

Opening Up the Text: Arabic Literary Studies on the Move

by Barbara Winckler & Christian Junge

Abstract

The uprisings associated with the “Arab Spring” since 2010 have had a multifaceted impact on the field of Arabic literary studies in general and in Germany in particular. The political protests in the Arab world evolved along with a “cultural revolution” that sees practices of literature and art as tools of the “new political”. In consequence, Arabic literary studies have begun revisiting the relationship between literature and society, thereby “opening up” the concept of the traditional literary text. Scholars of Arabic literature are now eager to study new text forms such as blogs, graffiti and slogans and explore the sociopolitical conditions of texts and the socio-cultural practices of writing. However, this opening up is by no means limited to academic research in Arabic literary studies. Indeed, practices of networking, language instruction and societal commitment throughout the discipline are opening up. Strengthening collaborative research efforts among scholars based in the West and the Arab world, teaching Arabic as a modern language of communication and knowledge production, and demonstrating societal commitment in the growing presence of Arab refugees and migrants in Germany, the field of Arabic literary studies is on the move.

Academia in Transformation

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Opening Up the Text: Arabic Literary Studies on the Move

About the Authors



Barbara Winckler

is Junior Professor for Modern Arabic Literature and Culture at Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster and co-director of the international summer school program "Arabische Philologien im Blickwechsel". She is an AGYA member since 2014.



Christian Junge

is a lecturer and research assistant at the Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies at Philipps-Universität Marburg and co-director of the international summer school program "Arabische Philologien im Blickwechsel".

About the AGYA Working Group Transformation

Popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have had a deep impact not only on the societies in the respective countries, but also on academic disciplines and scientific relations between European and Arab countries. Many of the developments that have taken place in the region are not exceptional, but rather have reflected and accelerated broader global trends. Moreover, the importance of new media, new forms of social mobilization and new instruments of governance is being felt outside the MENA region. Taking a transcultural perspective, the Transformation Working Group of the Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) aims to improve understanding of these trends. The working group debates how ideas, norms and concepts are diffused in a context of mutual exchange, and how scientific relations between Europe and the MENA region can be improved.

Opening Up the Text: Arabic Literary Studies on the Move

“Until the 25th of January, neither the protagonist of my novel ‘Brooklyn Heights’ nor I myself believed that [political change in Egypt] could become reality. [...] The reality of my country surpasses the fiction of the novel” (El-Tahawy 2011: 51f., our translation). With these words, the Egyptian writer Miral El-Tahawy (b. 1968) explained how the aura of the Tahrir Square during the 25th of January revolution fundamentally changed what is thinkable and imaginable in Arabic fiction. When reality surpasses fiction, the role of literature changes in society. Asked about the role of art in times of political upheaval, the Egyptian playwright and performance artist Laila Suleiman (b. 1981), who staged documentary performances like “Lessons in Revolting” and “No Time For Art” (both 2011), stated: “It is time for art used as a tool. I am at the moment not interested in experimenting for the sake of the process or for ultimate goal of self-expression.” Faced with the manner in which “the media and official institutions were rewriting history [...] it became one of our main priorities to [...] document certain events that were supposed to be forgotten. [...] I wanted to find out what I could do artistically with the methods of documentation”, Suleiman adds. “My tools are the tools of the theatre. It might reach less people, but it can have a much more piercing, more direct effect than a YouTube video” (Malzacher & Warsza 2011). Indeed, since the beginning of the upheavals in 2010, many Arab writers have fundamentally revisited the roles of literature and the arts in society.

Within large portions of Arab societies, the Arab uprisings raised hopes of fundamental political change and tangible social improvement that were quickly shattered by outcomes such as the authoritarian counter-revolution in Egypt and the humanitarian disaster in Syria. These developments continue to have a major impact not only on literature and the arts but also on Arabic literary studies as an academic discipline. This essay discusses how scholars in the field have recently approached the relationship between literature and society. To be sure, in the last four decades, most of them have been interested in reading modern Arabic literature from a sociopolitical perspective (see, for example, Wielandt 1980; Harlow 1987; Klemm 1998; Darraj 2008), which underscores the fact that even postmodern Arabic literature has never been fully detached from politics (Pflitsch 2010: 27ff.). However, since the 1990s, many scholars have emphasized the importance of exploring Arabic literature for its own sake, in appreciation of its aesthetic value, and not primarily as a medium of social and political representation. These scholars have worked hard to make Arabic literature more visible as part of world literature (see, for example, Abou-Bakr 2004; Ette & Pannewick 2006; Allan 2016) and have been active in Western literary theory debates, arguing with Dipesh Chakrabarty for the need to “provincialize” Western knowledge production and “deprovincialize” Arabic literature (see Klemm & Gruendler 2000; Neuwirth, Pflitsch & Winckler 2010).

The recent transformation processes in the Arab world have urged scholars of Arabic literature to focus again on the relationship between literature and society. This is due to the fact that a new understanding of literature and art became – at least for a period of time – prevalent in Arab societies. Many young writers have been activists in the uprisings, and new literary art forms have emerged or gained visibility through the protests. In addition, documentary forms have gained in importance. Another reason for reading society through the lens of literature has been the increasing demand of a Western audience to understand the “Arab Spring” through literature, which has been criticized by some Arab writers as a kind of neo-orientalism (Rakha 2012: 162ff.). In addition, Western funding institutions have been eager to fund academic research and various forms of cultural production related to the transformation processes, and many scholars addressed the “Arab Spring” in literature to express implicitly or explicitly their sympathy for the uprisings, which has been criticized as a form of biased knowledge production (Schielke & Shehata 2016: 1f.). Though we have witnessed a return to the old question about the relationship between literature and society, it is now posed very differently. Instead of asking “How does literature mirror sociopolitical change?” scholars of Arabic literature ask instead “How does literature take part in this change?”. In this way, they shift the focus of inquiry from representation to practice.

This essay discusses this new approach to modern Arabic literature, with a particular focus on Germany. It is not meant to be a comprehensive overview of this field, but rather a selective mapping of trends that we consider promising. Though the “Arab Spring” has clearly been significant in shaping these trends, it is neither their starting point nor does it represent a radical turn, and it is certainly not the only driver of the changes and challenges faced by Arabic literary studies. Our central argument involves a changing approach to texts, namely that Arabic literary studies are “opening up” the traditional literary text by reaching beyond its mere textual reality. This expanded approach to texts has an impact on academic research as well as other practices in the field of Arabic literary studies. We therefore discuss recent trends not only in academic research, but also in academic networking, the teaching of Arabic and academia’s demonstration of societal commitment. These four different yet related means of opening up the text are summarized as follows:

- 1) Academic research expands the canon of literary texts and shifts the focus from textual representation to the sociocultural conditions and practices of literature and literary texts.
- 2) More inclusive academic networking now questions the dominant valuation standards that privilege knowledge produced in the West and calls for a sustainable exchange of views and experiences between scholars based in the West and those based in the Arab world. This deepening of inclusive networking opens up both textual and discursive spaces to hitherto disregarded perspectives and diverse readings.

- 3) Unlike the prevailing Western academic practice that restricts the role of Arabic to a language of primary sources, Arabic literary studies now emphasize the importance of practicing Arabic as a living language of knowledge production and academic communication.
- 4) Scholars of Arabic literature demonstrate an increasing sense of societal commitment, which involves going beyond the text and applying their academic knowledge to various societal contexts.

► Research: The “Arab Spring” as “Cultural Revolution”

The “Arab Spring” uprisings unleashed not only a political transformation but also, in many regards, a “cultural revolution” (see Nurtsch 2013; Pannewick 2014; Jacquemond 2015). During and after the protests, various cultural and artistic practices left the realm of subculture and attracted the attention of a wider audience. These practices, such as chanting slogans, creating banners and graffiti, covering old songs, shooting hip-hop videos, autofictional blogging and performing documentary theater, are part of the ongoing transformation that has caught the attention of Arabic literary scholars. Among the growing number of publications exploring the cultural and artistic dimensions of the uprisings, we discuss three major overlapping perspectives:

- 1) Mapping the new artistic forms and aesthetics that have emerged from the protests: Many studies begin by documenting nascent art forms and artefacts, in particular transient artefacts such as street art or banners (see Sanders 2012; Gribbon & Hawas 2012), while literature and arts are undergoing a “documentary turn” in which documentation is viewed as an important artistic and political tool (see Prince 2014; Heshmat 2015). Nearly all studies emphasize the unleashed creativity of the uprisings, approaching it either from a synchronic perspective that foregrounds the great variety of different art forms (see Pannewick 2014; Boustani, El-Enany & Hamarneh 2016) or from a diachronic perspective that places them in a larger historical framework and traces continuities, transformations or ruptures (see Guth 2011; Ziter 2015). Eventually, this leads to the elaboration of particular poetics and aesthetics, like the “fiction of scandal” exposing scandalous realities (El-Ariss 2012) or the rhetoric of “*kifaya*” (that’s enough!) evoking the sense that life under the present sociopolitical conditions had become unbearable (Junge 2015).
- 2) Discussing the re-emergence of commitment (*iltizam*) and the “new political”: In recent works of literature and art, classical topoi of commitment such as the rebel, the intellectual and the people reappear but find different forms of expression (see Guth 2011; Botros 2015). More importantly, the concept of who and what is considered political has changed (see Albers, Khalil & Pannewick 2015). Focusing less on political ideology and social movements, many studies now focus instead on “life as politics” (Bayat 2010) in which, for instance, the body, affects and

everyday life are seen as the terrain upon which battles over the “new political” are carried out (El-Ariss 2013; Junge 2015; Milich 2015).

- 3) Focusing on the cultural practices of literature in relation to power, institutions and the economy: This approach views literature from anthropological and sociological perspectives. It shifts the focus from the literary text and its possible interpretations to the production of the text in its different social and cultural contexts and thus sees literature as a social practice. Studies with this approach focus, for instance, on the making of Arabic bestsellers and the emergence of a new reading audience (Rooke 2011). They also explore the social practice of writing in urban contexts and how “specific institutional, cultural, generational and class milieus contribute to the making of literary careers, sociality and aesthetics” (Schielke & Shehata 2016: 1).

Though distinct in their focus, each of these approaches share a common outcome: they open up the traditional literary text. Since the “Arab Spring”, scholars of Arabic literature seem to embrace more openly different forms of texts such as the digital, sprayed, graphic, sung or performed text, and they seem to be more attentive to the effects of texts such as corporeal, affective, traumatic or emotional effects. In addition, these scholars appear more eager to focus on the conditions contributing to the making of texts such as social, institutional, financial or generational conditions. In order to illustrate these trends, this essay now presents two recent research projects which are close to our own research.

Documenting Post-Revolutionary Realities: “In 2016”

One research project that has expanded the focus beyond the classical literary text is “In 2016: How it felt to live in the Arab World five years after the ‘Arab Spring’”, directed by Stephan Guth and Albrecht Hofheinz at the University of Oslo (University of Oslo 2015). This project seeks to create the atmosphere of the post-revolutionary realities by letting the texts themselves speak. Instead of developing a master narrative or constructing a canon of representative texts, it seeks to bring together a broad range of different kinds of texts. Focusing on Egypt and Tunisia, it collects fresh and hitherto mostly unexplored sources from literature and social media published during the year 2016 exclusively. Instead of relying on comprehensive political statements or religious commentaries, the project foregrounds personal everyday experience. It thus highlights the corporeal and emotional dimensions of life and/as politics. Bringing together “highbrow” and popular culture, joining major issues with minor topics, and linking famous authors with anonymous writers, it aims to create a textual network that allows us to read beyond the common text(s). It strives towards what one might call with Clifford Geertz a “thick description” of the lived world that is expressed in the selected sources and which, taken together, may be understood as an academic collage documenting the aftermath of the “Arab Spring”. The project’s synchronic snapshot technique draws upon Hans

Ulrich Gumbrecht's historical collage "In 1926: Living On the Edge of Time", which catalogues a broad range of literary, journalistic, academic and political texts by "arrays" (i.e., artifacts, roles or activities) and by binary and collapsed codes in order to create the particular atmosphere (or *Stimmung*, as Gumbrecht calls it) of this year (Gumbrecht 1997). By applying Gumbrecht's historiographic and aesthetic approach to the Arab world in 2016, the project opens the approach up to digital, visual and audio sources and thus transforms the collage into a digital hypertext. With the collection of raw data now complete, the various textual items are currently being analyzed, arranged and catalogued. Preliminary findings suggest arrays of phenomena such as "sexual harassment", "narrow spaces", "closed rooms", "vulnerability", "Facebook" or "emotionalism" are relevant, while binary codes such as "courage vs. fear", "idle man vs. hard working woman", "Rolls vs. Volkswagen" or "piety vs. blasphemy" are also prevalent (Guth 2016a: 229ff.). In addition, some preliminary studies have been published in a special issue of the *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*, including studies on Tunisian Facebook posts, a snapshot of recent Arab films and an overview of popular literary genres in Egypt (Achour-Kallel 2016; Guth 2016b; Jacquemond 2016). The project's planned online "encyclopedia of 2016", though still in a nascent state, seeks to enable the reader to "click himself/herself" through the "world of 2016" and, in this way, approximate the experience of how it felt to live in Arab contexts five years after the "Arab Spring". By combining the literary with the social text and the printed with the digital text, the project opens up the literary concept of text. In addition, it emphasizes the interwoven nature of documentation and feeling.

Literature and Art as Cultural Practices: "Figures of Thought | Turning Points"

Opening up the text in contemporary Arabic literary studies also involves a stronger focus on the contexts and conditions of textual production. In so doing, this approach re-addresses the role of literature in society, which is one of the classical topics of Arabic literary studies. The research project "Figures of Thought | Turning Points: Cultural Practices and Social Change in the Arab World" directed by Friederike Pannewick at Philipps-Universität Marburg re-visits this relationship (University of Marburg 2015a). Normally, there are two dualisms used to analyze literature in regard to society: "either art is seen as a mirror, reflecting society, or it is understood as a medium of political expression; either it is the social structure that shapes and fashions the literary work, or it is the work of art that impacts on a social context" (University of Marburg 2015b). To escape these dualisms, the project reads literature and the arts as cultural practices. In other words, literature and the arts, because they construct society and are constructed by society, are involved in the conditions of their own production. From this perspective, the text is located within what Stuart Hall has called a "circuit of culture" which includes the production, consumption and regulation of the text and the identity of its agents in addition to the artistic and political signification of the text (see Pannewick 2014; Pannewick & Khalil 2015). This approach includes studies on the literary field or the habitus of

authors (see Jacquemond 2015; Lang 2016), but may also include the visual and performing arts (see Albers 2015; Eickhof 2016) or even youth and sport practices like parkour, in which one uses his or her body to clear obstacles (see Braune 2014).

While cultural studies have sometimes been described as a radical contextualization, the “Figures of Thought” project seeks instead to combine approaches from literature and art studies with those from cultural studies and anthropology in order to discuss the poetics and aesthetics of a text along with its social and cultural context. In other words, the project goes beyond – and eventually returns to – the text. In practice, this may involve combining a close reading with interviews or a mapping of intertextuality with fieldwork. The approach, of course, refers not exclusively to the “Arab Spring”, but also to other turning points, such as the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948 or the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956, both of which marked a change in hegemonic figures of thought and the cultural practice of arts.

Although several cultural, social and anthropological studies of Arabic literature and arts predate the “Arab Spring” (see Jacquemond 2003; Mehrez 2008), its attendant cultural revolution has compelled scholars of Arabic literature to incorporate a broader spectrum of sociological and anthropological approaches to the analysis of textual production and its contexts. In other words, the Arab uprisings pushed to the forefront interdisciplinary approaches that are able to address and grasp more comprehensively the opening up of literary texts in societies undergoing transformation. Responding to the urgency and relevance of political and social transformation, these perspectives thus gained a greater academic legitimacy in the field of Arabic literary studies.

► Networks: Towards Collaborative Research with Arab Academia

The processes of political and social transformation underway since the “Arab Spring” have had an impact not only on the content and focus of academic research in Arabic literary studies, but have also affected the conditions and means of scientific cooperation. While scholars in this field have never been limited to their national realm, international exchange and cooperation has mostly taken place among colleagues working at academic institutions in the West alone and has only rarely involved universities in the Arab world – with the exception of Western-style universities such as the American University of Beirut or the American University in Cairo. As in other disciplines, knowledge production in the field of Arabic studies in internationally renowned publications is still widely dominated by scholars based in Europe and the United States.¹ Research conducted at universities in the Arab world, particularly if published in Arabic or by an Arab publisher, is often neglected by Western colleagues. This is due in part to practical matters of visibility and availability, but there are also epistemological reasons accounting for this blind spot. These include discrepancies in research interests and academic traditions, Arab academia’s reticence to address presumably sensi-

¹ For a similar conclusion regarding their respective fields of research, see the contributions of Carola Richter and Hanan Badr “Communication Studies in Transformation” and Florian Kohstall “Beyond Regime Change: Middle East Studies and Academic Cooperation in the Wake of the Arab Uprisings” in this working paper series.

tive topics and reservations prevailing in Western academia regarding the use of Arabic as an academic language. These limitations have far-reaching consequences. They hamper close cooperation and comprehensive exchange across cultural and geographical borders, and exclude Arab scholars in the region from contributing to internationally acknowledged knowledge production. Given the current state of affairs in our globalized world and the challenges faced by the Middle East and North Africa in particular, a serious and sustainable exchange of views and experiences between scholars based in the West and the Arab world is urgently needed in order to reach a more comprehensive understanding of the pressing matters requiring an effective response by all stakeholders.

In recent years, the number of Western-Arab cooperation and exchange programs has increased significantly. Moving beyond an isolated exchange between individual scholars with shared research interests, many of these programs now function as a framework to ensure ongoing exchange between individuals and institutions. As a result, they have built up a transregional network that continues to grow. The two initiatives presented in the following illustrate the major challenges faced by this form of academic cooperation and its achievements thus far. By discussing these initiatives, we also identify the challenges ahead in improving Arab world-based scholars' access to international scientific output and ensuring that their scientific contributions are recognized and incorporated into international knowledge production. This requires an awareness in Western academia of the need to take account of research literature published in Arabic and thereby expose itself to hitherto disregarded perspectives and diverse readings. Both examples demonstrate how a productive opening up of the text can be achieved in Western academia.

Building a Transregional Network – An Interdisciplinary Postdoctoral Fellowship Program

In the broader field of Middle Eastern studies, the Berlin-based “Europe in the Middle East – The Middle East in Europe” (EUME) research program, which is part of the larger research organization Forum Transregionale Studien, represents one of the most significant efforts in terms of budget, the variety of instruments and number of involved disciplines and institutions. Launched in 2006 as a joint initiative of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, the Fritz Thyssen Foundation and the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, EUME is a multidisciplinary program with a distinct research and research policy agenda. EUME has set new academic standards in Middle Eastern studies research by aiming to “recollect the legacies of Europe in the Middle East and of the Middle East in Europe in an inclusive way that aims to do justice to their entanglements” and “rethink key concepts and premises that divide Europe from the Middle East” (EUME 2011a: 1). With regard to research policy, EUME aims to rethink prevailing disciplinary structures in Germany and most other Western countries. This involves exploring “problems inherent in the academic division of labor between Area Studies and the systematic disciplines” which exclude non-European history and literature from the “systematic” disciplines and thereby delegate “the study of non-European cultures

and societies to regional experts and institutionally small disciplines” (EUME 2011b: 7). Finally, and most significantly in terms of international exchange, the program sets an example by establishing new forms of academic cooperation and networking. A key element here is the postdoctoral fellowship program that allows young scholars from Middle Eastern and other countries to pursue their own projects within the EUME framework. In addition to providing a forum for interdisciplinary academic debate through a seminar held every two weeks, the framework helps integrate the fellows, according to their academic disciplines, into university departments or academic institutions involved in the project (EUME 2011b: 19). The fellowship program is complemented by a series of summer academies. Most often held at an academic institution in the Middle East, these summer academies foster the growth of scholarly networks by providing an additional 20 doctoral and post-doctoral students the opportunity to discuss relevant topics in an international and multidisciplinary environment (EUME 2011b: 20). The program thus aims to create “a platform that rests upon the idea of ‘learning communities’ (Wolf Lepenies) and the principle of ‘research with, rather than research on’” (EUME 2011a: 1). By placing scholars from different backgrounds on equal footing, the program provides participants the opportunity to familiarize themselves with different scholarly traditions, approaches and debates and thereby overcome the divide between them (EUME 2011b: 7-8). A network of more than 200 scholars based in the MENA region and beyond has emerged from the project that continues to stimulate research activities within the program as a whole and within the specific institutions involved. The program also engages in public outreach, organizing debates and artistic presentations in public venues (EUME 2011b: 8).

Towards Multiperspectivity and Self-Reflection – An Arab-German Summer School Program

A related though slightly different aim is targeted by the “Arabische Philologien im Blickwechsel / نحو / دراسات عربية برؤى متعددة” (Towards Multi-Perspectival Arabic Studies) initiative, in which the authors of this essay are directly involved. Still in an initial state of realization, the initiative has a twofold agenda: to facilitate the systematic exchange of perspectives and experiences between scholars from universities in Germany and in the Arab world, and to foster the use of Arabic as an academic language (Arabic Philologies 2014).

The project’s summer school program format is designed to engage established and junior scholars alike. Professors, PhD students and postdoctoral researchers from Arab and Western universities are invited to discuss current, innovative approaches to Arabic philology, literature and culture. The summer school’s tandem teaching method renders participants’ differences and commonalities visible and comprehensible. In addition to addressing issues of contemporary relevance, the summer school encourages participants to reflect on their work at the meta-level. This involves questioning the premises and priority objectives of our work while exploring the drivers of existing discrepancies such as differences in epistemological or sociopolitical conditions.²

² For more information on why and how working conditions differ, see Florian Kohstall’s contribution in this working paper series.

The conceptual framework for the summer school program emerged from Arab-German cooperation workshops held in Cairo in 2011. Since then, two trial runs have been held at international workshops in Berlin. The first, held in 2011, focused on the tandem teaching method and featured participants discussing a text or topic from different perspectives at each session. The second, held in 2014, took the form of a workshop-cum-summer school in which potential key issues and approaches were explored and the summer school program's concept was put to practice. In both cases, the bilingual environment combined with an intercultural tandem teaching method brought to light remarkable differences across research traditions but also underscored the shared approaches and concepts. The alternate use of two languages (German and Arabic in the first case, English and Arabic in the second) raised awareness of the impact of linguistic usage and the need to discuss the translation, or even the very translatability, of scientific terms and concepts (Milich & Sadek 2014; Junge & Winckler 2015).

The idea driving this project was born in the spirit of optimism surrounding the “Arab Spring”. Originally scheduled to be held in Cairo in September 2013, the workshop-cum-summer school was conceived with the processes of social, political and academic transformation in mind. However, as a result of the uprisings in Egypt in the summer of 2013 and the volatile security situation, the workshop had to be postponed and was eventually held in Berlin in 2014. Despite such challenges, projects of this nature are more important than ever because they help promote and sustain international intellectual exchange among Arab and Western scholars in the face of a substantial lack of intellectual freedom. Furthermore, they advance the inclusion of younger scholars within international academic exchange. Finally, despite security issues, it is important to carry out programs like the summer school in Arab countries where a broader spectrum of academic participants can gain access to such exchange.

► Language: Practicing and Teaching Arabic as a Modern Academic Language

Conceptions of how to use and teach Arabic have undergone substantial changes in recent years.³ A growing number of Arabic literature and culture scholars feel uncomfortable with the way Arabic has been used and addressed in academic teaching at Western universities. Although attitudes and teaching methods have changed considerably in recent decades, Arabic is still dealt with in the West almost exclusively as a language of written sources rather than being practiced as a living language of knowledge production and academic communication. This is reflected in the fact that the research literature discussed in classes is usually written in English, German or French, rather than in Arabic. The same is true of introductory literature or handbooks, which almost exclusively refer to non-Arabic titles. The scientific terms, concepts and approaches used are most often originally developed in Western languages, while there is little if any discussion of the concepts and scientific approaches

³ For a comprehensive discussion of how the recent Arab uprisings have changed the way Arabic as a foreign language is taught, focusing on the example of the American University of Beirut, see “An Uprising in Teaching Arabic Language” by Bilal Orfali, Rana Siblini and Maha Houssami in this working paper series.

used in modern Arabic research literature. Finally, as is the case within the field of Arabic and Middle Eastern studies in general, international conferences dealing with Arabic literature and culture are almost exclusively held in languages other than Arabic – typically English or French. This aspect of academic practice has significant bearing on the arguments made in the previous section of this essay; in order to realize the principle of “research with, rather than research on”, we argue that it is imperative that scholars from the West and from Arab countries meet on an equal footing. This implies that scholars in the West should no longer restrict their interest to what has already been translated – both in the literal and figurative sense – into Western languages and concepts. Instead, the academic community should consider what is published and discussed in Arabic, taking account of the region’s scientific traditions and recent debates. This requires an opening up of the prevailing practice of text consumption into a matter-of-course use of Arabic as a living language of knowledge production and academic communication, in both its written and spoken form.

To achieve these goals, changes are necessary both on the levels of consciousness and of capabilities. Scholars have to become more aware of the effects of language use; however, providing students and junior scholars with the ability to read and discuss research literature in Arabic is even more urgent. In recent years, a number of initiatives seeking to address this shortcoming have been created. We will present four of these initiatives that function on different levels, including (1) enabling German students to plunge into the Arabic language within the region itself, experiencing the way Arabic literature is taught at universities in the Arab world; (2) professionalizing the teaching of Arabic as a foreign language; (3) giving German students of Arabic and Arab students of German the opportunity to interact both on a linguistic level and in the areas of culture, history and lived experience; and (4) creating links between the various efforts to promote and strengthen the teaching of Arabic as a foreign language on both the individual and institutional levels.

Bachelor Plus in Oriental Studies – A One-Year Study-Abroad Program for Undergraduate Students

Funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the Bachelor Plus program is not restricted to any particular university or discipline. The program is aimed at establishing four-year bachelor’s degree programs at German universities, allowing students to spend an academic year abroad that is fully integrated into the curriculum. The Philipps-Universität Marburg offers its Near and Middle Eastern studies students this opportunity alongside a more traditional three-year bachelor’s degree program. Students enrolled in the “B.A. Orientwissenschaft (international)” program who spend their third year abroad can choose among selected universities in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, Iran or Tajikistan. During the first half of their stay abroad, students attend intensive language courses, and in the second half either attend regular courses in their academic discipline at the host university or complete a five-month internship. The qualifications acquired

during the students' years abroad are integrated into their bachelor's degree programs, and are displayed on their bachelor's certificates (University of Marburg 2016a; ZAS 2016).

German-Algerian Joint Program for Professionalizing the Teaching of Arabic as a Foreign Language

In 2016, the Department of Arabic Studies at the University of Bamberg launched an exchange project in conjunction with the Department of Arabic Language and Literature at the University of Oran I Ahmed Ben Bella. The idea resulted from the above-mentioned discontent with the current situation regarding opportunities for German students of Arabic to practice the language in an academic context, as well as from the observation that teaching Arabic as a foreign language (TAFL) remains a developing but still-nascent field. Thus, the “Arabic as a Foreign Language in the Algerian Context” (Arabisch als Fremdsprache im algerischen Kontext / اللغة العربية للناطقين بغيرها في السياق الجزائري) project, funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for an initial period of three years, was established with the goal of creating a lasting student exchange between the two cooperating departments. The project has two complementary aims: first, strengthening German students' ability to use Arabic as a living language for academic teaching and communication, and second, to establish teaching Arabic as a foreign language as an academic training program at the University of Oran. As of the time of writing, two out of three projected workshops had been held, one in Bamberg in April 2016, and the other in Oran in October of the same year. Both focused on the use of Arabic as a language of communication in academic settings. In addition to activities providing insight into living and study conditions at the two participating universities, the workshops included lectures on teaching methods in the fields of Arabic language and Arabic literature and culture, while also providing the German students with an opportunity to present their own research in Arabic. Another meeting was scheduled to take place in Bamberg in 2017 with the goal of establishing terms for a continuous student exchange. Thus, each year, two students from Bamberg will travel to Oran to attend language courses and regular literature classes alongside local Arabic literature students. Similarly, one PhD student from Oran will have the opportunity to spend an academic term at Bamberg University enhancing his or her practical and conceptual skills in the field of teaching Arabic as a foreign language (University of Bamberg 2016).

Cross-Cultural Exchange via Translation – Tandem Workshop for German and Tunisian Students

Another workshop aiming at bringing together university students from Germany and an Arab country was held in Tunis in January 2017 under the title “Cross-Cultural Exchange via Translation – Tandem Translation Workshop for Students from Germany and Tunisia” (AGYA 2017; University of Münster 2017). The idea behind this initiative was to allow students studying the language, history, literature and culture of the partner country to practice their chosen foreign language while also exchanging ideas regarding literature, culture, history, daily life, and recent regional and global

developments. Organized within the framework of the Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) in cooperation with the University of Münster and the University of Tunis El Manar, the workshop brought together students enrolled in the German department of the Higher Institute of Human Sciences (ISSHT) at the University of Tunis El Manar with Arabic and Islamic studies students from the University of Münster. Around 30 graduate and undergraduate students met in Tunis, and were tasked with translating a selection of literary texts and cultural essays from Arabic to German and vice versa. For many of the participants, the workshop was a first occasion to practice the foreign language and be exposed to it on a wider scale – that is, both in an academic context and in daily-life situations. Forming tandem groups consisting of two Tunisian and two German participants, the students of both universities were able to benefit from their partners' linguistic, cultural, historical and sociopolitical expertise. While working on the translations, they discussed in-depth questions of language, linguistic usage and problems of translation, as well as issues related to the mentalities, points of view and living conditions reflected and expressed in the various texts. In the medium term, the project aims at establishing exchange programs between the two departments in particular and the two universities in general (especially within the humanities). This is ultimately intended to encompass both research and teaching, and will involve graduate and undergraduate students as well as postgraduate students and experienced researchers. The tandem translation workshop was meant as a pilot project, which organizers hope to continue on a regular basis.

A Professional Association Promoting the Teaching of Arabic as a Foreign Language

The last initiative we will present here functions on the broader political and institutional level of cultural and educational policy. In September 2016, a number of academics from or close to the Department of Arabic Studies at the University of Bamberg founded the Fachverband Arabisch e. V., a professional association that seeks to create links between the various efforts to promote and strengthen the teaching of Arabic as a foreign language on both the individual and institutional levels (Fachverband Arabisch 2016). The association was modeled on similar associations for other languages that have existed and wielded considerable influence in Germany for several decades. It is focused on encouraging the teaching of Arabic at all education levels – thus, at secondary schools as well as universities – as well as on fostering research-based approaches to the didactics of language and culture. The association's creation was driven by a perception of gaps in the current academic infrastructure. For example, Arabic is the only official language of the United Nations for which no academic training in its instruction as a foreign language in secondary schools is available in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. At the same time, interest in learning Arabic within secondary schools is on the rise. The association's current work focuses on remedying this obvious discrepancy, seeking to establish Arabic as a foreign language regularly taught at the secondary level by adequately trained teachers. In late 2017, the association will organize a conference addressing the issue of

“Arabic as a Foreign Language”. It also plans to establish a yearbook dealing with the same topic in the near future.

► Societal Commitment: Outside the Ivory Tower

While the Arab world is currently the center of a far-reaching transformation process, Europe is also being affected by this process in many respects. Due to the increasing number of Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi refugees making their way to Europe in 2015, many German universities and academic institutions created programs to facilitate access and provide financial support for student and scholar refugees. Freie Universität Berlin’s “Welcome@FUBerlin” program, for instance, offers German language courses to prospective students, opens selected academic seminars free of charge, and provides comprehensive preparatory courses (through a so-called Studienkolleg program) readying students for academic studies (Freie Universität Berlin n.d.). A number of German funding institutions, including the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) and the Volkswagen Foundation, provide current research projects with additional grants specifically aimed at integrating refugee scholars (DFG 2015; VolkswagenStiftung 2017). The “Philipp Schwartz Initiative”, set up by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, offers funding to universities or academic institutions that host scholars at risk (Humboldt Foundation n.d.), while the “Adopt an Academic” mentoring program instituted by the Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) and Freie Universität Berlin provides scholars support in their new academic environment (AGYA n.d.).

Arabic studies programs in Germany have to take account of these challenges and play a role in shaping these changes, at least to the degree possible within the framework of their academic expertise. Most institutes of Arabic studies in Germany are already making considerable effort in this regard with projects ranging from tandem language and culture courses to providing Arabic-language information helping newcomers integrate into society and the work force – this latter role generally in cooperation with the public employment services (see University of Marburg 2016b). However, future challenges will probably require Arabic studies programs to engage in a long-lasting and sustainable course of societal commitment within Germany. This essay suggests three possible avenues for such a commitment.

First, using Arabic at Arabic studies departments and teaching Arabic at secondary schools should be fostered. In order to make it easier for Arab refugees to study Arabic literature at German universities, selected seminars and lectures should be conducted in Arabic. As a positive side effect, this would also improve the language skills of other students of Arabic. In the long term, however, the main aim is to establish Arabic as a state-approved foreign language in German secondary schools, as demanded by the newly founded Fachverband Arabisch. If integration is conceived not as a one-

way street, but rather as a process that goes in two directions, the teaching and learning of Arabic will gain broader importance – and provide university-level Arabic studies programs with a new task, namely that of training instructors able to teach Arabic as a foreign language. Taking this path, with all its challenges, would provide Arabic studies with new and immediate relevance for German society.

Second, a greater focus should be placed on studying and teaching Arabic literature written in Germany. A number of Arab and especially Syrian writers now live in Germany, including established authors such as Nihad Siris (b. 1950) and Rosa Yassin Hassan (b. 1974); moreover, new voices are emerging, making Arabic literature written in Germany a fast-growing and important field for Arabic literary studies. Studying this topic may help these still-marginalized authors to gain more visibility and improve their reputations within the German cultural sphere (Jarmakani 2017). In the long run, some of these authors will probably shift to writing in German, as have other Arab authors including Syrian poet Adel Karasholi (b. 1936), who has lived in Germany since 1959, and Iraqi novelist Abbas Khider (b. 1973), who came to Germany in 2000. Their works are now an integral part of contemporary German literature. Much as the Arab-American literature written mainly in English creates links between Arabic and American literature programs – or even between Arabic, American literature and Romance-language departments for works in Spanish or Portuguese (Ette & Pannewick 2006) – the study of Arab-German literature should involve close cooperation between Arabic and German literature departments.

Third, greater efforts should be made to translate Arabic literature and Arab culture for the German audience. This should include translating Arabic texts into German, while also ensuring that the translations are reviewed in German newspapers. At least for the present, the Arab uprisings and their subsequent humanitarian disasters have generated a new interest in literary and cultural anthologies dealing with the region (Bender 2014; Halasa, Omareen & Mahfoud 2014). This interest also encompasses literature written by Arab authors in Germany (*Weg sein – hier sein* 2016). While Arabic literature still has a hard time achieving recognition within the German cultural sphere (Reif 2014; Jarmakani 2017), Arabic literary studies programs could help whet this interest, for instance by mapping Arab authors living in Germany in an online encyclopedia, or by launching a German-language journal for Arabic literature, continuing the work of former journals such as *Diwan: Zeitschrift für arabische und deutsche Poesie* (2001-2006) and *Lisan: Zeitschrift für arabische Literatur* (2006-2012). Moreover, Arabic studies departments could convey their knowledge about the Arab world more frequently and effectively to cultural multipliers, social workers and primary and secondary school pupils by engaging in public lectures and workshops.

Certainly, the options available to scholars seeking to act on their societal commitment depend largely on the prevailing academic culture, which often limits ambitions to the purely academic realm. However, if they are to help meet future challenges in German society, departments of Arabic

studies should be aware of their social responsibilities, and contribute within the limits of their ability to the successful integration of refugees and migrants in Germany. For both scholars and programs of Arabic studies, going beyond the text will be a first and vital step.

► Conclusion

The field of Arabic literary studies in Germany has been affected in many ways by the recent Arab uprisings. Though not the only drivers of change in the field, these political and cultural transformations and the sense of urgency and heightened relevance they have created have definitely accelerated developments already underway. These dynamics have fostered an opening up of the text that is not only manifest in academic research approaches but also in academic networking, the practice and teaching of Arabic, and demonstrations of societal commitment.

These changes are thus affecting the field of Arabic literary studies as a whole. Indeed, faced with the fundamental changes in the literary field itself, Arabic literary studies have developed new perspectives on modern Arabic literature, expanded the canon of literary forms and is revisiting the relationship between literature and sociopolitical conditions. In addition, scholars in the field are increasingly emphasizing the importance of collaborative research and a sustainable exchange between scholars based in the West and the Arab world. Moreover, they are working to ensure that Arabic is acknowledged in international academic contexts as a living language of knowledge production and communication. In Germany in particular, scholars are also working to raise awareness of Arabic as an increasingly important language of cultural and social life in the country. While scholars of Arabic literature will certainly need to build on these initial steps, the field itself is clearly on the move.

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