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Engaging the world on the Alexandria waterfront

Samuli Schielke

An intersection of possibilities

Mukhtar Shehata, a frustrated and underpaid teacher in an informal area in the east of Alexandria, lives just a block inland from the Abu Qir suburban train line which divides the up-market seaside from the ‘popular’ (sha’bi) inland of the city. Unlike in Cairo where upmarket districts are increasingly physically apart from the rest of the city, many of Alexandria’s upmarket districts are in everybody’s reach due to the double role of the seafront Corniche Road as a main area for middle class outings (the true elites are drawn to the more exclusive resorts east and west of the city) and as the city’s main thoroughfare. Mukhtar and his family live just half a kilometre from the Corniche, and he often jokingly explains that he lives ‘next to the Sheraton’. There are a few sites accessible to him and his family, such as the Fathallah supermarket which offers a sense of global consumerism at very competitive prices. But in general, his very modest lower middle class standard of living is precarious at best, and the other side of the railway line is his for walking and window-shopping only (see Abaza 2006, 258). And like for so many other people in Alexandria, walking along the waterfront and dreaming is one of his favourite pastimes.

When I sit on the seafront, it depends on my mood which way I look. When I’m in an optimistic mood I look away from the sea towards the high-rise buildings and think about the life of the people who live in them. When I’m depressed I look at the sea and think about the other side. And
I imagine that on the other side there is someone who, miserable and depressed just like me, looks across the sea and dreams of the other side.

On the waterfront in Alexandria different promises of the good life come closer together than anywhere else in Egypt. One is the wealth and comfort of affluent Egyptians who spend weekends and vacations in holiday apartments overlooking the sea in Alexandria. Another is travel across the sea as a migrant worker, a prospect of which the Mediterranean Sea is a constant reminder. In January and February 2011, a third one quite suddenly entered the scene, as the Corniche Road became the site of huge demonstrations demanding the removal of president Hosni Mubarak and the system of corruption and oppression associated with him. During those short and intense days, Mukhtar, his wife, and their two children were among the hundreds of thousands of demonstrators who turned the waterfront of Alexandria into one of the key sites of Egypt’s peaceful revolution, a political space of better future.

As an intersection of aspirations and possible paths of action, the Alexandrian waterfront offers a starting point for linking issues of movement and diaspora with the issue of aspiration for a good life at home, embedded in a vision of a wider world. In this chapter I look at the expectations, the constraints, and the possible dynamics involved in the state of ‘dreaming of the other side’, to borrow Mukhtar’s words. My enquiry is devoted to an attempt to make sense of where and what that other side stands for, and what dreaming about it can do to one. But first, a few words about the notion of dreaming are necessary. If in this chapter I often use ‘dreams’ and ‘aspirations’ almost synonymously, it is because in doing so I am orienting on colloquial Egyptian usage of the word *hilm* ‘dream’. To have a dream is to have guiding, driving ideas, something to pursue. Dreams in this sense of something to pursue raise the question of their realization. Unlike nighttime dreams, or even daydreaming, such aspirational dreams can be more or less realistic. However, there is a peculiar logic of imagination and action that greatly complicates the relationship between dreams and reality. Whether a dream can be acted out is one thing. What is actually accomplished through the act of pursuing a dream can be quite different (cf. Jackson 1996, 34).

The ideas I present in this chapter are strongly indebted to my shared work with Daniela Swarowsky on her documentary film project *Messages from Paradise*, the first part of which we shot in Egypt and with Egyptians in Austria (Swarowsky and Schielke 2009), and with Mukhtar Shehata who was my host in Alexandria and together with whom I have developed many ideas. Inspired to such a high degree by shared work and thinking, this chapter is to an important degree also theirs.
The people who appear in this chapter all hail from one village in the Nile Delta. Most of them live in Alexandria. Some of their paths are very conventional, while others, notably Mukhtar’s and Tawfiq’s literary engagements, are less so. While their particular trajectories may not be representative in quantitative terms, the conditions with which they struggle are shared by a very large proportion of men in Egypt. Furthermore, I argue that precisely this tension between conventional paths and unlikely detours is instrumental to teasing out the two powers of imagination involved in the gaze towards the other side.

**Cosmopolitanism as a longing**

The gaze towards the other side includes at once a vision of there being a world made up of different, interconnected parts, and the recognition that the relationship between these parts is marked by inequality and exclusion. Grounded as it is in an imagined world of possibilities and promises, the gaze towards the other side is a case in point of the social practice of imagination (Appadurai 1996) that shapes the scope of possible actions and trajectories. And in today’s Egypt possible actions and trajectories are saturated by globally marketed and mediated commodities, promises of middle class prosperity and the good life, and various kinds of travelling theories. They are all over the place, in new houses built with migrant money, in furniture oriented at European models (even if they are impractical for Egyptian ways of living), in youth fashion oriented towards global tastes, in the spread of Salafi-inspired religiosity, in the fan culture around Lebanese singers, Egyptian and Hollywood movie stars and European football players, in the Turkish television series, Saudi Arabian sermons and Egyptian and American films through which people narrate their lives. And yet Egypt has not become like Italy, Saudi Arabia, the United States, or Turkey. Rather than a direct emulation of these goods and ideas, what appears to be going on is attempts by people to transform their own world to make it seem valuable in the face of these powers and promises (see Weiss 2009, 36).

There is a growing tendency in contemporary anthropology to study this condition as a cosmopolitan one in order to account for the fact that not only the wealthy and intellectual, but also people of very modest means, live lives that exceed the limits of what earlier generations of anthropologists called indigenous, traditional, or local. They aspire to make global modernity their own, without becoming homogenized or fully connected in the sense evoked by globalization (see Rouch 1958; Larkin 1997; Piot 1999; Behrend 2002; Weiss 2009; de Koning 2009; Elsayed 2010;
Cosmopolitanism, in this sense, is about versatility in and belonging to ‘the world’, of ‘ways of living at home abroad or abroad at home – ways of inhabiting multiple places at once, of being different beings simultaneously, of seeing the larger picture stereoscopically with the smaller’ (Pollock et al. 2002, 11). As such, cosmopolitanism is a modality of both action and imagination. It is not only about life trajectories that exceed borders, but also expectations that exceed borders.

‘Cosmopolitanism’ has a flavour of being a privilege of the global elites. But when looked at from the point of view of the practice of ‘open-ended subjectivities’ (Marsden 2007; 2008, 215), cosmopolitanism is not the privilege of any particular class or place in the world, nor is it detached from particularistic local identities and hierarchies. The world evoked by cosmopolitanism in this sense is not a world without borders, but a world full of borders, inhabited by people who try to cross them.

There is good reason, then, to think of Mukhtar’s stroll along the waterfront of Alexandria as a cosmopolitan one. With its intersection of different milieus of a stratified class society, and with the Mediterranean Sea reminding one of the presence of the overseas beyond the horizon, the Corniche is a cosmopolitan site par excellence. Crucially, Mukhtar also describes the experience of walking along the waterfront as one that often comes along with depression and frustration. The longing for a world of material comfort and money and a life of dignity and freedom (I come back to the details of this a little later) is an unfulfilled one in most cases, and even moments of modest material success are usually relativized by the undiminished sense of pressure that comes along with the race for material improvement. A world of fantastic promises is also a world of deep disappointments.

Sites of possibility

But what possibilities are we talking about? What kind of place is the world which the young men of provincial backgrounds and middle class aspirations aim for? And what are the promises they hope to fulfil by migration and its primary aim, social advancement? Like Mukhtar’s different visions at the Corniche, the different moments and sites of aspiration together make up a bigger picture of the world of possibilities. To pursue these different moments, I move my focus for a while away from the Corniche, to Mukhtar’s native village Nazlat al-Rayyis, some 80 kilometres from Alexandria, where since 2006 I have spent much time discussing the prospects of social advancement, political change, and labour migration with young men (and fewer women). In Nazlat al-Rayyis, as in much of Egypt, the years before 2011 were
a time in which sustained economic growth made the cities’ streets fill with private
cars, and new red brick buildings of up to six floors transformed the appearance
of villages. But it was also a time when almost everybody would bitterly complain
about increasing economic pressure, corruption and nepotism, and deepening social
divisions. During this time, three sites rose above others when people imagined and
discussed the world and the possibilities it offered.

The first of these sites is the wealthy strata of class society in Egypt, the imagined
and actual lifestyles of the Egyptian upper and upper-middle classes which are om-
nipresent in advertisement, cinema, television, popular culture, and the notions of
wealth and happiness evoked in them. This is a fancy world, but the actual dreams
of the good life it inspires are not extravagant. The stereotypical dream of a com-
fortable life that people I know express consists of marriage, children, a reasonably
large and well-equipped house, and a private car – a decidedly middle-class fantasy.
One of the particular features of contemporary consumer-oriented capitalism is that
while it produces striking inequalities, the social utopia of the good life it offers is
that of the middle class, ‘middle’ evoking a sense of being at the centre of society
as one of the good, decent people Schielke (2012). What is important about this
dream beyond its resonance with a worldwide capitalist sensibility is that, even in
a time of an omnipresent pressure to migrate, it is primarily located in Egypt. The
most important kind of social movement that people with such modest middle class
aspirations expect is a movement upwards (or perhaps from the margins towards the
middle), towards the lifestyle and standard of living of affluent Egyptians.

And yet precisely this movement appears also to be the most difficult of all. A
major heritage of Arab socialism, the system of state education and public sector
jobs continues to be the main hope for people of lower middle class background
or aspiration. At the same time, however, all possible paths of advancement to the
more privileged positions in the public sector have become regulated by *wasta*,
networks of nepotist and clientelist dependency. Without *wasta*, one has no hope
of entering anything except the lowest jobs in the public sector. In the private sector
the situation is slightly less dominated by *wasta*, but more by the educational capital
of having attended the right schools. People with government school degrees have
little or no hope of entering good private sector careers. It was in this situation, where
people's main aim was to build a comfortable middle class life in Egypt but where
the means of reaching that aim were increasingly socially exclusive, that migration
came to appear to be the solution over all others.

When people think about migration abroad, they think essentially about two
sites: the West (that is, Europe and Northern America) and the Arab Gulf States.
Both sites are associated with complex expectations, promises, and perils. The Gulf is perhaps the most common site of migration for Egyptians. It has always been and continues to be more accessible for Egyptians to migrate to, although the highly exploitative contracts of labour agents also significantly diminish the profits of migrants. The Gulf is a site associated with highly contradictory sentiments. It is an Arab and Muslim place, and this gives it an aura of proximity and familiarity. Saudi Arabia in particular, with its privileged position as the country of the holy places of Islam and a globally successful centre of the Salafi current of Islam, enjoys a bright aura of Islam. This is clearly reflected in the way women’s migration is primarily directed to the Gulf States, which are considered more appropriate for women than the culturally more different and morally more liberal, or decadent, western countries. But the positive aspects of the Gulf as a familiar Muslim Arab place are countered by a very negative image of the Gulf as an uncivilized place of arrogant, immoral hypocrites, ruthless exploitation of workers, and therefore also perilous to women. If most Egyptians see Europeans and Americans as irresponsibly materialistic and individualistic, their view of the Gulf Arabs is hardly better – rather worse. This negative stereotype is partly due to historical competition about who represents the cultural centre of modernity in the Arab world. More immediately, perhaps, it is due to the actual experiences of Egyptian migrant workers who often face extreme exploitation and humiliation, further aggravated because of the cultural familiarity and shared religion that would make one expect better treatment.

Europe and Northern America, in turn, stand for a different, equally complex and contradictory set of promises and concerns. While perhaps less accessible than those of the Gulf, the promises of America and Europe are in many ways even more attractive for and present in the lives of Egyptians. The increasing sense of nationalist and religious confrontation and paranoia that marked the first decade of the 21st century has not for a moment diminished the aura of a western (that is, mainly American) way of life. The same people who hold militantly nationalist, anti-American, anti-Jewish, and Islamist views of world politics are also enthusiastic consumers of Hollywood fiction, global brands of consumer goods, and European football. They identify with the global fan community of Real Madrid, refer to Hollywood plots to make sense of their own lives, argue that the world is driven to ruin by an American-Zionist conspiracy, express solidarity with the global community of Muslims, and look up to the Western industrial nations as examples of social and political progress.

It is in the nature of hegemony that certain powers and places cannot be ignored, whether one likes it or not. As an Egyptian from the provinces, it is very difficult to
think about social mobility without reckoning with the wealth and possibilities of Cairo. And as an Egyptian from anywhere, it is very difficult to think about a better life without reckoning with the Gulf, Europe, and the United States. The very power of these sites to determine possible paths of progress makes the ways people engage them necessarily differentiated and complex. More fruitful than looking for moments of rejection or affirmation is therefore to look at some of the specific desires and concerns which people express when they think about their prospects in relation to places like ‘Cairo,’ ‘The West,’ and ‘the Gulf’. In what follows I take up two issues which are closely related to the issue of migration, and which, simple as they seem, evoke quite complex frameworks of aspiration for good life: money and freedom.

Money and freedom

In December 2009, I showed the documentary film *Messages from Paradise #1* to a family I had befriended in Nazlat al-Rayyis. The family had just invested its modest but well-managed savings in building a house in an informal area on the outskirts of Alexandria. The widowed mother of the three sons hoped that her youngest son would be able to make a career as a doctor in Egypt, but the older two, Mustafa and Salah, she encouraged to think about migration. Both Salah and Mustafa were in fact seriously thinking about it at the time, albeit in somewhat different ways from their mother. Watching the film, which begins in Egypt and then moves to show the stories of Egyptian migrants in Vienna, one scene in particular caught their attention. In that scene Magdi, a former boxer and now civil servant in Vienna, declares that his entire life is now in Vienna and that he does not want to return to Egypt except on holiday. He even wants to be buried in Austria (most Egyptian migrants, even if they never return, hope to be buried at ‘home’). Their mother expressed her discontent with the idea, and saw it as a kind of failure, even betrayal of the proper meaning of migration, which in her view would be to go abroad with a clear plan, achieve it, and return. Salah contradicted her: “No, he’s right.” His view of migration, too, was about making money to build a life, but he also looked forward to the idea of building a life in Europe.

After seeing the film, the three brothers, two other friends and I went to a café in the village, where we continued to discuss motivations and plans to migrate in more detail. In the course of the discussion, they developed money and freedom as the two essential motivations to migrate – not exclusive, but complementary. Those
who just want money, they argued, are more likely to go to the Gulf States which
are more accessible but also less attractive to live in. In any case, they said, the plan
of the Gulf-bound is always clear and simple: go abroad and collect money to ‘build
a life’ at home. Those, on the other hand, they argued, who also want freedom are
more likely to want to go to Europe or, even better, America where they can live a
life free of the constraints and oppression they experience in Egypt.

The way these young men, and like them many others, used ‘money’ and ‘freedom’
as evident shorthand terms for entire sets of aspirations and subjectivity makes it
necessary to take a closer look at these two notions.

‘Money’, to start with, is not just about getting money. It is very strongly associated
with quite specific things money is needed for, commonly expressed by the phrase
‘building a life’. For a man, to build a life implies all the conventional responsibili-
ties and assets that make a respectable man: marriage, an apartment or a house (a
necessary precondition for marriage), and a comfortable standard of living (the
most important marker of which at the moment is a private car). All this, in the
imaginary evoked by ‘money’, is to take place in or near one’s place of origin, be it in
a new floor over one’s parental house, a new house in the fields outside the village, or
an apartment in a nearby city. ‘Money’ thus evokes a sense of establishing oneself as
a respected and wealthy man in the already existing web of family relations, moving
upwards while remaining connected, which significantly involves also being willing
to provide financial assistance to less well-off relatives.

While there is some money to be earned even for the poor in Egypt, it is hardly
ever enough to qualify as ‘money’ in this sense of sufficient resources for social
advancement. Yet at the same time, money is absolutely indispensable in an infor-
mally privatized economy of a public sector where wasita and bribes are the only
paths to good jobs. It is in this situation where, in order to move upwards, one first
needs to have money that migration appears as the path over all others to a middle
class existence.

‘Freedom’, in turn, is not quite what Europeans often assume it to imply for people
from the Middle East. While the Western popular political imagination associates
freedom with an individualistic sense of a freedom of choice – of lifestyle, of partner,
of sexual orientation, etc., freedom is used by young Egyptians as a more complex
notion and less exclusively centred on choice. Choice certainly is an issue, notably
so in regard to sexual freedom, an issue that at once greatly animates the fantasy
of young men but also appears as something dangerous, especially with regard to
women (in the sense both that men’s sexual freedom can endanger women, and
that women’s sexual freedom is seen as dangerous). But while freedom of choice
is an ambiguous issue, another sense of freedom is almost unanimously phrased as positive: having rights.

Salah’s brother Mustafa argued on another occasion that migration to Europe is, of course, about money, but also about enjoying a degree of freedom and rights. When I commented that it is no fun to be an Arab Muslim in Europe at the moment, he replied, “Even if the law discriminates against me as a Muslim and an Arab, I will know where the law stands and where I stand.” A similar idea was put forward by Tawfiq, a young man who was pursuing several plans to migrate at the same time as we interviewed him for Messages from Paradise #1 in the autumn of 2007:

My uncle told me that once a friend of his sent him a letter from America. He wrote: I am in a country where five garbagemen can demonstrate in front of the White House and return to their homes safely. Here it could never happen. Here the judges get beaten up. Imagine what would happen if the garbagemen tried to demonstrate here.

This view of America may appear excessively optimistic in the light of the many civil rights violations that the past decade has witnessed. But in light of the routine and haphazard brutality of the Egyptian state, Tawfiq’s appraisal of the garbagemen’s demonstration and Mustafa’s hyperbolic claim that it is better to be discriminated against by a rule of law than to be subject to a state of lawlessness are telling of a longing for freedom that is about predictable justice and, most fundamentally, human dignity in the face of a brutal and demoralizing social and political reality. And just as the idea of migration for the sake of money is really about living a better life at home, so also the idea of migration for the sake of freedom in the sense of rights is very much about the frustrating injustice, humiliation, and inequality at home.

Eventually, ‘freedom’ (hurriya) and ‘dignity’ (karama) were to become two of the key demands of the 25 January revolution, so evidently interconnected that one could not be thought of without the other. Also in the way developed here by Mustafa and Tawfiq, the demand for freedom is a demand for dignity, directed against one and the same sense of oppression and humiliation. Importantly, Tawfiq in fact came to be one of the revolutionaries of the first hour, joining the very first demonstration in Tahrir Square on 25 January 2011. That event puts the relationship of migration and freedom in a somewhat different light, and I will get back to his story towards the end of this chapter.
The two powers of imagination

So far I have spoken about the world, and being included in it by means of social advancement and migration, as an expectation, a potentiality. But how does this potentiality connect with action? Actually migrating is the most obvious kind of action involved. But there is more to it, and in a way actual migration may be less important and less insightful than other forms of action. Developing my enquiry to a conclusion with this question about dreams as a socially and existentially constructive activity, I want to highlight the question about how to find paths of action in a world of vast possibilities and limited means.

The tragic twist of migration as actual practice is that while it seems to be about widening one’s scope of action and imagination, the actual experience of migration may rather narrow down one’s horizon of expectation. When one really is there, working in a restaurant in Italy, selling newspapers in Vienna or guarding a bank in Doha, life is utterly monotonous and boring, completely ruled by very few questions: how much money can I save this month? Do I have enough to get engaged on my next holiday?

For Tawfiq, who dreamed of migration for both money and freedom, this was a very disheartening experience. In early 2008, he got a two-year contract as a guard for an international security company in Doha, Qatar. Although the Gulf was not where he really wanted to go, he was hopeful that going there would open up new possibilities for moving ahead. In October 2009 I went to Doha and met him there, living an utterly monotonous life between the bank where he worked and a workers’ hostel in the outskirts of the city. He was very disillusioned about his situation which, he said, brought him some useful experience, but a lot less money than he had hoped, and a life under conditions of virtual slavery. Back in 2007 when I had asked him whether he would return if he could leave Egypt he had replied, “If you were released from prison, would you want to return?” In Doha, I asked him what he thought about it now.

It turned out to be a bigger prison. The problem is how to know the borders of your prison. It’s a prison of many walls. After crossing one wall you find another wall. It’s like you’re in the beginning in the innermost circle, and when you jump the wall you find yourself only in the next circle of the prison. You have to know where the borders of your prison are so that you know how to jump all the way over the outermost wall. But how to know which wall is the outermost? That’s the problem.
Tawfiq’s reply is a philosophical reflection about the condition of people who try to cross borders in a world full of borders (and there never may be that outermost wall). The problem he has with migration is that it has not offered him any practical means of pursuing different trajectories of life. On the contrary, the centrality of money – salary, cost of living, savings, remittances, presents – in the everyday life of migrant workers means that ‘money’, in the sense of the conventional things money must buy, simply becomes more powerful. And the biggest problem is that the little money which the migrant workers do earn is usually much less than they hoped for, and rather than return home with a fortune to ‘build a life’ they more often than not end up living in a more or less permanent state of migrancy to sustain that life.

The trouble with migration as actual practice, then, is even bigger than the lack of freedom outlined by Tawfiq. Even if one were only and exclusively after ‘money’, the problem is that migration troubles, even breaks, precisely that sense of connectedness so central to the social imaginary of the things money must buy. Migrants end up living far from their families, and instead of helping to live out a conservative social ideal, their economical profit often comes at the cost of personal tragedy.

This is the first of the two powers of imagination: the power of dreams that are so compelling that they become almost inescapable. In this regard, the expectation of migration is an imaginative, world-making practice of the tragic kind, because the imaginaries of the proper social roles of the migrant and the dynamics of migrant labour compel people to pursue dreams that greatly limit their capacity to dream. Because it can be acted out, and because there is some real money to be earned abroad, actual migration is a realistic dream. But what it accomplishes is often a troubling limbo; precisely those good things in life one really wanted to build with the money from abroad keep eluding one.

Tawfiq returned from Qatar exactly two years after his departure, without extending his contract. It was a difficult decision, because by staying he could have saved at least some money, while back at home his meagre civil servant’s salary does not even cover running expenses. Back in Egypt, he told me that reading Paulo Coelho’s novel *The Alchemist* in Arabic translation (Coelho 1996 [1988]) several times over during his time in Doha was what gave him the strength to return. *The Alchemist* is a parable of quite explicit symbolism, a story of winding paths to the fulfilment of a dream, and a plea for a life of individual self-realization guided by one’s unique, true potential. If reading this novel could be powerful enough to help one to take a step against the compelling stream of migration, then this certainly raises a question about the power of imagination not only to create paths so compelling that
other paths become almost impossible, but also to create alternative paths in spite of their apparent impossibility.

If the ‘realistic’ (in the sense of the socially accepted plan evoked by Salah’s mother) dreams of migration often end up limiting one’s horizon of fantasy, unrealistic dreams have the advantage that their practical relevance is not bound to their practicability. Mukhtar Shehata whose stroll at the waterfront in Alexandria opened this chapter is one of the most unrealistic dreamers I know in Egypt, and his own experiments in the relationship of dreams and practice offer some important insights into this second power of the imagination.

Now, you are the other side

Mukhtar has often considered migrating, and on two occasions he tried to get a visa to work in the Gulf States, but without success. But for him, migration for money was always secondary to travelling to widen one’s horizon, as he explained in an interview for *Messages from Paradise #1* in 2007:

It wasn’t my dream to marry and have children, a house, a family. But it was my dream to go abroad. I didn’t want to migrate to change my situation here. I wanted to migrate to find other dreams.

As Tawfiq’s account reminds us, migration can be a disappointing way to search for other dreams. Yet Mukhtar, unable to migrate even to the Gulf, turned to fantasy as a means of imaginary travel. In 2007 he started to write a novel, the plot of which he explained to me on one of our strolls along the Corniche. After many difficulties (publishing a book costs money in Egypt), he finally managed to publish it in the spring of 2010. Entitled *No to Alexandria* (Mukhtar Shehata 2010), it is the puzzle-like story of Said (Arabic for ‘happy’), a deeply unhappy man who reacts to a personal tragedy by emigrating, a journey that leads him from Egypt through Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan to Germany, with his only true friends being the spies set after him by Arab and Western intelligence agencies. A psychological novel in the guise of a spy story, *No to Alexandria* turns the themes of migration and global politics into a wider engagement with the Other, an issue that is central to Mukhtar’s creative work.

Pursuing the theme of the Other, Mukhtar began to write a second novel which, located in Alexandria and the United States, tells the story of the fraught relationship between Christians and Muslims in the city. It is also a story of the city and
the class boundaries that divide it, and the Abu Qir railway plays a major role in it. In Summer 2009, discussing my research about migration and his ideas about the railway and the Other, we decided to produce together an experimental short film about the topic(s).

The film, entitled *The Other Side* (Shehata and Schielke 2010), in nine minutes tells the absurd story of a man of extremist looks (played by Mukhtar himself) who at first seems to plan a suicide attack on the Abu Qir railway, but then turns out to pursue quite different objectives that appear to be related to an unhappy love story across class boundaries. Finally the hero finds himself on the waterfront, expressing the very thoughts about seafront that I cited at the beginning of this chapter. And in the film there is indeed another across the sea, longing for the other side just like the hero. The film ends with a leap by both the hero and his other towards the sea, leaving it open whether that boundary can be overcome or not.

Both the novel and the film develop the issue of migration through themes of unfulfilled search and the engagement with the Other. Both works look at situations in which migration appears as the only possible choice after other choices have become impossible in the eyes of the characters. These works leave their protagonists in a state of never arriving, always about to take yet another step forward. This makes hope and loss into an intimate pair, with the characters repeatedly finding themselves in situations where they desperately hold on to the dreams that once motivated them, but now those dreams are there to overcome their experience of exile. In this moment, the dream itself becomes the homeland they long for.

Mukhtar’s work, which also crosses over the boundaries that usually differentiate between the anthropologists and their interlocutors, is interesting in several respects. First, it is interesting because of what it has to say. At another level, it is interesting because of what the actual practice of writing and publishing a novel and producing a short film has accomplished. For one thing, it offered Mukhtar the chance to visit Germany and Mali as an author and filmmaker to present his vision. In this regard, his collaboration with me has been instrumental. But of course most people who enter the path of creative practice do not collaborate with anthropologists, and there is a reason why Mukhtar’s literary and cinematic work is relevant beyond our encounter, and also beyond his arguably idiosyncratic personal trajectory.

Mukhtar’s novel, as well as the colloquial poetry he is publishing on the Internet, is part of a new wave of writing that emerged in Egypt in the first decade of the 21st century. After a long period of stagnating readership of literature, the past decade has witnessed the rise of new, accessible styles of novels (see, e.g., al-Aswany 2002; al-Ayidi 2003) and colloquial poetry (Salama 2007; al-Jakh 2010; Sa’id Shehata
and an entirely new genre of sarcastic observations about daily life (e.g. Fadl 2005; al-Khamisi 2006; Ez El-Din 2010). These forms of writing, which are often published online before (if at all) they appear in print, share a stylistic proximity to colloquial Arabic, distribution beyond and past established literary circles, and a strong focus on critical social commentary. In the years before 2011 when politics was a dangerous, frustrating and unfruitful terrain, this social commentary developed into an important channel of critical political imagination. And eventually writers and readers of this wave turned out to be among the most enthusiastic revolutionaries in the spring of 2011. In a way, engagement with literature did to a certain section of young Egyptians what reading Coelho did to Tawfiq: it opened up unlikely paths of action in spite of the odds.

Of course this is not to say that becoming writers would be the solution to the problems of frustrated young men and women in Egypt. Writing is a distinctive practice in its own way, requiring as it does education, support, and a degree of obsession. In any case it is almost never a way to make money. And the biggest problems in the lives of young Egyptians are economic in one way or another. And yet the rare occurrence of a revolution – even a politically unsuccessful one – makes visible in a dramatic way what the imaginative search for alternative paths usually accomplishes in undramatic, less visible ways. One’s horizon of expectation and action is determined not only by the landscape of structures, powers, and promises one looks at, but also by one’s way of looking at it. What the practice of imagination can accomplish under favourable conditions is a change in the way the world appears to one, and thus a change in one’s possible paths of action. The power of flights of fantasy lies in their ability to give birth to new dreams (see Masquelier 2009).

It remains a difficult and uncertain path. Some new paths have opened up to the people this chapter tells about, but the problems of economy, inequality, borders, and the deep structures of securitarian state power remain unchanged. Tawfiq, back in Egypt from Qatar, turned into a very capable political activist in his village in the months after the revolution. But in May 2011, he nevertheless left for the Gulf again for a new two-year contract. Although this was a time when Egyptians were more hopeful than I had ever seen them before, the pressure to migrate had only grown due to the difficult economic situation after the revolution. But there is a different tone to migration now. Tawfiq’s first migration to the Gulf in 2008 was undertaken by a bored young man so completely disillusioned about his society that he intended to leave forever. His second migration is that of a still young man, now extremely politicized and experienced in running a revolutionary movement.
in his village, but realistic enough to see the need to save some cash to overcome the difficult years and to get married.

Tawfiq’s trajectory is telling of the dialectic relationship between the capacity to generate new dreams, on the one hand, and the recognition of the sturdy power of political economy. Just as it would be mistaken to assume that people are simply determined by the conditions to which they are subjected, it would also be illusory to assume that they could simply change those conditions by choosing to think and act otherwise. However, even this is only a partial picture. People do not face abstract conditions. They face other people, material objects and technologies, and these encounters – be they immediate, virtual, or imagined – are the conditions under which we all live. There is thus a third, relational aspect to this relationship of imagination and the material world that takes us back to the moment of gazing at the other side.

In 2011, the relationality of cosmopolitan imagination became very tangible around the Mediterranean. For a rare and exceptional moment, ordinary Egyptians were not compelled to compare themselves with Europe, America, or the Gulf, but occupied the centre stage of history when protest movements in Bahrain, the US, Spain, and France emulated the tactics of peaceful resistance developed in Tunisia and Egypt. Egypt itself became a site of possibility. In this spirit, I was inspired to comment to Mukhtar, “Now, you are the other side.” And this is, of course, what the idea of gazing across the sea is all about. The idea that also on the opposite shore there is someone longing for the other side crystallizes the moral implicit in cosmopolitan longing. As Eric Gable (2010) pointed out, it is not only about wanting to be like (or equal to) the wider world, but also about expecting the wider world to be like oneself. This sense of ‘moral mutuality’ (Gable 2010, 89) is an important part of what a cosmopolitan horizon is about: being able to see one’s predicament as one that is shared by others. In this sense, engaging the world on the Alexandria waterfront involves not only a demand for inclusion (Ferguson 2007), but also the more fundamental question about why the world is full of borders, and what could be done about it.

References


Notes

1 This paragraph is a free translation of an Arabic abstract about the novel and the film by Mukhtar Shehata.

2 Blogs and bloggers are the internationally best-known and best studied part of this trend of writing, but the phenomenon is wider, blogs being only one aspect of it. See Onodera 2009; Jurkiewicz 2011; Hirschkind 2011.