Rosenthal, Gabriele (ed.). 2016a. *Established and outsiders at the same time: Self-images and we-images of Palestinians in the West Bank and in Israel*. Göttingen: Göttingen University Press.

Rosenthal, Gabriele. 2016b. 'The social construction of individual and collective memory'. In: Sebald, Gerd and Jatin Wagle (eds.): *Theorizing social memories: Concepts, temporality, functions*, 32–55. London: Routledge.

Schütze, Fritz. 1983. 'Biographieforschung und narratives Interview'. *Neue Praxis* 13(3): 283–293.

Schütze, Fritz. 2014. 'Autobiographical accounts of war experiences: An outline for the analysis of topically focused autobiographical texts: Using the example of the "Robert Rasmus" account in Studs Terkel's book "The Good War"'. *Qualitative Sociology Review* 10(1): 224–283.

Tamari, Salim. 2000. 'Jerusalem's Ottoman modernity: The times and lives of Wasif Jawhariyyeh'. *Jerusalem Quarterly* 9: 5–27.

Wallach, Yair. 2011. *Shared space in pre-1948 Jerusalem: Integration, segregation and urban space through the eyes of Justice Gad Frumkin*. Divided Cities and Contested States Working Papers, 21.

Worm, Arne, Hendrik Hinrichsen, and Ahmed Albaba. 2016. 'The homogenizing we-discourse and the social positioning of the refugee camps'. In: Rosenthal, Gabriele (ed.): *Established and outsiders at the same time: Self-images and we-images of Palestinians in the West Bank and in Israel*, 45–66. Göttingen: Göttingen University Press.

6   Where is Alexandria?

Myths of the city and the anti-city after cosmopolitanism[1]

Samuli Schielke

IN: URBAN NEIGHBOURHOOD FORMATIONS: BOUNDARIES NARRATIONS AND INTIMACIES. EDITED BY HILAL ALKAN AND NAZAN MAKSUDYAN. LONDON AND NEW YORK: ROUTLEDGE, 2020.

The Chinese Housing

In March 2015, on one of my many journeys between Berlin and Alexandria, I landed at Borg El Arab airport west of Alexandria late at night. The airport is 50 kilometres away from the city centre, but close to many thriving industrial areas, holiday villages, and upmarket suburbs that have been built west of the city and on the North Coast in the past two decades. They are part of a general scheme by the Egyptian government to create new cities far from the old urban centres.

At the airport, I was picked up by my friend Mustafa, whom I have known since the days when he was still living in his native village in the northern Nile Delta. He has been living half an hour from the airport in the district of Agami at the western edge of Alexandria since 2009. Agami is known among the Egyptian bourgeoisie as a pleasant, traditional, and exclusive beach resort (Abdel Gabbar 2013). Mustafa, however, lives 3 kilometres away from the coast in an informally built area on a small hill right behind the Chinese Housing (al-Masakin al-Siniya), an ill-reputed area of large public housing blocks. The area was built in the 1980s as company housing for public sector companies by an Egyptian-Chinese joint venture.

For decades, the Chinese Housing had been an area where poor and marginalised people lived, people who lacked the means to build a house of their own in an informal settlement. It had experienced periods of gang wars that forced the inhabitants to stay indoors for up to three days. Since then, though, the neighbourhood had become calmer and the population more mixed. Mustafa and I moved through the area with no sense of risk even late at night.

Mustafa later told me that he initially didn't like the neighbourhood but grew to appreciate it for the opportunities it offered: 'For me, the Chinese Housing was like America.' He had just opened a shop in the area and business was reasonable. He said that unlike the commercial district of al-Manshiya in the historical downtown of Alexandria, the Chinese Housing and the surrounding informal neighbourhoods were not yet solid, not yet occupied. For Mustafa, it carried some of the mythological aura of the American dream.

Two years earlier, an Egyptian employee at a foreign research institute in Alexandria had been shocked to hear that I frequented the Chinese Housing. She said that she was surprised that I was still alive. For her it was a no-go

Figure 6.1 The Chinese Housing.
Source: Photo by Samuli Schielke (2016).

area, definitely not a part of her city. If anything, it was an *anti-city* neighbourhood that marked the boundaries of and threatened a bourgeois Alexandria, a cosmopolitan seaside city.

The next evening, I continued my journey on a minibus to the opposite end of the city, the neighbourhood of al-Mandara in the east. Al-Mandara is where I lived during my stays in Alexandria as a guest of the novelist Mukhtar Shehata, with whom I worked on an ethnography of literary writing, until 2017. To evade the congested roads along the city's seaside, the minibus takes a detour inland via the International Road that crosses Lake Maryutiya on a land fill bridge where the nauseating smell of pollution occasionally compels passengers to hold their noses. The road passes poor informal areas in inland Agami, the upmarket suburb of King Marriot, vast chemical and cement factory complexes, and the upmarket City Centre Alexandria shopping mall (not near the historical centre of the city). Finally, the minibus enters the city again along 45 Street, in what is known as the East of the City (Sharq al-madina). Approaching the end of the line, the minibus turns into smaller streets, passes the Faculty of Islamic Studies of the al-Azhar University, and finally enters busy Mallaha Street which is surrounded by shops, market stands, and congested by private cars, taxis, minibuses, and toktoks.

Eastern Alexandria is symbolically divided class-wise by the Abu Qir suburban train line, the seaside area being generally more well-off, and the inland area being mostly poorer. I got out at a spot where this mythological division is a tangible reality: at a minibus station next to the railway line. On the other, wealthier side of the railway are the Muntazah Gardens (formerly the royal summer residence, now a public park), the Fathallah shopping mall, the Sheraton, and the beach. On this side, the informal area of inland al-Mandara begins, where construction has been ongoing since the 1990s, with 15-storey houses replacing older five-storey ones.

In Mukhtar's words, this is 'the ugly face of Alexandria'. And it would be difficult indeed to find the Chinese Housing, the International Road, or inland al-Mandara beautiful in any conventional sense. It is not simply the poor face of the city, however. The suburban crescent that surrounds the old coastal core of Alexandria is made up of poor, middle-income, and upmarket neighbourhoods alike. They provide homes and work for millions, and yet none of these would count as the real Alexandria in the media, literary, and scholarly accounts of the city – and many of the inhabitants of the suburban crescent would agree. When I asked Mustafa what the real Alexandria is for him, he did not name the Chinese Housing where he lives, but rather the popular quarter of Bahary in the ancient centre of the city, his favourite site for outings with his family. Where, then, is Alexandria?

Alexandria has a reputation for being cosmopolitan – or having once been so, in a past *belle époque* when Europeans dominated the bourgeois districts of the city. That era is gone, but the reputation and romance of Alexandria live on. Western readers are likely to know Alexandria from the works of Greek, British, and other European writers who lived in the city, or more specifically, in the European-dominated central districts of the city that still carry the material memory of that era. Readers of those works will remain largely ignorant, however, of the vast majority of the city's inhabitants, Arabic-speaking Egyptians, and of the neighbourhoods they inhabited. Arabic literature on Alexandria is only gradually finding its way into the canon of Alexandrian cosmopolitanism (see Hazem 2006; Kararah 2006; Starr 2009; Halim 2013). Historians and literary scholars have provided textured accounts that question the Euro-centrism of the myth of cosmopolitan Alexandria (Fahmy 2006; Zubaida 2011: 131–155; Halim 2013; Chiti 2016; Hanley 2017). And yet an ambiguous nostalgia for a bygone cosmopolitan era is also shared by many Arabic-speaking inhabitants of Alexandria today, in a time when the city has left that era behind, and something rather different is emerging in a sweeping movement of urban erasure and expansion.

Which old and new myths of the city, I ask, are being crafted, questioned, or revised in such a moment, and what might they tell us about the wider imagined and material locations of the city? How do specific neighbourhoods figure in those myths? What political and moral claims about the city are involved in them?

Based on ethnographic fieldwork with contemporary Alexandrian writers and literary circles, I trace a selection of contemporary afterlives of the myth of Alexandria as something different and better than the actually existing city. The

result is part ethnography of a specific literary milieu and part urban ethnography, where writers from that milieu provide the main theoretical inspiration. For an anthropologist, literature is not an obvious choice for understanding how a city is imagined and understood by its inhabitants. However, I encountered the question about the city through my ethnographic fieldwork with writers in Alexandria. The city is a major theme for many of them, and I needed to pay attention to that. Writers also participate in the wider popular cultural imagination as crafters of popular myths. Sometimes their works gain wider circulation when they are taken over by script and song writers, and by national and international cultural institutions. Some of these contemporary literary accounts of the city are fairly well-known nationally and internationally, such as Ibrahim Abdel Meguid's (1999, 2005, 2013) *Alexandria Trilogy*, and Alaa Khaled's (2012) literary work as well as his ongoing editorship of the journal *Amkenah* since 1990. There are many others who are less prominent but not less interesting. In this article, I engage with a handful of writers of the latter kind. All of them are more or less involved in the small, internationally connected and funded avant-garde scene in the city, a scene that is open to the world but limited in its societal reach (for other scenes, see Schielke and Shehata 2016).

When such rather cosmopolitan circles become the breeding ground for an intellectual critique of nostalgia for the cosmopolitan, something important is going on. Equally important is the historical moment in which such critique has emerged: the aftermath of Egypt's January 25 Revolution, which despite its political defeat has transformed both the way many young writers and intellectuals see the world and city they live in, as well as the material shape of the city itself. Since 2011, it has been subjected to rapid erasure and reconstruction in the course of a construction boom.

I work with concepts and ideas that I have encountered in my fieldwork, and consider them as theories that may or may not provide valid answers to the inquiry. I nevertheless call those theories myths because that is the form in which they circulate: as narrative, dramatic structures that may be told in different words (Lévi-Strauss 1955), and that naturalise moral and political claims and relations of power (Barthes 1970).

Alaa Khaled evokes the dreaminess of an Alexandria haunted by its myths – but also points out that those myths may change along with the city:

> The dream that was once planted into the consciousness of the city, will haunt it like a restless ghost, until it either takes material shape and returns to life, or this dream comes to an end and dies, or a new dream is invented.
>
> (Khaled 2012: 20)

Myths thus understood are compelling narrative structures that are to be judged by their power to inspire one to think and act along the lines they suggest. They have historical, political, and social lives worthy of attention (Chiti 2016),

which means that they are never separate from struggles and relations of power, as pointed out by Roland Barthes (1970: 72): 'There are thus very likeable dreams which are however not innocent.' Following up with Khaled's, Chiti's, and Barthes' insights about the historicity and complicity of myths, I add that, when considered as social theories, some myths may also be better suited to providing guidance in a given reality than others.

Despite being highly mythologised, contemporary Alexandria is a rather ordinary city (El Chazli 2018), and its recent development is not remarkably different from so many other cities in the Global South that, in a short time, have transformed into vast conglomerates that have little in common with the cities they once may have been (see, e.g., AlSayyad and Roy 2005; Robinson 2006; Simone and Pieterse 2017). The nostalgia for a past colonial-cosmopolitan era is also a common feature of cities in the Global South (see, e.g., Bissell 2005; Newcomb 2017).

As Setrag Manoukian (2012) shows in his work on the Iranian city of Shiraz, talking about a city always involves highlighting some of its districts and neighbourhoods, and silencing others. Myths that purport to reveal a city's true location and values need to account for those locations and values that don't fit into the story: neighbourhoods and ways of living that are marked as not legitimately part of the mythologised city. I call them the *anti-city*. When I speak about 'the city' in the following sections, it is thus within the tension between the urban conglomerate that is too large for a textured account, my specific knowledge of some parts of it, and various myths that tell us what and where that conglomerate really is and ought to be – as well as what it is not and ought not to be.

Cyprus

Whenever I ask people where the 'real Alexandria' is located for them, I typically get seaside replies. They differ in terms of class (between the old popular neighbourhood of Bahary at the tip of the peninsula, the historical downtown area of al-Manshiya and Ramleh Station, and the old middle-class neighbourhoods east of downtown) and in terms of interests (between literates and summer guests), but there is wide agreement about the shore of the Mediterranean being Alexandria's proper location. And yet, over the past hundred years, the city's linkages with the inland have proved more enduring.

Founded by Alexander the Great in 331 B.C., Alexandria today bears few visible traces of its long history. Contemporary Alexandria is a child of the trade expansion and industrial revolution of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Its rapidly growing population was mainly made up of migrants from upper Egypt, Nubia, and the nearby countryside, along with large numbers of European and Ottoman subjects who had moved there. The Alexandria of the colonial era was also a city of enormous inequalities and conflicts, and it could only last as long as the privileged position of foreign nationals lasted. Following the 1956 Suez Crisis, most Egyptian Jews as well as French and

British citizens were pushed to leave. The already dwindling Greek and Italian communities were allowed to stay, but the majority of their members gradually de-emigrated following the socialist nationalisation policies of the 1960s (Kazamias 2009). Alexandria became a city dominated by Arabic-speaking Egyptians of Muslim or Christian faith. They or their ancestors were once newcomers to the city, too, having arrived as rural–urban migrants in the city and having gone on to reproduce the plurality of Egypt within it.

And people keep arriving: rural–urban migrants and commuters, refugees from Syria and Libya, students from across the world studying at the Islamic al-Azhar University, Egyptian, Arab, and fewer Asian and Western tourists. But that mixture does not strike Western visitors and journalists as cosmopolitan. In Alexandria, 'cosmopolitanism' is usually equated with urban coexistence across religious and ethnic lines, but not all coexistence counts. Alexandria's cosmopolitanism is mainly equated with Europeans and European-dominated quarters.[2] This Eurocentrism is notably reproduced in the way 'cosmopolitanism' is used in Arabic as a French/English loan word: *kuzmubulitaniyya*, although the concept would be easily translatable into Arabic (Raouf 2016).

No wonder, then, that anything that happened after the 1950s hardly counts in standard accounts of the city's assumed cosmopolitanism. Towards the end of the 20th century, a new transformation of the city began, caused by rapid urbanisation and real estate development. Today, the most populous parts of Alexandria are no longer the old central districts, but the numerous new areas that have grown to the east, south, and west of the city. With few exceptions, the villas and small houses that once stood near the seafront to the east and west of central Alexandria have been demolished and replaced by high-rise buildings.

While the Alexandria of the seafront, with its Euro-cosmopolitan past, has been associated with holiday romance and images of a liberal Egypt open to the world, the Alexandria of the inland has become known as a centre of Islamist activism since the 1970s. In the past two decades, the purity-oriented Salafi movement has become a main religious player in the city, competing with the Muslim Brotherhood for followers (Decschamps-Laporte 2014). The ahistorical vision of Salafism resonates well with the drive of real estate developers to demolish and build. Notably, both Salafism and real estate speculation are truly global movements for which national borders and identities are secondary. And yet, just like rural migrants and Syrian refugees, Salafis and real estate speculators also do not fit into the standard narrative of Alexandria's cosmopolitanism. The standard seaside cosmopolitan myth is a story of past grandeur and present decline, whereby the contemporary city is not worthy of interest in its own right. Outside of Egypt, it has been reproduced by concerned journalists (Traub 2014; Hadid 2016) as well as critical intellectuals – including Edward Said (2000).

It is not only foreign visitors who are drawn to such romantic melancholia, however. At a time when both 20th-century secularist nationalist visions of a bright future as well as the material and cultural continuity of the 20th-century city began to crumble, a new interest in cosmopolitan Alexandria before the 1950s emerged. Cultural circles in the city developed an increasing interest in

non-Arabic heritage. Both Egyptian state institutions and international cultural organisations and funding bodies began to actively promote a usually de-politicised, sanitised vision of past glory. This vision, which is especially, but not only, popular among liberal members of the urban bourgeoisie, is today also supported by social media pages that post photos of colonial and monarchy-era Egypt, often accompanied by explicit words of praise for a beautiful past and depreciation of the present (Ryzova 2014).

And yet, no matter how counterfactual it may be today, the idealised association of Alexandria with beauty needs to be taken seriously as something that many inhabitants of the city strive for.

Regardless of their political and religious views, their origin and their class position, inhabitants of the city generally appreciate the sea, even if they only rarely manage to take a stroll along the seafront in their free time. On warm evenings, the Corniche becomes crowded with families, couples, groups of friends, and lone strollers. Many of them sit down and look out on the sea, towards the lights that can be seen on the horizon. I have been told that those are the lights of Cyprus.

Unromantic sceptics object that it is impossible to actually see Cyprus because it is more than 500 km away from Alexandria, and that the lights on the horizon belong to ships and fishing boats. But I am not interested in

Figure 6.2 The Corniche by Ramleh Station.
Source: Photo by Samuli Schielke (2011).

questioning whether it *really* is Cyprus that they see. Instead, I am interested in the gaze itself of the night-time strollers as they look at the dim lights on the horizon. That gaze says something about the city's paradoxical location between a congested, segregated, and largely unappealing urban conglomerate stretching inland – where the vast majority of its inhabitants live and work – and the seaside as the mythological, value-laden location of the city where inhabitants and visitors can imagine and appreciate Alexandria as something beautiful and magical, even if they only rarely manage to actually go there. The Cyprus seen by those strolling on the Corniche is an intimate part of Alexandria. Rather than firmly locating Alexandria as part of the Mediterranean world, however, the gaze toward Cyprus highlights the ambiguity of the Mediterranean Sea, having become a border that divides much more so than being a means of communication that unites.

As a city mythologically located on the sea, Alexandria is also defined by the presence of borders right in its urban heart. The international border of the Mediterranean Sea is paralleled by the class boundaries that run between seaside and inland neighbourhoods, and between the many segregated suburbs even further inland. Those borders, in turn, establish the stranger or the Other as a key figure in the myths that can be told about the city. Explaining what and where Alexandria is typically involves some telling of the relationships of strangeness and alterity that structure the city and the specific spots where those relationships evolve – be they romanticised, as the 'cosmopolitan era' and the historical downtown that still embodies its memory often are, or scandalised, as the anti-city of the sub-urban crescent often is.

What makes literature interesting as a production site of such myths is that it often creates myths with a twist, myths that try to change the set-up of the stories worth telling.

Ghurbal

This is the Alexandria into which the lawyer and poet Hamdy Zidan was born in 1972: the neighbourhood of Ghurbal, south-west of the historical downtown, one of Alexandria's old 'popular districts'. His grandparents migrated to Alexandria from Upper Egypt in the first half of the 20th century and settled here. His father was a wedding singer, and Hamdy became interested in literature and music at an early age. He describes the Ghurbal of his youth as his key inspiration, a society that was at once conservative and open-minded. It is a densely populated quarter of narrow streets laid out in a modernist quadratic grid. In his childhood, the houses had only two floors built of brick and a third floor built of corrugated iron and wood. Several families shared one floor or one apartment, with a shared kitchen and bathroom. Christians, Muslims, and people from different parts of the country all lived together. With the houses fully packed, life took place in the streets. According to Hamdy, there was a magic to the streets, paved with basalt blocks, with steps of iron

and stone pillars: 'This quarter creates drama and debate. The place gave me the magic key to language.'

In autumn 2011, the novelist Mukhtar Shehata and I were attending exhibitions and symposia as part of the joint fieldwork we had just begun. Among the places we frequented was El Cabina, an independent cultural space that had opened months earlier. During the five years of its existence (2011–2016), El Cabina quickly developed into a meeting point of an internationally connected, politically pro-revolution, leftist or liberal, secular cultural milieu with avant-garde tastes.

Among the events we attended was a symposium dedicated to Hamdy's poetry that took place on 17 October 2011. Connecting the memory of his youth and childhood with his free-verse poetry in the Egyptian colloquial, Hamdy outlined his literary and political vision of the city:

> I'm interested in the study of Alexandria as an example of the human condition that we live everywhere in the world – an example of pluralism, openness, tolerance. [...] Alexandria, starting with Alexander the Great, is a sentence that has no full stop, no definite end ....

The real Alexandria for Hamdy is not the bourgeois and cosmopolitan districts on the sea, but the old popular quarters housing migrants from different parts of Egypt, living together in close spaces, but feeling that the whole city is theirs. It is this city – very much the city of his childhood, still remembering the colonial era, connected to a history and looking forward to a better future, rooted yet tolerant and open-minded – that Hamdy elevated to a moral principle that must live on, despite and against the powers that have since come to dominate the city. Hamdy's vision of the city did not exclude contradictions and conflicts, but he was convinced that 20th-century popular-quarter Alexandria offered constructive solutions for coexistence in spite of its contradictions, and therefore needed to be preserved, remembered, and revived.

Locating the myth of Alexandria as an open city (in the sense of being open to the world and to difference) in its old popular quarters stands in a longer literary tradition established by Edward Kharrat (1993, 1999) and other Arabic writers (see Kararah 2006; Starr 2009; Halim 2013) before Hamdy's time. It is also reflected in Mustafa's (who is not a writer and reads little) appreciation of Bahary as the real Alexandria. According to Hala Halim (2013: 282–283), Arabic writing from Alexandria has developed the theme of Alexandrian cosmopolitanism in a decidedly different fashion than that adopted by most European writers, and at times even decidedly against it. But as Alaa Khaled (2012: 12–13) points out, even while that tradition locates cosmopolitan coexistence in popular quarters, it remains committed to the politically safe vision of a lost paradise, grounded in a sense of perpetual loss between a grim present and a golden past.

For Hamdy, a key theme in his vision is the relationship with the Other, especially the Christian and the foreigner. That relationship is at once fraught and attractive, as in his poem 'White Desire' (Zidan 2013):

who collects the wax at the church
to melt it down at home to sell it back to the same Church
was our Christian neighbor.
I understood that on my own when I was little
from the large black straw cross on
the chest of her short black dress
and her silver hair the color of melted wax.
Our mute neighbor
screamed when the boiling wax spilled on her.
She screamed, and no one noticed her,
like my boiling desire within my straw heart.

I noticed a peculiar turning of tables regarding heritage and progress in these events. They took place in a cultural milieu that sees itself as progressive and in opposition to both a conservative religious current as well as the authoritarian system of the state. And yet the prevailing tone was that of a cultural critique of the forgetfulness and destruction of history involved in the Islamic revival. The self-declared cultural and literary avant-garde was upholding remembrance of the past and connectivity with tradition, in opposition to a wave of religiosity marked by a characteristically modernist oblivion in place of history.

A claim to a tradition involves a claim to power. As Talal Asad (2014) has pointed out, traditions are not taken-for-granted continuities. Rather, they are the foundation and result of struggles for power to define, reproduce, and guard them. Hamdy's myth of Alexandria as a principle of openness located in Ghurbal rather than in the seaside districts is a way to wrestle some of the power of the cosmopolitan myth from European bourgeois into Egyptian working-class hands. And yet it remains grounded in a specific, essentialised vision of what is and what is not Alexandria, and an accompanying claim by the urban intelligentsia to define the city. Although a principle of openness, Hamdy's Alexandria is not open in every direction.

A long discussion followed at the symposium. Among those asking questions was Mukhtar. He has a different relationship with the city: 'Maybe it is because I only moved to Alexandria 7 or 8 years ago, and I don't love it the same way.' He asked why the Alexandrian authors in the circle only write about the old Alexandria. He demanded a literature for and about the districts that were once small houses and gardens, and have now turned into 'a concrete jungle': al-Mandara, 45 Street, Abu Kharouf. Mukhtar claimed that these places are never mentioned in the stories of the city, but that they are even sharper and harsher places than some of the ill-famed old quarters such as Gheit El Enab (for the latter, see Abdel Meguid 1999; ElToukhi 2014). They, Mukhtar argued, are places that can and must be written about: 'Abu Kharouf can equal the Gammaliya of Naguib Mahfouz.'

Mukhtar was in this way claiming space for his own writing. At the time, he was sketching a novel (Shehata 2017) that would be located partly in Abu Kharouf and partly in Gheit El Enab.

Hamdy disagreed. He had actually lived in Abu Kharouf for more than ten years. There are writers from the bourgeois milieu who really do not know this side of Alexandria, but Hamdy knows it inside out. He argued that those suburbs are like a cancer attacking the city. In contrast to the plurality, openness, and rootedness that he identified as the characteristics of Mahfouz's Gammaliya (and his Ghurbal), Hamdy saw informal settlements like Abu Kharouf as the very opposite of the idea of Alexandria. He claimed that they are 'like Kandahar' (drawing a comparison between the Taliban stronghold in Afghanistan and the power of the Salafi movement in Abu Kharouf), a place where social relations have collapsed, embodied by adolescents from the informal areas who come to fill Ramleh Station during the Islamic feasts to harass women and anybody who looks unusual.

If for Hamdy Alexandria was a dream of a better world, a memory to revive for the sake of a better future, for Mukhtar Alexandria was the shocking reality of a divided city in which some people attempt to revive the city's cosmopolitan age, while others want to transform it into Kandahar, a seaside city in which some people living in inland informal settlements have allegedly never seen the sea. After the reading in Cabina in 2011, he criticised the downtown intellectuals for the self-imposed isolation they create by celebrating the memory of old Alexandria and rejecting the concrete jungle. In doing so, he argued to me, they close themselves up in a small circle and, by rejecting the reality of the city, fail to reach out to the concrete jungle.

Alexandria as an open city is a very likeable myth, and there are good reasons why it is reproduced by writers who hope that their city might be more accommodating towards different ways of life – especially those that are not promoted by the Islamic revival or the real estate boom. Such ways of life are indeed precarious in Alexandria outside some protected niches. However, it is not an innocent myth. It comes with a political economy. It easily legitimates the privileges of the urban bourgeoisie and the Egyptian regime. It also allows European funding agencies and visitors to leave the comfortable privileges they enjoy unchallenged. This makes it a safe (and thus also potentially profitable) topic for national projects and international cooperations alike.

As a result, the myths of the city in this tradition have become populated by two kinds of strangers: those who fit into a vision of openness, and those who must be excluded, even destroyed, in order to safeguard that openness. It is no coincidence that many (albeit not all) people who sympathised with the cosmopolitan coexistence narrative, joined forces in 2013 with militarist nationalism and either tacitly accepted or openly supported the massacring of supporters of the deposed President Morsi. With their vision of moral and confessional purity and their strong grounding in popular neighbourhoods like Abu Kharouf, the Islamists are easy to depict as the very opposite of the spirit of Alexandria as Hamdy sketched it. Seen from this point of view, they were the ideology of the anti-city, and they had to be excluded and destroyed.

The anti-city of the open city myth, however, actually makes up most of the city. Alexandria as I have encountered it in past years is a plural city, but not a pluralistic one. Hamdy's version of the real Alexandria as rooted in and open to difference, continuous between past and present, strikes me as more sympathetic, but I find Mukhtar's version, which foregrounds the 'concrete jungle' and the break with the past it involves, closer to the city I know.

While public sector cultural flagships like the Bibliotheca Alexandrina have engaged in nostalgic celebration of 'cosmopolitan Alexandria' (Awad and Hamouda 2006), a certain anti-nostalgic backlash has emerged in parts of the cultural scene. Interestingly, this backlash has been produced partly by the very same people who, 20 years earlier, spearheaded the search to reconnect their urban present with its past non-Arabic inhabitants and literatures (e.g. Raouf 2016). Paradoxically enough, it is being articulated by people who are internationally well-connected and who read both English and Arabic literature and social theory (and some read French) – that is, people who would easily qualify as cosmopolitan by most counts.

Among them is Ali Al-Adawy, born in 1985 in the eastern suburb of Abu Qir, organiser of film and cultural programmes, writer and editor. Since 2014, he and some of his friends have been working to put together a research and film project about the East of the City (Sharq al-madina) which, in their view, has replaced the historical downtown of al-Manshiya and Ramleh Station as the centre of the city. The East of the City – especially the district of Sidi Bishr – represents an anonymous, consumerist, at once conservative and individualist form of urbanity influenced by Egyptian migration to the Gulf, the import-export business, the Islamic revival, and unrestrained real estate expansion. If the old central districts stand for what Alexandria may once have been, Sidi Bishr shows what it is now becoming, and quite literally so: the race to demolish villas and smaller apartment buildings and to build 15-storey high-rises in their place began in the East of the City around the turn of the millennium.

Since 2011, this demolition and construction boom has engulfed almost the entire city. Old popular quarters like Bahary, Ghurbal, and others have been thoroughly transformed, a large portion of their older houses replaced by high-rises. Exclusive new projects on land fill are making the sea inaccessible to the general public and no longer visible from many parts of the Corniche (El Nemr 2017). Beaches have already charged for admission for some time, following two decades of privatisation of public space. Until now, however, viewing the sea had still been free of charge.

Some urban activists try to document and protect urban architectural heritage. But with government and private interests aligned towards generating maximum profit from construction and real estate, a progressive erasure of the city appears unstoppable. And with the gradual disappearance of the sea shore behind resorts on land fill, Alexandria may one day no longer be a city by the sea for its non-privileged inhabitants.

In search of ways to overcome what he sees as an unproductive nostalgia in writing about the city, Ali turned to the work of Walter Benjamin. With funding from the Goethe-Institut he organised a workshop about 'Benjamin and the City'. Ali hoped that Benjamin's way of writing about Berlin and Paris (Benjamin 1991 [1939], 2019) might provide guidance for overcoming the cosmopolitan nostalgia, and for deconstructing any and all narratives of the city:

> The idea of the narrative of the city – be it an old and conservative narrative, or a contemporary one – is an ideological notion that constantly relies on the historical, political, social, and economic framework and context. It expresses the reality that it in a way produced despite all its attempts to disguise it.
> (Al-Adawy et al. 2016: 6)

The main outcome of the workshop was a small collection of essays that was presented in El Cabina on 10 March 2016. It was something more contradictory than what Ali may have been aiming for. The texts were evenly divided between two approaches: Abdelrehim Youssef, a teacher, poet, and cultural programmer at El Cabina, and Yasmine Hussein, a researcher at the Alexandria Library and photographer, had each written childhood memories with an eye for minute details and personal experiences, inspired by 'the dominance of the poetic' (in the words of Abdelrehim) in Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (Benjamin 2019). Hager Saleh, an M.A. student in history, and Hakim AbdelNaim, an actor and theatre director, produced more comprehensive critical engagements with the city. An expression that came up in the latter two texts was *al-madina al-za'ila* 'the perishing/non-permanent city', a vision of a city in a constant process of erasure. In the words of Hager Saleh:

> Thus, the city likes to show off its passing/perishing (*za'ila*) cosmopolitan-ism. It hides its history and covers it with dust as if it were a disgrace that deserves to be erased, and then again boasts of it with insolence. The city persistently reinvents itself, carrying a new face in every era and hiding its old face under rubble.
> (Saleh 2016: 10)

A long discussion followed the presentation. Although it had not been a major theme of the workshop, a controversy about 'nostalgia or not' dominated the discussion.

The theatre director and manager of a performing arts NGO Ahmed Saleh claimed: 'Also today's writings were loaded with nostalgia, just like the writings of the past 20 years. What new does Benjamin offer?' Abdelrehim disagreed and pointed out that three of the five texts presented were critical of nostalgia; only his and Yasmine's leaned towards nostalgia. Hakim commented that Ahmed probably intentionally played the role of the provocateur. More important than nostalgia or not, he went on, was to question the classist aspirations of the

specific nostalgia for a city by the sea. From what kind of societal configuration did that city emerge?

The poet and guest participant in the workshop Ahmed Abdel Gabbar defended a nostalgic relatedness to the past and its traces:

> Cavafy also didn't write of the Alexandria of his age, but of the Hellenic era. That history is still present, under the earth. Kharrat's popular quarters and Durrell's Cecil Hotel are still there in the city you move in. While I speak I see the ruins of the demolished Rialto Cinema. But it was there. Even if only in the layout of the streets, the traces remain with us. I see nostalgia positively, if it means that I know what I write about.

Hager countered: 'We are drawn to cosmopolitan longing because of its dramatic touch. Like classical tragedy, it is attractive.' Addressing the many historical periods of the city and its varying centres and dominant groups, she pointed out that the location of the city itself was constantly on the move: 'The city is not something solid.'

Mohamed Elshahed, editor of the *Cairobserver* magazine on urbanity and architecture in Egypt, insisted on a more complex picture. The way we speak about the past reflects the way we speak about the present and reproduces its blind spots, he argued. What is left out in the binary of the *khawagas* (as in Durrell) and the popular quarters (as in Kharrat), he argued, is the social history of Alexandria from the 1940s to 1960s, a period of major social mobility for urban inhabitants of Egyptian origin, when many rural migrants climbed into bourgeois society.

Abdelaziz ElSebaei, one of the founders of the Eskenderella Association who had left it in 2013 along with Maher Sherif, intervened to problematise what he called 'the passion for the city':

> It has become a sort of national disease. I'm not against engagement with the city. But we always try to reach back to times before us. Myself, I'm not as upset today as I was twenty years ago when an old house is demolished.

The presentation of the 'Benjamin and the City' workshop in March 2016 marked a departure from the nostalgic tone that had dominated the poetry symposium in 2011. Svetlana Boym (2001) argues that nostalgia may come in restorative and reflective varieties; Ahmed Abdel Gabbar clearly claimed the contemporary usefulness of a reflective nostalgia in his comment. The critique of cosmopolitan nostalgia, however, equates it with a futile attempt to restore something that can no longer be retrieved, and probably was never really so beautiful in the first place. Such critique is in line with an emerging shift from the binary towards the fragmentary in writings about the city, such as in Alaa Khaled's *Alexandrian Faces* (2012). The Benjamin workshop also coincided with other cultural events and publications in 2016 (see, e.g., Nizar 2016) that balanced a reflective-nostalgic search for ways to remain connected to the city's 20th-century history and the positive values it might represent on the one hand,

with a demand to recognise the self-erasing, conflicted, and divided character of the city's present and past, on the other.

What had changed? A generational shift is part of the story. Some participants in the Benjamin workshop, notably Hager Saleh and Hakim AbdelNaim, are young enough to have experienced their generational formation during the revolutionary period. But others had been active in the scene even before 2011; Abdelaziz ElSebaei was born in 1949. Nostalgia in all varieties is a reflection of the present against which it is posited, and the present had changed. For those who in 2016 questioned the nostalgia for old Alexandria, the very recent events of the revolution provided a more pertinent nostalgic relation to the present. Theirs was now a more conflicted and combative longing for a future very recently lost, and the myth of an unchanging spirit of a true Alexandria appeared less helpful to provide orientation in the city and country in which they lived. By 2016, after a defeated revolution and a victorious construction boom, the topos of unsolved conflicts and permanent erasure had become more pertinent, and the nostalgic vision of connectedness and openness more difficult to maintain (see also Faruq 2017).

In a short text published a year later, Hakim AbdelNaim made explicit the link between his suspicion towards nostalgia and the trauma of the defeated revolution:

> All places are accompanied by trauma, by post-traumatic stress disorder, by an enormous affective experience that was not completed, that found no occasion to have a light ending, or even a heavy one but without a sudden cut, as if a person dies burning and remains in his final state, state of trauma … and who knows if he died of trauma or of heat? I detest longing and everything that has a relation with longing and everything that makes me feel that it is part of the longing I detest. I fear it and its closed circle.
>
> (AbdelNaim 2017)

And yet by the very virtue of their intensive concern with the city as such, pieces of writing that aren't nostalgic also contribute to the mythologisation of Alexandria. It is a different myth, however. It tells of Alexandria as a perishing, non-permanent city of conflicts, fragmentation, and erasure.

The myth of the non-permanent city has the paradoxical advantage over the myth of the cosmopolitan open city that it is more inclusive. It has space for both al-Manshiya and al-Mandara, both Bahary and the Chinese Housing. The myth of the non-permanent city is cosmopolitan in its own way, in the sense that it tells of the urban coexistence of difference. However, it highlights conflicts over harmony. I am definitely not impartial in this matter. Part of a wider shift in academic interest towards understanding Alexandria as an ordinary city in the present (El Chazli 2018; Jyrkiäinen 2019), this essay contributes to the narrative that highlights conflicts and erasure. With the publication of the Arabic version of this essay in December 2016, it became a part of the conversation it addresses (see Schielke 2016). And yet the issue at hand is not an opposition between a romantic fantasy of what Alexandria might
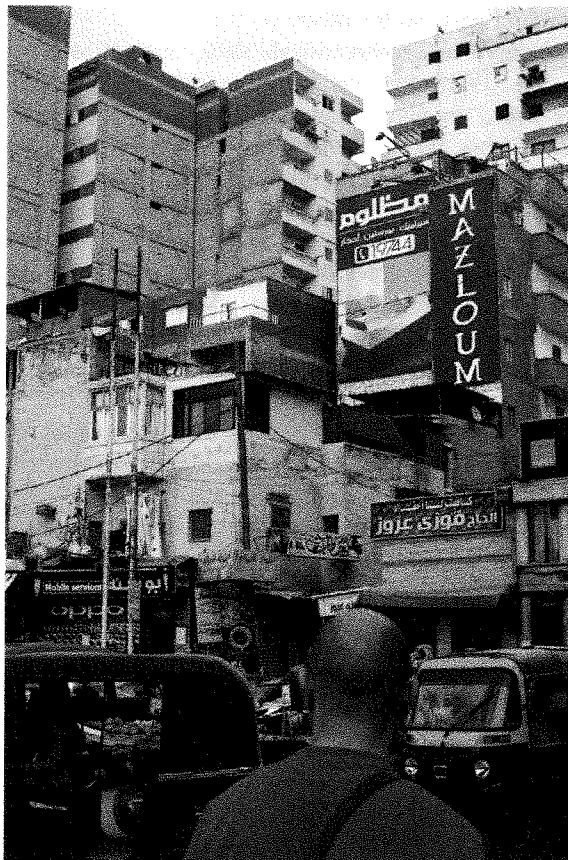
Figure 6.3 Inland al-Mandara in the East of the City.
Source: Photo by Samuli Schielke (2016).

once have been and a realistic recognition of what the city really is. The very question of what or where the city 'really' is, is an exercise in fantasy.

Every claim to have located the city is the product of a certain politically and morally loaded work of imagination (Chiti 2016). Hamdy's rewriting of the cosmopolitan myth from the point of view of Ghurbal, Mukhtar's emphasis on the 'concrete jungle' of Abu Kharouf, even Ali's search to deconstruct the narrative unilinearity of 'the city', are all expressions and draft blueprints of specific urban mythologies where neighbourhoods, streets, and fictional characters embody specific affective, political, and moral visions and conflicts. Mustafa's appreciation of Bahary as the real Alexandria and the Chinese Housing as his America shows that these mythologies can coexist, and find resonance even beyond dedicated literary circles.

Taking myths seriously as social theories means considering the possibility that some of them may provide a more likely true and helpful account of the realities they describe than others do. The essentialising utopias of an organic, true, better city that are evoked by cosmopolitan nostalgia in its popular-quarter and seaside varieties alike need to be recognised for what they are: dreams of and strivings for beauty and ease of life, made only more compelling by their increasingly counterfactual character. However, anti-utopian myths of erasure and conflicts can provide a better orientation for understanding what kind of a city Alexandria is today, where it is, and in what directions it is moving.

Notes

2 While many historians tend to avoid the Euro-centric pitfall, recent historiography of Ottoman cities (e.g. Freitag and Lafi 2014) also tends to equate cosmopolitanism with the well-ordered urban coexistence of different ethnic and religious groups, and not with border-crossing lives or a sense of worldliness that would amount to one sort or another of a 'citizenship of the world'.
3 Faransa, Arabic for France, was common as a Christian girl's name in the early 20th century.

References

Abdel Gabbar, Ahmed. 2013. 'Al-'Agami: al-'umran la ya'ti gharban.' *Tara al-Bahr* 1 June. https://tinyurl.com/yy2mqn3o.

Abdel Meguid, Ibrahim. 1999. *No One Sleeps in Alexandria*. Translated by Farouk Abdel Wahab. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.

Abdel Meguid, Ibrahim. 2005. *Birds of Amber*. Translated by Farouk Abdel Wahab. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.

Abdel Meguid, Ibrahim. 2013. *Al-Iskandariya fi ghayma*. Cairo: Shorouk.

AbdelNaim, Hakim. 2017. 'Mudun al-sadma.' *Tara al-Bahr* 4: 10.

Al-Adawy, Ali Hussein, Hakim AbdelNaim, Hager Saleh, Abdelrehim Youssef, Kholoud Saeed, and Yasmin Hussein. 2016. *Benyamin wa al-madina: Hal yumkin sard madina? Nusus*. Alexandria: Yadawiya. https://tinyurl.com/yxg7x5zn.

AlSayyad, Nezar, and Ananya Roy. 2005. *Urban Informality: Transnational Perspectives from the Middle East, Latin America, and South Asia*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Asad, Talal. 2014. 'Thinking About Tradition, Religion, and Politics in Egypt Today.' *Critical Enquiry*. http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/thinking_about_tradition_religion_and_politics_in_egypt_today/.

Awad, Mohamed, and Sahar Hamouda, eds. 2006. *Voices From Cosmopolitan Alexandria*, Volume 1. Alexandria: Bibliotheca Alexandrina.

Barthes, Roland. 1970. *Mythologies*. Paris: Éditions de Seuil.

Benjamin, Walter. 1991 [1939]. 'Paris, Capitale du XIXeme Siècle.' In Benjamin, Walter, *Gesammelte Schriften, Band 5: Das Passagen-Werk*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, 60–77. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.

Benjamin, Walter. 2019. *Werke und Nachlaß: Kritische Gesamtausgabe - Band 11: Berliner Chronik/Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert*, edited by Burkhardt Lindner and Nadine Werner. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

Bissell, William Cunningham. 2005. 'Engaging Colonial Nostalgia.' *Cultural Anthropology* 20 (2): 215–248.

Boym, Svelana. 2001. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.

Chiti, Elena. 2016. 'Quelles marges pour quels centres? Perceptions arabes et européennes d'Alexandrie après 1882.' In *Etudier en liberté les mondes méditerranéens*, edited by Leyla Dakhli and Vincent Lemire, 491–501. Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne.

Decschamps-Laporte, Laurence. 2014. 'From the Mosque to the Polls: The Emergence of the Al Nour Party in Post-Arab Spring Egypt.' *New Middle Eastern Studies* 4. www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/archives/1350.

El Chazli, Youssef, ed. 2018. 'Everyday Alexandrias: Plural Experiences of a Mythologised City.' Special issue in *Égypte/Monde Arabe* 17.

El Nemr, Nahla. 2017. 'Alexandria's Vanishing Sea Shore.' *Zenith* 28 June. Accessed 28 January 2018. https://magazine.zenith.me/en/society/identity-and-corruption-alexandria.

ElToukhi, Nael. 2014. *The Women of Karantina: A Novel*. Translated by Robin Moger. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.

Fahmy, Khaled. 2006. 'Towards a Social History of Modern Alexandria.' In *Alexandria: Real and Imagined*, edited by Anthony Hirst and Michael Silk, 281–306. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.

Faruq, Osama. 2017. 'Wahm al-kuzmubulitaniya fi Bayrut wa l-Iskandariya wa Azmir.' *Al-Mudun*, December 24. Accessed 28 January 2018. https://tinyurl.com/y5x7s5g8.

Freitag, Ulrike, and Nora Lafi, eds. 2014. *Urban Governance under the Ottomans: Between Cosmopolitanism and Conflict*. London: Routledge.

Hadid, Diaa. 2016. 'Remembering My Mother's Alexandria.' *New York Times*, November 29. Accessed 28 February 2019. https://nyti.ms/2geuApy.

Halim, Hala. 2013. *Alexandrian Cosmopolitanism: An Archive*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Hanley, Will. 2017. *Identifying with Nationality. Europeans, Ottomans, and Egyptians in Alexandria*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hazem, Menatallah. 2006. *Modern & Contemporary Alexandria in Fiction: A Bibliography*. Alexandria: Bibliotheca Alexandrina. www.bibalex.org/libraries/presentation/static/Modern_Contemporary_Alexandria_in_Fiction.pdf.

Jyrkiäinen, Senni. 2019. *Virtual and Urban Intimacies: Youth, Desires and Mediated Relationships in an Egyptian City*. PhD diss., University of Helsinki.

Kararah, Azza. 2006. 'Egyptian Literary Images of Alexandria.' In *Alexandria: Real and Imagined*, edited by Anthony Hirst and Michael Silk, 307–321. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.

Kazamias, Alexander. 2009. 'The "Purge of the Greeks" from Nasserite Egypt: Myths and Realities.' *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 35 (2): 13–34.

Khaled, Alaa. 2012. *Wujuh sakandariya: Sirat madina*. With photographs by Salwa Rashad. Cairo: Shorouk.

Kharrat, Edward. 1993. *Girls of Alexandria*. Translated by Frances Liardet. London: Quartet Books.

Kharrat, Edward. 1999. 'Interview with Edward Kharrat.' *Banipal* 6. www.banipal.co.uk/selections/51/145/edwar-al-kharrat/.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1955. 'The Structural Study of Myth.' *The Journal of American Folklore* 68: 428–444.

Manoukian, Setrag. 2012. *City of Knowledge in Twentieth Century Iran*. London and New York: Routledge.

Newcomb, Rachel. 2017. *Everyday Life in Global Morocco*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Nizar, Nermin. 2016. 'We Came to Alexandria Looking for ….' *Mada Masr*, 12 May. Accessed 26 December 2019. https://madamasr.com/en/2016/05/12/opinion/u/we-came-to-alexandria-looking-for/.

Raouf, Khaled. 2016. 'Da' al-hanin: Da' al-"Hamada".' *Tara al-Bahr* 1: 30–31. https://tinyurl.com/y68776x3.

Robinson, Jennifer. 2006. *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development*. London: Routledge.

Ryzova, Lucie. 2014. 'Nostalgia for the Modern: Archive Fever in Egypt in the Age of Post-Photography.' In *Photographic Archives and the Idea of Nation*, edited by Costanza Caraffa and Tiziana Serena, 301–318. Berlin and Munich: De Gruyter.

Said, Edward W. 2000. 'Cairo and Alexandria.' In *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, edited by Edward W. Said, 337–345. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Saleh, Hager. 2016. 'An tata' madina tajtham 'ala atlal mudun qadima.' In *Benyamin wa al-madina: Hal yumkin sard madina? Nusus*, edited by Ali Hussein Al-Adawy et al., 9–13. Alexandria: Yadawiya. https://tinyurl.com/y37qt59m.

Schielke, Samuli. 2016. 'Ayna taqa' al-Iskandariya? Asatir al-madina wa al-madina al-naqid fi al-'asr ma ba'd al-kuzmubulitaniya.' Translated by Abdelrehim Youssef. *Tara al-Bahr* 3: 12–27. Accessed 28 January 2018. https://tinyurl.com/yyxe34pm.

Schielke, Samuli, and Mukhtar Saad Shehata. 2016. 'The Writing of Lives: An Ethnography of Writers and Their Milieus in Alexandria.' *ZMO Working Papers* 17. Accessed 28 January 2018. http://d-nb.info/1122236654/34.

Shehata, Mukhtar Saad. 2017. *Asafra Qibli: Riwaya*. Cairo: Battanah.

Simone, AbdouMaliq, and Edgar Pieterse. 2017. *New Urban Worlds: Inhabiting Dissonant Times*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Starr, Deborah. 2009. *Remembering Cosmopolitan Egypt: Literature, Culture, and Empire*. London: Routledge.

Traub, James. 2014. 'The Lighthouse Dims.' *Foreign Policy*, 23 December. http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/12/23/lighthouse-dims-egypt-alexandria-salafists-mubarak-sisi-longform/.

Zidan, Hamdy. 2013. 'Raghba bida/White Desire.' Translated by Jennifer Peterson. In *Iskenderiyan Standards: Nusus*, edited by Maher Sherif. Alexandria: Yadawiya.

Zubaida, Sami. 2011. *Beyond Islam: A New Understanding of the Middle East.* London and New York: I.B. Tauris.