

Performing Politics by Telling Tales: Tracing the civic in the Arabic cultural public sphere

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What?

To explore how Arabic dramatic and literary traditions can be understood as sites of intervention and disputation that perform politically as technologies of the self.



Artwork credit: Yasser Gaessa (<http://www.yassergaessa.com/>)

Early elements of the 'performative' in the Arab world are found in the tales of *Hakawais* [literally: tellers of tales; from the Arabic words *Hikaya* (meaning: tale) and *Haka/Hakaw* (told/they told)]. The nomadic *Hakawatis* travelled across different Arabic and Muslim locales sharing tales: fables as well as stories based on actual happenings and events. Recited as dramatic orations, rhyming poetry or satiric comedy, the tales served a dual function: to entertain and also to inform.

Beyond the *Hakawati's* stories 'telling tales' as an authentic Arabic tradition can be found in popular folktales (featuring fool-wise characters like *Juha*), and the satirical theatre of the every day (*Ghawwar*).

It also extends into narrative form, including narratives of the self and others (auto/biographies). The earliest Arabic language autobiographies can be traced back to the ninth century; by the twelfth century the practice of "interpreting/translating oneself" (as the Arabic expression for 'autobiography' implies) is well established.

Why?

Understanding how dramatic and discursive traditions of narration (of the self and others) in the Arab world are "technologies of the self" can contribute towards a more nuanced understanding of how political subjectivities are created, formed and articulated differently in different mediums and places.

How?

The research traces Arabic dramatic and literary traditions historically and explores how the enactment of tales from the early days of roaming *hakawatis* to the present forms of satirical theatre can inform our understanding of how culture performs politically. Ethnography of performance/ performance ethnography is used to examine the value of 'performance' in its various forms to the study of society. Particularly, to explore how political subjectivities are created and formed as modes of enquiry or intervention in the theatre of the every day.

The research will also consider how the 'telling of one's own story' in the early Arabic autobiographical tradition can be understood as a technology of the self informed by the recognition of the self as interpreter (reflexivity). I am interested in how this compares to early European conventions of autobiographical writing and to feminist methodology. Biographical interviews will be used to explore the life stories of Arab artists who tell stories about others through their works; this reflexive methodology enables the interviewees to interpret their own role as 'tellers of tales' through narrating their own story (whilst accounting for the relationship between researcher and researched).