otherwise in the face of managerial futurisms with significant financial and political support. The difficulty of naming a new futurism is also reflected in the use of Gulf futurism to describe both a hegemonic and a subversive aesthetic. On the other hand, this resistance points to a reluctance to outline such a new futurist utopia, which could lead to limiting definitions and possibilities.

This reluctance is manifest also in Arabfuturisms, which gesture toward more justice-oriented visions of the future beyond irony and dystopia without foreclosing possibilities. The term was first conceptualized by Sulaiman Majali in his “Toward a Possible Manifesto;

Proposing Arabfuturism(s) (Conversation A),” which invites the reader to participate in an unfolding conversation between multiple voices. Written in an open-ended, fragmentary style with incomplete sentences, the text calls for an exchange of ideas rather than defining an Arabfuturist utopianism. In an interview, Majali reflects on Arabfuturisms’ resistance to definitions: “Because defining is conquering and this is a way of pushing against that. Creating ambiguous versions of oneself. Right now, that’s the most subversive political act we can do.”<sup>60</sup> As an assemblage of visions that challenge hegemonic futures, as well as “mythologies of nationhood and home,” Arabfuturisms emerge from a counter-culture that seeks new forms of self-representation “beyond the logic of the state” to become “the subjects, not objects of history.”<sup>61</sup> In the following section, I demonstrate how *Using Life* echoes Arabfuturisms’ assemblage form and concern with reexamining history at multiple aesthetic scales, ranging from the text’s genre structures to the diacritical marks on individual letters. I argue that the text’s formal leaks at different scales challenge the Urbanists’ project to contain life. These leaks point at alternate, more embodied, ways of using life that are central to Arabfuturisms’ search for new forms of self-representation.

As an amalgam of fictional narration, historical facts, footnotes, popular culture, lyrics, illustration, and comic strips that move back and forth between formal and colloquial registers of Arabic, the aesthetic form of *Using Life* defies a neat genre categorization. Although at first glance it appears to be a contemporary SF text or a dystopia, *Using Life* also works with historical Arabic genres such as the city elegy (*rithā’ al-mudun*) and the *maqāmah* (a rhymed prose genre similar to picaresque) (). Both *rithā’ al-mudun* and *maqāmah* aestheticize urban spaces in distinctive ways. The nostalgia for the ruined city, the apocalyptic imagery of a sublime nature, the poet’s contemplation on lost love and ruined landscapes: these are features common to the city elegy and to Naji’s novel.<sup>62</sup> *Using Life*’s affinity with the *maqāmah* genre<sup>63</sup> is marked by the text’s generic hybridity, its citations of a



wide range of historical figures and texts, its episodic and nonlinear narrative style, its playful tug-of-war between deception and truth, its use of illustrations, its engagement with social critique, and the narrator's itinerancy.<sup>64</sup>

Such contemporary reworkings of *maqāmah* democratize literature, according to Caroline Rooney, and “create new kinds of collective consciousness” by incorporating elements of popular and digital media culture, aurality, and orality into the written text.<sup>65</sup> *Using Life*'s integration of historical genres links the text to premodern uses of the modern Arabic term for literature (*adab*), which, similar to *belles-lettres*, underscores the educational and ethical function of a broader range of texts. *Adab*'s historical connotations of disciplining the self, good manners, and urbanity all point to a more embodied engagement with texts as *adab* implies not only reading but also the training of the body.<sup>66</sup> *Using Life* expands this definition of *adab* with an ecological dimension that draws attention to the embodiment of the readers who are affectively invited to experience their situatedness within the material world.

One way in which the text draws attention to embodiment is by creating sonic spaces. The text establishes aurality not only through references to oral folklore and modern song lyrics but also through the performative use of diacritical marks. Diacritical marks in Arabic serve to disambiguate meaning and to assist readers in the correct pronunciation of words. As the use of vowel markers in Arabic is limited mostly to the Quran and classical poetry, their use in contemporary fiction is unusual. Quranic recitation assumes that vocalization—in its dual sense of vowelizing the written word and reading it out loud—preserves the semantic integrity of the text and ensures the continuation of an embodied experience of knowledge.<sup>67</sup> The Arabic words for diacritics, *tashkīl* (giving shape) and *ḥarakāt* (movements), suggest that these marks animate the written word, endowing it with sound, movement, and corporeality. As such, diacritical marks draw attention to the centrality of the body, the movements of its

speech organs, and the creation of sound to the production and transmission of meaning. This emphasis on reading, meaning making, and knowledge transmission as embodied practices challenges dualisms that set language and representation against a nonhuman nature understood as external to discourse and meaning.

In several sections, Naji employs diacritical marks that invite the reader to slow down and zoom in on certain phrases and sentences, carving out a space of vocalized introspection and evoking aurality within the written narrative. I argue that these vocalized interjections in *Using Life* function as one of the text's "strategies of engagement," which, as Marie Thérèse Abdelmessih argues, uses multimodality to generate an interactive reading experience.<sup>68</sup> These vocalizations affectively remind the readers of their own embodiment and situatedness in the moment of reading. When read in tandem, the voweled sections connect the human body, memory, and language to geography through a constellation of different forms of loss. These voweled sections call for an openness to the particularities of the sensible to revitalize what is lost in the present: urban ecologies, bodily intimacy, music, oral knowledge transmission, among others. While the first fully voweled phrase focuses on the environmental destruction of Cairo, now buried under "tons of sand and soil,"<sup>69</sup> another voweled section cavales the body and the senses from Bassam's memory of his old lover: "Her odor is that of something callous and cruel, but she's fragile to the touch. When kissing her neck or licking her like a hungry dog, I sometimes was afraid she'd snap like a twig."<sup>70</sup> Here the use of diacritics creates a site of intensified intimacy between the text and the readers by compelling them to absorb Bassam's carnal memories through vocalization. Augmenting the senses and the erotic affectivity of the words through their precise pronunciation, as if reading a piece of classical poetry, the diacritics capture in the text the loss of bodily intimacy and love in a suffocating city. These performative readings foreground the body—the living archive of sounds, affects, and memories—as a site of

“situated knowledges” resisting “various forms of unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims.”<sup>71</sup> By calling attention to the body, an assemblage of material-semiotic entanglement moving within a complex urban ecology, *Using Life* challenges the techno-futurist utopia’s regime of truth, which aims to foreclose its possibilities and in doing so, reproduces mind-body and human-nature dualisms.

A more specific example of the many instances where the text breaks down dualisms is one of Ayman al-Zorkany’s illustrations. An eight-page comic strip depicts Bassam’s nostalgia about lost lovers and friends and his alienation in the city upon consuming hash. Peering into a black plastic bag he picks off the street, Bassam finds himself floating on a paper boat to a sunny island. The drug-induced escapade ends with a hot air balloon carrying him back into the plastic bag, from which he crawls out onto the gloomy street. Two panels interject this strip: a panel with the image of a belly dancer followed by a panel with pictorial calligraphy. Here I dive deeper into the aesthetics of the latter image, which calls attention to the entanglement not only of the human and the nonhuman but also of sacred and profane.

This multilayered illustration is comprised of the drawing of a giraffe eating tree leaves, calligraphy, and a rickshaw/truck saying. In the center of the image lies a giraffe whose neck is partially created with Arabic letters forming the phrase “*min kutr ghadr*.”<sup>72</sup> This style emulates zoomorphic Arabic calligraphy, which often depicts verses from the Quran or classical poetry in animal form, thus superimposing word and image. The writing, “I fell in love with travel because of friends’ deceitfulness” (*Min kutr ghadr al-ṣuhāb ‘ashiqtu al-safar*) is a play on “I fell in love with travel because of people’s treachery” (*‘Ashiqtu al-safar min ghadr al-bashar*).<sup>73</sup> Regarded as the expression of a maudlin sentimentality, this popular saying can be seen inscribed on the bumpers of vehicles, especially of trucks and rickshaws (and on social media platforms where it is used sarcastically). Pictorial calligraphy, a prized Islamic art form, bestows sacredness onto the Arabic script as an expression of

divine will. The goal of pictorial calligraphy in Islamic art is not mimesis, but to evoke a sense of appreciation and amazement for God's design as it manifests in nature.<sup>74</sup>

Approaching calligraphy from a different perspective, Marie Thérèse Abdelmessih identifies it as “hyper”: nonlinear, interactive, and multimodal like a “hypertext.” She writes, “Calligraphy combines the material and the immaterial, whereas hypertext is a hybrid of the human and non-human.”<sup>75</sup> On the one hand, al-Zorkany's combination of this highly symbolic and sacred art form with a rickshaw saying points to the kitschification of the Arabic script within futurist aesthetics such as Gulf futurism. On the other hand, the breakdown of dualities in the figure of the giraffe serves as a synecdoche for the subversive eclecticism of the book's assemblage aesthetics. In this amalgam of visual and verbal registers, all distinctions between high art and popular culture, human and nonhuman, educated and street-smart, word and image, sacred and profane are toppled.

*Using Life's* counter-futurist aesthetic also combines modern and classical forms with an attention to embodiment at all scales of the text, like a fractal. The structural tension between literary forms considered high/sacred and low/profane is amplified by the recurring obscenities in image and word. One comic strip depicts the “blue anus-fly” designed to wipe feces off human bodies. Another narrates the story of an employee whose nervous system is hooked into a machine at his workplace. The machine ultimately kills him for desperately wanting to have sex with it. These explicit and subversive elements satirizing the techno-futurist project had serious repercussions for Naji, who was imprisoned on charges of “violating public modesty” in 2015.<sup>76</sup> After receiving the PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write Award in 2016, and after British author Zadie Smith's call to action essay in *The New York Review of Books*, Naji's case attracted significant international attention, and he was released after ten months. Although these explicit elements may have seemed provocative to the authorities, *Using Life's* subversiveness stems from its attention to embodiment, generated by

the nonhierarchical and nondualistic interweaving of visual and linguistic forms. Such coexistence gestures toward an Arabfuturist possibility that challenges the Urbanists' and Gulf futurist projects, which rest on the logic of general equivalence and on the exploitation of human and nonhuman bodies.

Although *Using Life* highlights the impossibility of envisioning a future Cairo outside the Urbanists' utopia, it demonstrates that their techno-futurism is also an impossible project—a mirage that can never fully hijack the potentiality and materiality of life. This resistance is reflected by a Lucretian epigraph from *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*): “Forever is one thing born from another; life is given to none to own, but to all to use.”<sup>77</sup> Underscoring the unstoppable flow, transformation, and transience of life, this quotation points to a different understanding of life than the one upheld by the Urbanists. Life as a force that unfolds from previous moments of life-making is for everyone to use, and its irrepressible expression in diverse forms of embodiment cannot be controlled by a select few. Thus, finding new possibilities of using life in the present to envision alternate futures requires not only attending to embodiment but also revisiting the past.

This emphasis on reexamining history, a central concern of Arabfuturisms, as I have argued, aligns with *ta'mīr* meanings of reconstruction and repair. In *Using Life* the counter-futurist mode of *ta'mīr* constellates fragments of the past in the present, as a creative assemblage.<sup>78</sup> The textual elements pointing at nostalgia, loss, and hopelessness are countered by the situated reader, who is both challenged and trained in the very materiality of the present, to envision the entangled futures of the city, bodies, and language. *Ta'mīr* in this sense is not a nostalgic attempt to re-create an idealized past; it is a speculative, playful act to reorganize the present (hence the future) in conversation with the past. Echoing Arabfuturisms' resistance to definitions, the text thus refrains from producing yet another

vision of a unified future in which every singularity is subsumed under the globalizing logic of hegemonic futurisms.

## Conclusion

Ahmed Naji's *Using Life* responds to techno-futurist urban design projects that produce standardized and globalized visions of the utopian city through a redefinition of urbanity. This urbanity resists the dominant logic of general equivalence that undergirds the enframing of nature, the production of futures cut-off from the past, and grandiose projects of urban design. Situated within the irreducible materiality of the body and of language, this urbanity calls for a grounding in the present where one remains open to the possibility of diverse pasts and futures. What I mean by the irreducible materiality of language is perhaps best exemplified by the word *ta'mīr*. Here I have used *ta'mīr* as a conceptual tool to analyze the text's movements across construction, reconstruction, and life-making: between utopia and dystopia, the past and the future, hope and hopelessness. The word's ambivalence and its constant movements between different possibilities showcase how attention to the particularities of language can open new ways of envisioning hope and futurity in a seemingly dystopian text. As both the objective and the limit of the Urbanists' techno-futurist utopia, *ta'mīr* highlights the complexities of matter and time. The future can never be created *ex nihilo*, it can always only be constellated in the present.

The mode of reconstruction Naji employs in *Using Life* is founded on a counter-futurist assemblage aesthetics that aims to reinstate the affective, temporal, and multisensorial complexities of urban ecologies that are displaced by global urban development models. In its material-semiotic entanglement with the environment, the body functions as a key element of the text's urban aesthetics and ethics. Attention to embodiment redefines both human relationship to urban ecologies and to literature. Moving beyond primarily symbolic and

allegorical depictions of the city as the quintessential site of encounters with European modernity, *Using Life* adopts a distinctly ecological perspective in its attention to the material realities of human-nonhuman entanglement. As Arabic fiction (particularly SF) converses more with the realities of climate change and other ecological issues, the stakes of writing and reading literature in the face of environmental destruction will become more critical to discussions on utopia, dystopia, and futurism. This study is an invitation to examine how such texts attend to the entangled materialities of words, bodies, and environments and how environmental crises are changing the aesthetic, ethical, and political engagement of contemporary Arabic fiction. Returning to the organic connection between *adab*, embodiment, and urbanity in these discussions can open up further venues of ecocritical inquiry for investigating the relationship between urban ecologies, literary aesthetics, and ethics.

Merve Tabur is a lecturer in Comparative Literature at Utrecht University and a researcher affiliated with the ERC-funded CoFutures at the University of Oslo. Her research examines representations of ecological crises and the development of a planetary aesthetics in speculative fiction and the visual arts from the Middle East and its Anglophone diasporas. Tabur works with Arabic, Turkish, and Anglophone sources that address issues such as climate change, extractivism, and biodiversity loss. Her research critically engages with the discourse of the Anthropocene and demonstrates how cultural production in the Middle East challenges and redefines universalist conceptualizations of the term. Her research has appeared in *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* and *Middle Eastern Literatures*. Her current book project examines conceptions of futurity and environmental justice in the Middle East from a comparative perspective.

## Notes

This research article is part of a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (Grant agreement No. 852190).

---

<sup>1</sup> Carl Abbott, *Imagining Urban Futures: Cities in Science Fiction and What We Might Learn from Them* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Nathaniel Robert Walker, “Lost in the City of Light: Dystopia and Utopia in the Wake of Haussmann’s Paris,” *Utopian Studies* 25, no. 1 (2014): 24–51.

<sup>3</sup> Sophia Al-Maria and Fatima Al-Qadiri, “Al Qadiri & Al Maria on Gulf Futurism,” *Dazed*, accessed June 10, 2023, <http://www.dazeddigital.com/muse/article/15037/1/al-qadiri-al-maria-on-gulf-futurism>.

<sup>4</sup> “The Line,” *Neom*, accessed July 1, 2023, <http://www.neom.com/en-us/regions/theline>.

<sup>5</sup> NEOM is a neologism that combines two words: the Greek prefix “neo” (new) and the first letter of the Arabic word “mustaqbal” (future).

<sup>6</sup> Nada Tarbush, “Cairo 2050: Urban Dream or Modernist Delusion?” *Journal of International Affairs* 65, no. 2 (2012): 171–86.

<sup>7</sup> Ali Alraouf, “Phantasmagoric Urbanism: Exploiting the Culture of Image in Post-Revolution Egypt,” *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 31, no. 1 (2019): 72.

<sup>8</sup> Alraouf, “Phantasmagoric Urbanism,” 74, 76; Tarbush, “Cairo 2050,” 182–83.

<sup>9</sup> All citations of Najī refer to the Arabic original and the English translation respectively.

Aḥmad Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, illus. Ayman al-Zurqānī (Marsūm, 2014), 9–10; Ahmed Najī, *Using Life*, trans. Benjamin Koerber, illus. Ayman al-Zorkany (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 1–2.

<sup>10</sup> Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 108; Najī, *Using Life*, 89.



- 
- <sup>11</sup> Alexandra Alter, “Middle Eastern Writers Find Refuge in the Dystopian Novel,” *The New York Times*, accessed August 1, 2023, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/30/books/middle-eastern-writers-find-refuge-in-the-dystopian-novel.html>; Teresa Pepe, “Aḥmad Nājī’s *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh* (Using Life) as ‘Critical Dystopia,’” in *Arabic Literature in a Posthuman World*, ed. Stephan Guth and Teresa Pepe (Harrassowitz Verlag, 2019), 179–91.
- <sup>12</sup> Kodwo Eshun, “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): 301.
- <sup>13</sup> Translation mine. Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 170; Naji, *Using Life*, 141.
- <sup>14</sup> Jussi Parikka, “Middle East and Other Futurisms: Imaginary Temporalities in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture,” *Culture, Theory, and Critique* 59, no. 1 (2018): 46.
- <sup>15</sup> Anonymous, “The Violent Remaking of Jeddah,” *Current History* 121, no. 839 (2022): 356–62.
- <sup>16</sup> Translation mine. Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 170; Naji, *Using Life*, 141.
- <sup>17</sup> Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 190; Naji, *Using Life*, 161.
- <sup>18</sup> Richard Wittman, “Space, Networks, and the Saint-Simonians,” *Grey Room* 40 (2010): 29, 34.
- <sup>19</sup> Marwa Elshakry, “Free Love, Funny Costumes and a Canal at Suez: The Saint-Simonians in Egypt,” *Bidoun* 9, no. 10 (2007), accessed June 17, 2023, <http://www.bidoun.org/articles/free-love-funny-costumes-and-a-canal-at-suez>.
- <sup>20</sup> Miche, Chevalier, *Système de la Méditerranée* (Aux bureaux du Globe, 1832), 34.
- <sup>21</sup> See chap. 6 in Pamela M. Pilbeam, *Saint-Simonians in Nineteenth-Century France: From Free Love to Algeria* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
- <sup>22</sup> Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 170; Naji, *Using Life*, 141.
- <sup>23</sup> “‘Amr,” *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. J. M. Cowan (Spoken Language Services, 1994), 753.

- 
- <sup>24</sup> I thank Dr. Anna Ziajka Stanton for her input on the term's etymology.
- <sup>25</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Garland, 1977), 17, 27.
- <sup>26</sup> Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 60.
- <sup>27</sup> Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt*, 29–31.
- <sup>28</sup> Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 137; Najī, *Using Life*, 116.
- <sup>29</sup> Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 34; Najī, *Using Life*, 21.
- <sup>30</sup> Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 34; Najī, *Using Life*, 21.
- <sup>31</sup> Juan Carlos Motamayor, “New climate-resilient breadbaskets are crucial to sustain the human population and save the planet,” *NEOM*, accessed November 11, 2023, <https://www.neom.com/en-us/our-business/sectors/food/climate-resilient-breadbaskets#fifth-paragraph>; “Changing the Future of Energy,” *NEOM*, accessed November 11, 2023, <https://www.neom.com/en-us/newsroom/neom-green-hydrogen-investment>.
- <sup>32</sup> Quoted in David Sims, *Egypt's Desert Dreams: Development or Disaster?* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2015), 1.
- <sup>33</sup> Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt*, 273–74.
- <sup>34</sup> Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 35; Najī, *Using Life*, 20.
- <sup>35</sup> Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 148; Najī, *Using Life*, 113.
- <sup>36</sup> Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 228; Najī, *Using Life*, 191.
- <sup>37</sup> Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 211; Najī, *Using Life*, 177.
- <sup>38</sup> Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 35; Najī, *Using Life*, 22.
- <sup>39</sup> Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 194; Najī, *Using Life*, 164.
- <sup>40</sup> Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 194; Najī, *Using Life*, 164–65.
- <sup>41</sup> Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 195; Najī, *Using Life*, 165.
- <sup>42</sup> Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 195; Najī, *Using Life*, 165.

---

<sup>43</sup> Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 195; Najī, *Using Life*, 195.

<sup>44</sup> Translation of first sentence mine. Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 35; Najī, *Using Life*, 22.

<sup>45</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *After Fukushima: The Equivalence of Catastrophes*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 33, 40–45.

<sup>46</sup> Nancy, *After Fukushima*, 40.

<sup>47</sup> Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 171; Najī, *Using Life*, 142.

<sup>48</sup> First translation mine. Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 108; Najī, *Using Life*, 89.

<sup>49</sup> Sabry Hafez, “The New Egyptian Novel: Urban Transformation and Narrative Form,” *New Left Review*, no. 64 (2010), 62; Youssef Rakha, “In Extremis: Literature and Revolution in Contemporary Cairo (An Oriental Essay in Seven Parts),” *The Kenyon Review* 34, no. 3 (2012): 161.

<sup>50</sup> Ahmed Najī, “Beige Writing . . . Ahmed Najī in Conversation with Sam Diamond,” interview by Sam Diamond, *Hotel*, accessed July 12, 2023, <http://partisanhotel.co.uk/Ahmed-Naji/>.

<sup>51</sup> Najī, “Beige Writing.”

<sup>52</sup> Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 156; Najī, *Using Life*, 131.

<sup>53</sup> Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 156; Najī, *Using Life*, 130.

<sup>54</sup> Tarek El-Ariss, *Cracks, Hacks, and Scandals: Arab Culture in the Digital Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 57.

<sup>55</sup> Nicole Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 11.

<sup>56</sup> Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 171; Najī, *Using Life*, 142.

<sup>57</sup> Christopher Y. Lew, “Back to the Futurist,” *Whitney Museum of American Art*, accessed on September 25, 2023, <https://whitney.org/essays/sophia-al-maria>.

- 
- <sup>58</sup> Rahel Aima, “The Khaleeji Ideology,” *e-flux Architecture*, accessed on September 15, 2023, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/horizons/498319/the-khaleeji-ideology/>.
- <sup>59</sup> Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 198–99; Najī, *Using Life*, 168–69.
- <sup>60</sup> Quoted in Perwana Nazif, “Arabfuturism: Science-fiction & Alternate Realities in the Arab World,” *The Quietus*, accessed November 5, 2023, <https://thequietus.com/articles/24088-arabfuturism>.
- <sup>61</sup> Sulaiman Majali, “Toward a Possible Manifesto: Proposing Arabfuturism(s) (Conversation A),” in *Cost of Freedom: A Collective Inquiry*, e-book (2015–16), 15–53.
- <sup>62</sup> Tamar M Boyadjian, *The City Lament: Jerusalem Across the Medieval Mediterranean* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 56–60.
- <sup>63</sup> *Maqāmah* often employs parody, irony, and humor, and, as Abdelfattah Kilito argues, challenges semantic coherence and comprehension. Quoted in Alexander E. Elinson, “Tears Shed over the Poetic Past: The Prosification of Rithā al-Mudun in al-Saraqūṣī’s ‘Maqāma Qayrawāniyya,’” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 36, no. 1 (2005): 9.
- <sup>64</sup> Devin Stewart, “The Maqāma,” *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Arabic Literature in the Post-Classical Period*, ed. Roger Allen and D. S. Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 145–58.
- <sup>65</sup> Caroline Rooney, “The Contemporary Egyptian Maqama or Short Story Novel as a Form of Democracy,” in *The Postcolonial Short Story: Contemporary Essays*, ed. Maggie Awadallah and Paul March-Russell (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 129.
- <sup>66</sup> Stephan Guth, “Politeness, Höflichkeit, 'adab: A Comparative Conceptual-Cultural Perspective,” in *Verbal Festivity in Arabic and Other Semitic Languages*, ed. Lutz Edzard and Stephan Guth (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), 16.
- <sup>67</sup> Brinkley Messick, *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 21–22.

---

<sup>68</sup> Marie-Thérèse Abdelmessih, "Strategies of Engagement in Using Life: A Multimodal Novel," *Crossing Borders: Appropriations and Collaborations*, no. 38 (2017): 111.

<sup>69</sup> Translation mine. Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 9; Naji, *Using Life*, 1.

<sup>70</sup> Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 25; Naji, *Using Life*, 13.

<sup>71</sup> Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 583.

<sup>72</sup> Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 72; Naji, *Using Life*, 55.

<sup>73</sup> Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 72; Naji, *Using Life*, 55.

<sup>74</sup> Meliha Teparić, "Figural Representation in the Arabic Calligraphy," *Epiphany: Journal of Transdisciplinary Studies* 6, no. 2 (2013): 152.

<sup>75</sup> Abdelmessih, "The Hyper in Calligraphy and Text." *Literatures in the Digital Era: Theory and Praxis*, ed. Ameila Sanz and Dolores Romero (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2007), 257.

<sup>76</sup> "Ahmed Naji: Egypt," *Pen America*, accessed Sept. 18, 2023, <http://pen.org/advocacy-case/ahmed-naji/>.

<sup>77</sup> Nājī, *Istikhdām al-ḥayāh*, 5; Naji, *Using Life*, n.p.

<sup>78</sup> Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism," 301.

AAWP POSTPRINT