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Ibrahim El-Salahi's *Prison Notebook*: Resisting Colonial Violence

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Abstract

In this paper, I conduct a combination of a textual and contextual analysis of Sudanese artist and poet Ibrahim El-Salahi's creative memoir, *Prison Notebook* (2018), in which he narrates his experience of detention in Cooper Prison in 1975 through Surrealist drawing and Arabic calligraphy. This paper unpacks forms of colonial violence and decolonial resistance in El-Salahi's creative memoir, demonstrating that Arabic prison literature in the postcolonial era provides its readers with decolonial education that brings to light the ongoing impact of colonialism inside and outside prison, connects the present to the colonial past, emphasizes the importance of a non-Western solution for sustainable reform, and enables the reimagining of unity and liberation.

Keywords: coloniality, Sudanese prison, violence, decolonial education, creative memoir

Résumé

Dans cet article, je mène une combinaison d'analyse textuelle et contextuelle des mémoires de l'artiste et poète soudanais Ibrahim El-Salahi, *Prison Notebook* (2018), dans lequel El-Salahi raconte son expérience de détention à la prison Cooper en 1975 à travers le dessin surréaliste et la calligraphie arabe. Cet article décortique les formes de violence coloniale et de résistance dé-coloniale dans les mémoires créatifs d'El-Salahi, démontrant que la littérature carcérale arabe de l'ère postcoloniale fournit à ses lecteurs une éducation dé-coloniale qui met en lumière l'impact permanent du colonialisme à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur des prisons, relie le présent au passé colonial, souligne l'importance d'une solution non occidentale pour une réforme durable, et permet de réimaginer l'unité et la libération.

Mots clés : colonialité, prison soudanaise, violence, éducation dé-coloniale, mémoires créatifs

Sudanese Modernist writer, poet, and artist Ibrahim El-Salahi is one of the independent intellectuals and reform leaders who has experienced the prison and narrated it in creative non-fiction, combining modernist drawings with Arabic calligraphy, poetry, and prose. In his creative memoir, *Prison Notebook* (2018)[1], he talks about the six months he spent detained in Kober (Cooper) Prison in 1975 on the charge of being part of a coup plotted against Gaafar Nimeiri's military rule (1969-1985)[2]. He wrote this sketchbook of drawings, Arabic poetry, and prose in 1976 while under house arrest (Hassan, 2018: 7). After three decades and after translation into

[1] The title of El-Salahi's creative memoir *Prison Notebook* (originally written in 1976) is a literary and historical allusion to *Prison Notebooks*, which Antonio Gramsci wrote during his imprisonment under the Fascist regime of Mussolini.

[2] For more information, see Salah Hassan's commentary and notes in "El-Salahi's *Prison Notebook*: A Visual Memoir." *Prison Notebook.* By Ibrahim El-Salahi. Edited by Salah M. Hassan. New York; Sharjah, United Arab Emirates: The Museum of Modern Art; Sharjah Art Foundation, 2018. 6-13.

English, El-Salahi's *Prison Notebook* saw the light in Sharjah Art Museum in 2012 and in an exhibition in the Museum of African Art, NY[3].

The 36 drawings have a jaw-dropping effect, making the readers themselves witnesses of historical atrocities the Sudanese regime committed in the 1970s and '80s against intellectuals across the political spectrum. They function as testimonies of colonial violence, and even foreshadow the civil war that Sudan is living now due to the struggle for power between the Sudanese army headed by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) led by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, otherwise known as Hamedti (AlJazeera, 2023)[4]. El-Salahi's poetry and prose help explain his modernist, surrealist drawings and minimalistic style. Every poem includes words that connect it with the previous one as though a chain links the poems together, and every drawing tells a story that bridges into the others and binds the reader along the way. Through a close, "contrapuntal reading" of El-Salahi's *Prison Notebook*,[5] I demonstrate how this creative work serves as a model for what Arabic prison literature tends to do and accomplish, that is, "decolonizing the mind" and reimagining liberation[6]. It provides readers with decolonial education that unpacks forms of colonial violence and decolonial resistance, challenging the hegemonic, official narrative of the state.

The memoir opens in *medias res,* in prison. Its plot is in non-chronological order as the events are told in flashbacks, which reflect the persona's (El-Sahahi's) traumatized, fragmented memory. El-Salahi captures the relationship between the state and its subjects. He opens his memoir with the drawing of a large figure whose chest is a jail behind which faces of humans, animals, birds and insects are locked. This figure represents the neocolonial regime that turns the country itself into a prison. Humans and nonhumans alike are affected by the state-sanctioned violence (direct and slow; physical, psychological, epistemic, and ecological). Under this drawing, El-Salahi (2018) writes, "Each window has two faces" (14). He explains the symbolism of the two faces, saying: "The internal face: who you were and what you were doing and your intentions and hopes and aspirations. And the outer face: It comes from beyond. You have no control over it, but it has control over you" (14). The two faces symbolize the old self vs. the modern self[7]. The violence that the prison as a site of coloniality enacts on the individual leads to this tension and split within the self. It is not only physical violence, but also violence inflicted on the soul that forces it to live in a state of confusion and contradiction of values. The soul becomes "the prison of the body," disciplined to an extent that a new person is created (Foucault 1995: 30). El-Salahi

[3] The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) has published on its website the Arabic part of Ibrahim El-Salahi's *Prison Notebook.* You can access the drawings by clicking on the hyperlink or the following URL: Ibrahim El-Salahi. Prison Notebook. 1976 | MoMA

[4] In my interview, on Feb. 14, 2024, with Sudanese-American socio-cultural anthropologist and artist Hassaballa Omar Hassaballa, he explains that the current Sudanese civil war is "a multivariate war, meaning that several binaries have come together and made this war ongoing: the issue of the Arabic identity vs. the African identity, Muslim Brotherhood vs. Communist, North vs. South, country vs. city, the center vs. the margin, literacy vs. illiteracy, etc." I agree with Dr. Hassaballa, and I add that this civil war is funded by World powers to facilitate the process of weakening and dividing North Sudan into cantons.

[5] Edward Said practices and calls for "contrapuntal reading," meaning, to consciously read the text within its historical, national and international, context and avoid reading it as an "autonomous" work "chopped off from history and culture" (1992, 14). It is reading the text beyond the written words, in other words, to read what is there and what is absent (14).

[6] "Decolonizing the mind" are Ngugi's words in his book, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986).

[7] In his book chapter titled, "The Essay," Byron Santangelo, following Amitav Ghosh, discusses the nature of the relationship between the "enlightened" (modern) and the old self.

repeats the words, "Look Left, Look Right," which signify how the regime uses coercion (direct control) to overpower the individual. "Look Left, Look Right" also indicates "social conformism," epitomizing the modern condition of individuals in the prison of coloniality and under the coloniality of prison. Gramsci discusses "social conformism," using the metaphor of the "collective man" (1971: 242). He poses the question, "how will each single individual succeed in incorporating himself into the collective man, and how will educative pressure be applied to single individuals so as to obtain their consent and their collaboration …?" (242). The prison works to create the "docile bodies" and in turn the "collective man" through subjecting prisoners to physical violence as well as "interpellation," in other words to identity reformation and deformation. The motif of the face recurs in several of El-Salahi's drawings. In his second drawing, we see two faces: an impersonalized "moonlike" face whose brightness is compared to the sun, conveying feelings of hope, and a personalized face of a figure locked in a box, expressing "the bare face of truth," the reality of the prisoner, a "no body" stripped of their identity and freedom (El-Salahi 2018: 15). This exemplifies the discrepancy between the human rights slogans the regime raises and the oppressive reality of the situation in and outside prison.

To emphasize the ancientness of this oppressive reality, El-Salahi resorts to myth-making and storytelling. He draws a bird tied with many ropes to a huge flying rock above it. Inside the rock lies a skeleton. Commenting on this drawing, El-Salahi writes: "When you are ruled by people who have nothing but the weight of their power over you, you are subjected to something and not allowed to fly about like a free bird. Your freedom has been taken away from you and becomes like a huge rock that is going to destroy your world, and you can do nothing –not a thing –about it" (15). The drawing recalls the image of a puppet master and a puppeteer, but while the purpose of a puppet master is to tell stories to instruct and entertain, the purpose of the flying rock, which represents the regime's power over its subjects, is to prevent or censor this retelling of stories. In the next drawing, El-Salahi continues recounting the story, whose main characters are a rock and a sultan who "[h]ave engraved, at the peripheries of/Sudan,/A perfect myth" (15). The word "peripheries" is key here to understanding the struggle of those who find themselves at the margin of society due to their differing beliefs (ideological, religious, etc.). And the verb "engraved" accentuates the persisting influence of colonial violence that is reproduced by tyrannical rulers who make their hegemonic myth of homogeneity and harmony and force their singular narrative onto their people.

El-Salahi depicts the moment of arrest that marks the first encounter with the regime's repressive apparatus. The authorities use the rhetoric of deception. We hear the voice of authority full of dramatic irony. What starts with "[i]t won't take more than a couple of/ minutes/And you'll be back home safe and sound" ends up with him being locked for six months in Cooper Prison (16). El-Salahi recovers his voice and debunks the authorities' false narrative and promise, ending his story of arrest with an audio-visual image of the prison iron gates. He writes, "The echo of bolting the iron gates is/deafening,/Like thunder roaring, for no guilt of ours,/For no guilt of mine, for no guilt" (16). He uses repetition and parallel structure to express the state of disbelief and denial he feels and the monotony of the prison life forced on him. In the following poem, he documents what is written at the entrance of Cooper Prison above the prison gate. "Enter unto it engulfed in peace and/security./And do not despair of God's mercy," it reads (16). The irony lies in this sharp contrast between the Quranic verse that promises the believers peace and security in Heaven and the modern practices of the neocolonial regime that throws its subjects into the hell of its prisons, tortures them, isolates them, and shatters their hope. The drawing that accompanies the poem depicts the prison gate with its small asymmetrical barred windows and the faces and eyes

of prisoners gazing from behind the gate. It is symbolic and suggestive of the rough conditions the prisoners live under and of the classist society of the prison. The minimalistic drawing that follows sums up the prison reality: bars, lock, and a prisoner with a nail-like head that is indicative of the inhuman, cruel reception that the prisoner is greeted with.

In another drawing, El-Salahi depicts a military apparatus of cannons and guns inside a rock, a dead bird beneath it and to the left a tall, skinny shapeless figure with the same nail-like head. He repeats the phrase "people and rocks" over and over and comments on it, saying: "You have an apparatus within you that can show you the right way and the wrong way, so you can maneuver your destiny as you go along. But sometimes it takes you back. By the actions of others, you are made into a stone to protect yourself, to protect your innocence. You petrify yourself because of the situation" (17). Right after this drawing, we see El-Salahi placing a rock above the head of a shapeless figure lying bound with the fetters, including an iron ball tied to his foot, and dressed in clothes that do not fit his malnourished body. The drawing evokes feelings of "indignity," which according to Walter Mignolo, "is a feeling provoked by he who controls knowledge and is in a position to classify and rank people in the chain of humanity" (Darker 2011: 218). Political prisoners are considered as worthless outcasts who lost their status as humans for thinking differently. In the poem that accompanies the drawing, El-Salahi captures the sarcastic voice and contradictory words of a warden, reassuring a prisoner of the authorities' democratic system that protects human rights and so he should fear not. The warden's words are filled with repetition and parallelism, which imply that he is trying to convince himself of this false hegemonic narrative. He addresses the prisoner, saying:

> There is nothing against you at all.
> It all boils down to . . . boils down to . . .
> down to . . .
> That it's a precautionary measure, a mere
> precautionary procedure,
> Nothing more.
> Precautionary measure.
> . . .
> Your rights are sacred, protected. No
> problem whatsoever. (18)

The use of ellipsis conveys the sense of hesitation the warden feels deep down since he knows that there is no justifiable reason for detaining the prisoner. But the poem acquires a different meaning when reading El-Salahi's comment on the actual context of these words. El-Salahi mentions how that whenever the Director General of Sudanese Prisons visits Cooper Prison and asks prisoners, "Is everything alright?", El-Salahi feels that his self, his voice, becoming foreign to him and to his suffering as he and other prisoners are repeating the words, "No problem at all. Everything is alright, your Excellency!" (18). This ongoing occupation of the prisoner's very being intends to perpetuate subjugation and inferiority. It targets one's identity until one turns against oneself and sings, what El-Salahi calls, "the song of the Tyrant's bird," repeating and circulating the regime's rhetoric of control:

Keep me company.
I'll share my food with you.
I'll dictate my words unto you
Until I become the ears of your hearing,
Your eyes with which you know,
Your guiding light leading to my path.
Be with me. I guarantee you everlasting
Eternal happiness. (18)

By forcing the prisoners to pretend that everything is all right, the prison authorities throw prisoners in a state of "precarity"[8]. According to Nadir Hakim et al, precarity is "inherent in Eurocentric modernity: a situation of ontological insecurity constituted not only by material uncertainty but also by an existential uncertainty associated with the destruction of historically viable ways of living" (2022: 13). The prison reproduces and intensifies precarity, which is another form of colonial violence, in which like the colonized, the prisoner experiences displacement and dispossession, and lives in a state "existential uncertainty" of their fate.

El-Salahi moves to describe how wardens prepare prisoners' reception and body search, and escort them to and from interrogation chambers. He repeats three times the line, "Lucky is the one who would be brought/back to jail" as though it is a sort of prayer. This ambiguity about the fate of those prisoners who do not go back to their cells is revealed in the following poem and the drawing that illustrates it. Death by hanging at dawn is their fate. El-Salahi draws a rope hanging at the top right corner of the page and a hanged man's feet at the top left corner of the page along with a naked shapeless figure sitting down staring up at the hanged man's feet while waiting for his turn. El-Salahi connects state violence of the present to the colonial violence of the past. He challenges colonial temporality and refutes the claims of progressiveness and humanism that modernity propagates. History repeats itself, and chronicles how the successors of the colonizers who have blindly adopted modernity's values have been suppressing their people for decades post-independence. Choosing the time and the place of execution is deliberate. Dawn is the time of Fajr prayer, the most sacred time of the day, according to Islam, in which God answers prayers and bestows His blessings. It is also the beginning of sunrise and thus a symbol of rebirth, of freedom. By carrying out death sentences at dawn, the wardens aim to murder not only the body of the prisoner on death row but also the resisting spirits of other prisoners, both literally and symbolically, forcing the replacement of traditional ritual of worship with death memories.

On the other hand, El-Salahi shines light on the resistance both of those political prisoners on death row and of those listening. Here the prisoners' "power of performance" clashes with and outdoes the authorities' "performance of power"[9]. El-Salahi describes how prisoners awaiting execution spend the night before the execution day "chattering, singing, and/reciting folk poetry all night long" (19). They resort to collective cultural practices to reduce the psychological and the ideological effect of the death sentence. Folk poetry specifically carries much power as no specific person claims it and it speaks to the shared lived experiences of the collective, their connectedness,

[8] For more information on colonial precarity, see "Turning the Lens in the Study of Precarity: On Experimental Social Psychology's Acquiescence to the Settler-colonial Status Quo in Historic Palestine" article. In this study, Nadir Hakim et al examine and critique the role experimental social psychology research plays in producing precarity "through the very denial of Palestinian precarity" (2).

[9] In his article "Enactments of Power: The Politics of Performance Space" (1997), Ngugi gives illustration on how an artist's "power of performance" clashes with and challenges the state's "performance of power" while talking about Kenyan activists protesting outside the Kenyan National Theater against the state's abuse of power.

solidarity, and rootedness in the land. El-Salahi emphasizes the significance of poetry in recovering agency and creating hope in the bleakest of situations. He writes, "With my own hands, I shall write my/poems./With my own hands, I shall write the/pronouncement for my last day" (34). The parallel structure and the repetitive use of the first-person pronoun in the stanza reinforces the prisoner's agency, which El-Salahi himself recovers through writing.

As the hour of death, 4:00am, is approaching, the prisoners to be executed break their silence to rattle the wardens' cage. El-Salahi documents their last words before being hanged: "'I'm your brother, Fatima,/I'm the custodian of the clan's girls'" (19). By using this historical allusion to Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim (1928-2017), an influential Socialist, feminist activist and freedom fighter in the colonial and postcolonial history of Sudan who was arrested several times under Nimeiri's and al-Bashir's reigns, El-Salahi connects Sudan's colonial past with its neocolonial present. According to Hassaballa Omar Hassaballa (2024), a Sudanese-American artist and socio-cultural anthropologist, Fatima Ibrahim is considered "a symbol of resilience" for many Sudanese[10]. Prisoners use an arsenal of rituals to give meaning to this farce and to stay grounded at the sight of the "rope hanging from the ceiling" where they have found themselves forced to die despite not being guilty of a crime. Their calls, "'I am your brother, Fatima,'" underscore the fact that many detainees were Socialists, and this reflects the binary nature of the conflict between the Socialists and Nimeiri's regime that presented itself as Islamist and was projecting its "moral panic" onto the opposition[11]. Their calls demonstrate their comradery and solidarity with this political activist under arrest, and glorify her effort as a liberation movement leader who witnessed and fought systems of oppression that have been reproducing themselves. Despite knowing that it is the end, they overstate their own responsibility for support towards women's liberation and protection. The other prisoners who hear these calls feel themselves in a liminality; they feel powerless unable to act. They search for meaning in the midst of this madness. El-Salahi compares their voices to "the screams of a new-born baby," which creates a "pessoptimistic" atmosphere[12], in which death (of a revolutionary) becomes birth (to another).

El-Salahi continues with his depiction of the death scene. He compares the image of a hanged man's neck to a camel's neck that "stretches/toward the valley of eternal freedom" (19). This image is significant; it as if foregrounds violence against both humans and nonhumans. According to G. A.V. Keays Bey, in Sudan camels had been used in colonial expeditions (like the Gordon Relief Expedition in 1884 and 1885) since the late nineteenth century (1939: 103)[13]. And the term "Camel Corps" was used for British troops that used camels during their colonial campaigns and battles. As domesticated animals that play an integral part in Sudanese culture and its economy, camels were put in danger of extinction due to colonial exploitative use of them in carrying and transporting heavy military loads and in fighting in battlefields against the Sudanese tribes that resisted the colonial control. The image of the camel's neck that El-Salahi draws is in

[10] I conducted a mobile interview with Hassaballa Omar Hassaballa on Feb. 14, 2024.

[11] When discussing subcultures and social reaction, John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson and Brian Roberts mention the term "moral panic" which they define as "a spiral in which the social groups who perceive their world and position as threatened, identify a 'responsible enemy', and emerge as the vociferous guardians of traditional values: moral entrepreneurs" (56).

[12] "Pessoptimistic" is a term coined by the Palestinian prison writer Emile Habibi, who wrote his novel Al-Mutasha'il (*The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist*) (1974).

[13] See G. A. V. Keays Bey's "Note on the History of the Camel Corps." *Sudan Notes and Records* 22. 1 (1939): 103-123. For more information on camels' use during colonial campaigns, see Alexander Morrison's article "Camels and Colonial Armies: The Logistics of Warfare in Central Asia in the Early 19th Century." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 57. 4 (Sep. 2014): 443-485.

itself a symbol of endurance and defiance in the face of British colonialism that not only occupied the land but also put its resources (including camels) into its imperial service. Using animal imagery, El-Salahi also shifts the lens, taking the reader from the modern site of the prison back to the Sudanese pre-colonial natural desert landscape, which he glorifies as "the valley of eternal freedom" that witnessed the battles of liberation (19).

El-Salahi vividly shows how the authorities harness nature to do colonial work. The authorities use nature to subjugate prisoners and break their spirits. For example, El-Salahi depicts the prison authorities' use of searchlights at night, which attracts swarms of insects and mosquitoes that feed on the prisoners' blood:

> During the long, boring evenings,
> searchlights
> Flooded all corners of the prison yard.
> Sleepless, and maddened by ceaseless
> buzzing of swarms of mosquitoes
> Sucking our blood.
> During the day, the army of ants and
> swarms of flies,
> Joining forces with the hellish day heat
> and sandstorms,
> Endlessly assail and benumb the senses. (21)

When El-Salahi relates his transfer, along with some other fellows from their cell, to the notorious "Quarantine Section A," he specifically describes the ancient dungeons he calls "detention holes": "It was reported, impoverished rats in these/cells bite human limbs and figures," he recounts (25).

Nonetheless, El-Salahi still highlights how prisoners use the power of nature to survive the different forms of violence enacted on them. He shows how nature can also be a source of solace, hope, and wisdom. It has its uncontrollable agent actors. For instance, he depicts the effect of a little dove's visit to their cell: "We were over the moon the day a little/dove stopped by/We rejoiced in the presence of that bird/of good tidings" (21) because the dove is a symbol of peace and freedom. It represents the glimpse of hope that prisoners try to keep aflame. In another drawing, we see a figure sitting handcuffed, though with no obvious cuffs, while on his knee a bird is standing, with its tiny claw touching the figure's arm. Underneath the drawing, a statement reads: "Remaining in prison is a personal choice" (32). This drawing portrays the prisoners' confused state of mind in prison and/or after release. They internalize the prison until it becomes a reality they struggle to escape. The motif of the bird, personified and depicted as though it is a friend trying to bring comfort and show solidarity, recurs in the memoir. The bird here is even taking the role of a wise mentor awakening hope in its mentee's heart and even teaching him to resist this internalization of the prison. El-Salahi also depicts his feelings of joy when he receives some onions, saying: "Four Beautiful moonlike onions, like/paradise apples" (23). He uses a celestial metaphor and simile to emphasize the high value that even an onion acquires in prison. He plants this onion and recounts its impact on him and his fellow prisoners in the following lines:

I planted, watered, and took care of that
onion.
It grew up a lush green plant.
I kept fending off birds and feet from my
little garden.
The prison yard turned flourishing green.
My garden, the garden, the garden of
walls, was in full bloom.
It was there and then the favorite subject
for our chatter.
A symbol for all of us, for growth, life,
and hope. (23)

The onion gives him a sense of possession, which he emphasizes by using the possessive pronoun "My." Again the power of nature which evokes imagination and helps him challenge feelings of dispossession and torment in prison. In a different place in the memoir, El-Salahi uses a metaphor comparing the onion to a "rare gem/with magical powers./An antidote against poison and sorrows" to highlight how an onion, representing nature as a whole, occupies an integral part of prisoner's struggle for survival and resilience (26).

Following the drawing of the sprouting onion is the image of a filthy cell and the prisoners' mental and physical strategies to survive this poisonous, reeking atmosphere. El-Salahi depicts the sanitary condition of the cell where he and nine other prisoners are locked in and forced to use a bucket to urinate. He repeats words and phrases that represent memories of the things that constantly annoy them and become an inseparable part of their lived reality in the cell. He writes: "The flies and the bucket and prison walls/and prison guards/Ants, prison walls, and mice and prison guards" (24). Repetition here signifies the prisoner's disturbed state of mind in this disgusting, infected setting they are locked in. Beyond all that, it is a reflection of anxiety and fear of language loss. It is even a clear demonstration of the impact of prison on one's linguistic memory. The drawing sums up the reality of the prison life. A guard occupies the top center place on the paper. El-Salahi depicts him sitting like a "trained gorilla" and around him a swarm of mosquitoes and flies[14]. The urination bucket is placed at the bottom center of the paper while a prisoner with a wrinkly, malnourished body is being cornered to the left, imagining a lemon close to his nose and mouth. Nature becomes the prisoners' tool to cope with and survive the prison by helping them imagine alternatives, escapes.

El-Salahi next juxtaposes this image of the prisoner in the putrid cell with the image of a robotic bird. He calls this bird the "Flying Happiness Factory," alluding to propaganda-making and broadcasting via radio stations and other mass media through which the state cultivates consent. The robotic bird is a recurring motif in the memoir. El-Salahi associates the modern and the artificial post-human with control and deception as opposed to the ancient and the natural, which he sees as source of truth and wisdom. He confronts the robotic bird, saying: "Have mercy on people and spare them/such cruel happiness./Spare them such cruel happiness" (25). The use of oxymoron in "cruel happiness" sums up Gramsci's "cultural hegemony" in which the state uses the illusion of "spontaneous consent," in other words its ideological apparatus, to control the

[14] Gramsci, using Frederick Taylor's term "trained gorilla" for "manual worker," argues that "[Industrialists] are trying to reduce him [the worker] to a trained gorilla, [which] can lead him into a train of thought that is far from conformist" (1971: 310). This is a warning that violence does not lead to disciplined minds in the long run.

populace. The conflict El-Salahi materializes here between the state and the prison writer represents the existential conflict between "biopolitics" and "body-politics," or what Mignolo calls, "biographic politics of knowledge." According to Mignolo, "Whereas biopolitics studies how the state manages the population, biographic politics of knowledge is political epistemology that refuses to be managed, that de-links and works toward communal futures and toward building states at the service of the population rather than a population at the service of the state" ("Decolonizing" 2011, 30)[15]. The image of the state's iron bird is ironically followed by an epic shot of the prison, which openly debunks the state's propaganda of happiness.

Using flashback, El-Salahi relates his experience of being put in solitary confinement awaiting transfer to Cooper prison. He draws a prisoner being cornered to the left, sitting with his hands on his cheeks. He documents the date of his transfer to Cooper prison: "[i]t was Monday, the eighth of September,/1975, corresponding to the third day/ of Ramadan in the Hijri year 1395" (20). In addition to the documentary aspect of it, giving both the Islamic and the western date is significant for two reasons: first, it indicates the extent to which the modern, colonial ways of knowing interfere with those of the colonized. Using the Hijri dates becomes something outdated. It also indicates the authorities' complete disregard for the holiness of the month of Ramadan. They act like a foreign force, undermining local knowledge and disrespecting cultural beliefs and practices. In the face of this modern/colonial epistemic violence, time disruption, and the abrupt transfer to Cooper prison, we see El-Salahi reciting a series of prayers that are culturally known to be recited when there is a catastrophic event or death. On one hand, this points to how the prison, in the Arabic collective imagination, equates to death, and on the other, how it highlights the significance of grounding oneself in one's cultural and spiritual practices to combat fear and stay steadfast.

El-Salahi then depicts himself walking through the prison gates. The harsh reception at the time of arrival sets the tone for a series of atrocities and violations of human rights to be committed and witnessed in prison. El-Salahi mentions the professions of the prisoners locked behind Cooper prison walls to highlight the fact that Nimeiri's regime targets the intellectual class from judges, professors, activists, scientists, students, and labor union leaders, many of whom are Socialists and lead awareness campaigns and advocate for social justice and reform. Not mentioning the criminal prisoners is indicative of the separate system implemented in Sudan's prisons, separating the criminal from the political to prevent "the contamination of political thought" from being passed to criminal prisoners. It is worth noting that the separate system is another colonial inheritance. In mid-nineteenth century England, the Separate System replaced surveillance, according to Sean Grass (2003: 10). And this very system has been applied in many prisons throughout the Arab World.

El-Salahi relates the story of the trade union leader as an illustration of one of the main reasons that individuals are being arrested and thrown into prisons. He writes, "I heard him tell his story with a big laugh,/Which infected his listeners, who burst/into ceaseless laughter" (20). The trade union leader storyteller relies on playfulness, laughter, and humor to create a non-banal, memorable story with a healing effect that surpasses the self and extends to his fellow prisoners and demonstrates the absurdity of the reason for his imprisonment, that is, winning the final election against the ruling party's candidate. It is a story of the complex interplay of power dynamics in the relationship between the subject and the neocolonial regime. Escaping power,

[15] In *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Mignolo argues that "body-politics is the decolonial response to state-managed biopolitics. . . . Body-politics is a fundamental component of decolonial thinking and doing" (2011: 140).

especially in a high security environment like the prison, is made to seem impossible. And this is what the authorities work to ingrain in the subjects' minds. However, the prisoner's story demonstrates that power also operates from bottom to top. In this direction, power is even more natural and sustainable, where something as simple and natural as storytelling or laughter can be an effective tool through which a prisoner recovers self-assertion, determination, and voice.

After relating this story, El-Salahi underscores the effect of this prison story on himself as a fellow prisoner. He writes, "Then, gradually, the thin layer of foggy /ignorance started to be lifted from/my mind's eye,/And I began to perceive the true essence/of things" (20). These lines summarize the importance of storytelling in general and Arabic prison literature in particular. This literature provides decolonial education to readers, one that traces the causes and effects of things, examines the working of coloniality, and demonstrates the way in which coloniality lays the condition for this imprisonment/freedom duality. The state provides its people with hegemonic, formal education through which it creates consent. But writers of Arabic prison literature offer their readers grassroots, ethnographic education that "decolonizes the mind" as it examines the psychology of the prisoner, as well as the warden, unpacking internalized colonial beliefs and erasing historical and political ignorance. The prison itself as a colonial site (re)constructs the prisoners' identities in relation to their own selves and others. Identity formation and reformation is an ongoing process in prison. The prisoners find themselves in constant search for meaning, and storytelling is one decolonial literacy practice that prisoners resort to for reconstructing the traumatized self.

In the middle of the memoir, El-Salahi relates how he ended up in prison. He was an expatriate when he was called for duty. He writes, "Your country is calling out for you,/I was told./Go back to your field and land,/To the milk that quenched your thirst,/Go back" (27). This is the language of authorities we read here; it is guilt inducing, aiming to appeal to pathos to extract consent. In an excerpt from El-Salahi's unpublished memoir that Salah Hassan included in his article, El-Salahi documents how in February 1972 he was contacted in London by the Minister of Information, Omar al-Haj Musa, who asked him to return to Sudan because he had been appointed as "deputy undersecretary for culture, responsible for the National Council for Arts and Letters" in Khartoum (Hassan, 2010: 202). However, his close friend Tayeb Saleh, the well-renowned novelist, gave him advice and warned him against the great risk he was embarking on. After three years of hard work in office, El-Salahi depicts how he was rewarded on his birthday, September 5, 1975: "I was beaten like an animal in my office in the Ministry of Culture and Information, which I spent dear time and effort to reorganize," bitterly recalls El-Salahi (qtd in Hassan, 2010: 202).

The image of a figure standing with his hands close to his head and two birds, one sitting silent on his right shoulder while the other in a steady mode standing with an open beak as though it is speaking to the man, narrates the story of the modern human's alienation and estrangement from society, a story of loss and guilt. It reflects El-Salahi's state of mind when he received the official job offer and call to go back to Sudan. Hesitation, worry, guilt –all are the conflicted emotions he has felt and conveyed through this drawing. Ironically, the following drawing, so surreal and shocking, materializes his feelings of worry about being arrested and/or killed. A man's head with a slit throat is buried. The blood is shed watering the ground, and the words, "The Onset of Nightmare and Sorrow" runs above the head. The drawing also foreshadows what he will be experiencing and witnessing after his return to Sudan. In his commentary on the drawing, El-Salahi explains that these were the nightmares that haunted him during and after release. He writes, "A bird of evil hangs over your head continuously and reminds you that you will be caught, you will

be taken again. It repeats the bitter experience you have been through and the worries you have" (28). This demonstrates how colonial violence persists and is reenacted in the traumatized memory of (ex)prisoners, causing the disruption of emotions of peace and love. Instead of invoking a feeling of happiness and a sense of longing and belonging, returning home brings about images of deaths and tears and consequently impacts one's sense of their national identity.

Within the prison, colonial violence manifests itself in the warden-prisoner relationship and the wardens' and prisoners' ways of thinking, being, and behaving. For example, El-Salahi draws Hamdan, the guard responsible for their cell and morning count, as a giant shapeless figure with a rifle and a list of names he holds upside down. He highlights Hamdan's illiteracy, saying: "I didn't know that he couldn't read or write until the day he came with a piece of paper and he was holding it upside down. This is about him, about the prison, and about Sudan. Because what was happening to him, what was happening to us–we were all in a big prison" (22). Hamdan represents the modern worker who is enslaved to the capitalist system and the social formations that reproduce it. He is subjected to, what Gramsci calls, the "mechanical repression" caused by industrialism (298). At the same time, he projects this repression onto prisoners by angrily ordering them to "sit in rows of fives" although only three prisoners were there in the cell. Hamdan, according to El-Salahi, used to order them to "sit in rows of fives" although only three prisoners were there in the cell. El-Salahi concretizes Hamdan's rage, and lays bare his insecurities and low self-esteem by drawing an audio-visual image, depicting Hamdan: "[h]eavily breathing in utter weariness, he/hollers,/ 'Forever and a day, lazily you lie down/doing nothing,/With no consideration for anybody.'/Sparks of fury emitted from bloodshot eyes" (22). El-Salahi shows that ignorance is the weapon that dictatorial regimes use to recruit their loyal servants who will not question their orders. El-Salahi juxtaposes the image of the ignorant guard with that of the intellectual prisoners. Using anaphora and exaggeration, he expresses his disappointment as he sees illiterate men like Hamdan in position of power playing with the fate of others. He writes,

> Oh Hamdan, you are a prison, a pris-
> oner, and a prison guard.
> Ye, a prison, a prisoner, a prison guard.
> A prison, a prisoner ye, Hamdan.
> Ye, a prison, a prisoner. Oh Sudan.
> Hamdan, a prisoner in Sudan. (22)

Here the persona, El-Salahi, is sympathizing with the warden whom he sees as also a prisoner to ignorance and to a corrupt deteriorating economic system. He likewise expresses his disappointment when he sees that many of those who were locked in Cooper Prison are intellectuals whose only fault was singing on a different tune.

El-Salahi diagnoses the essence of the problem, boiling it down to ignorance and the internalization of inferiority that is manifest first and foremost in the colonial mentality that considers the colonizer's ways superior. The problem of Sudan and the Arab World in general lies in human psychology, human emotions. El-Salahi repeats and uses synonyms for the word "ignominy" which signifies "inferiority," and he proposes self-control of one's emotions as a strategy to challenge tyranny. He writes:

I have shaken off tyranny and despotism
from my soul.
I have shaken off worry and pain,
Shaken off sorrows, laments, and
trepidation.
May blessed dew never fall upon the
ignominious.
May blessed dew never water plants of
fear, humiliation, and ignominy. (26)

To succeed, any decolonial project must work on psychological liberation, which starts when one becomes aware of and acknowledges the danger of an internalized inferiority and when one overcomes fear. The Algerian philosopher Malik Bennabi argues that the individual's inner readiness to be knowingly or unknowingly influenced by and be at the service of colonialism is a major factor that determines the success or failure of the colonial project (2018: 156). He stresses that each individual must do the inner work to fight colonialism from within (156). Similarly, the Readsura Decolonial Editorial Collective assert, "One implication of a decolonial framework is that colonial violence extends beyond physical space to psychological space, such that complete liberation requires forms of psychological decolonization" (7).

El-Salahi relates the story of another guard whose vulnerability in sharing his story and mundane life details humanizes him in the eyes of the prisoners and the readers. He opens the poem by depicting the guard in a position of power in a vertical (master-slave) relationship with the prisoners, monitoring them from above. El-Salahi writes: "From his lofty position on top of the/prison walls,/We could see his massive darkish body overlooking us./He was born in Ghazza and brought up/in the Nuba Mountains./He carries twenty bullets and a rifle,/slung behind his back" (21). A careful reading of the history of the region and the effect of the Israeli settler colonialism on Palestine and its neighboring countries like Egypt offers two explanations as to why the guard was born in Gaza but brought up in Nuba Mountains. The first explanation is that the guard's father is probably a Sudanese soldier from the Nuba Mountain in South Sudan, who like many Arab soldiers volunteered in the 1948 war against the Israeli occupation. The guard being brought up in the Nuba Mountain rather than in his birthplace, Gaza, indicates the systematic oppression Israel has been imposing on people in Gaza, which forced many to leave Gaza for neighboring countries including Sudan[16]. The second explanation brings to light the issue of trans-Saharan slavery or what is now called illegal traffic. Scholar Liat Kozma (2010) documents how "[i]llegal traffic . . . also included traffic of freed women, a problem that the central authorities in Cairo came to acknowledge. An 1880 Police Act declares the border-crossing stage: 'Some charlatans, especially of West African origins (*Dakarna*), deceitfully collect Sudanese women and children and sell them to Bedouins, who then smuggle them to Gaza and other places to sell them there'" (204, 205)[17]. The guard then has moved from the Nuba Mountains in South Sudan to North

[16]This is being written between Fall 2023.

[17]Scholar Liat Kozma mentions the account of "Saluma, a Sudanese freed slave, [who in 1877,] knocked on a stranger's door in the Palestinian village of Tira in the Ottoman province of Nablus. Saluma had been kidnapped from Cairo about five months earlier. She was smuggled through al-Arish to Tira, along with five other women, to be sold there as slaves. Her kidnappers had sent her to get some bread from a local bakery, and she was now waiting outside a stranger's house, hoping for a friendly face. The woman who opened the door listened to her story and hastened to inform the local authorities in Nablus. The authorities then sent the six women and their kidnappers to the Cairo police station and from there they returned to their homes" (197).

Sudan. The reason for that is left unsaid, but the fact the Nimeiri's regime focused on developing the North while marginalizing the South explains the reason behind the guard moving North[18]. Moreover, El-Salahi's emphasis on the guard's dark complexion and massive figure suggests that the guard is originally from Nuba, which evokes connection with slavery and racial difference and discrimination (in terms of employment, education, marriage, and other life aspects) Nuba people were and are still subjected to.

It is worth noting that El-Salahi emphasizes the blackness of the wardens' complexion in different places in the memoir. For example, he describes the guard in the above-mentioned poem as a "massive darkish body" and in his prose commentary on the drawing as "[v]ery, very, very dark in complexion" (21). He also depicts Hamdan, the illiterate guard, saying: "His complexion had the impact of pitch-/dark nights on the heats of little/children" (21). Moreover, he describes Nimeiri, whom he refers to as "the tyrant who ruled at the time," saying: "A black mass evolving, disguised in a/human form,/Trotting and straightening as if four legged./His apparel is silk garment" (29). Significantly, never has he used the word "black" to describe the prisoners. Therefore, blackness here evokes connection to racial difference and reflects the identity conflict (Arab vs. African and Northern vs. Southern) that has afflicted Sudan. Achille Mbembe (2017) explains, "By reducing the body and the living being to matters of appearance, skin, and color, by granting skin and color the status of fiction based on biology, the Euro-American world in particular has made Blackness and race two sides of a single coin, two sides of a codified madness" (2). This emphasis on blackness also asserts an internalization of colonial representation that associates blackness with race. Significantly, never has El-Salahi used the word "black" to describe the prisoners. Therefore, the blackness El-Salahi describes here can also be read within the Islamic context as evilness of the deeds being symbolically reflected on the outward of the wardens.

El-Salahi juxtaposes the intimidating image of the guard's performance of power on top of the prison walls with that of the same guard singing the Egyptian Umm Kulthum. Umm Kulthum's songs on love, hope, and freedom have spread widely in the Arab World[19]. This underscores the role that art and music play in the conception of a pan-national Arabic identity that transcends issues of race, gender, and religion and pushes against modern and settler colonialism. El-Salahi characterizes the guard, saying: "He cherishes the songs of Umm Kulthum./He used to sing her songs with exhala-/tions and sighs/ He lamented the days of his bygone youth" (21). The relationship between the guard and the prisoners changes from vertical into horizontal, one in which the guard finds someone to listen to him complaining without the fear of being judged. The guard is being vulnerable while indirectly expressing his frustration at inflation, low wages, and the energy problem. At the same time, prisoners benefit from hearing this guard whose singing brings liveliness to their monotonous life in prison. El-Salahi writes:

[18]In *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci's discussion of the city-country relationship during the Risorgimento can be used to explain one of the reasons of the past and current war in Sudan. Under the title "Southern Question," Gramsci writes: "The urban forces of the North had . . . to persuade those of the South that their directive function should be limited to ensuring the 'leadership' of North over South in general relation of city to countryside. In other words, the directive function of the Southern urban forces could not be other than a subordinate moment of the vaster directive function of the North. . . . it was natural that in the South there should be strong forces of opposition to unity. . . . The North-Central rural forces posed in their turn a series of problems which the urban force of the North had to confront in order to establish a normal city-countryside relationship" (1971: 99, 100).

[19] At the present moment, however, and because of the genocide and displacement Palestinians face in Gaza, it is the resistance and resilience songs of the Lebanese Julia Boutros, who is attacked and called the "voice of war" by IDF, that prevail on social media platforms in the Arab World. Her songs connect the colonial past to the neo-colonial present and the suffering of the people of Lebanon including Palestinian refugees during Israel's wars against Lebanon to the continuous suffering of the people of Palestine and its refugees due to Israel's settler colonialism.

We used to ask him to describe how the
streets,
The people, and the buses on the roads
looked.
He would grumblingly retort, saying he
wanted to buy sugar,
But it was nowhere to be found on sale.
He wanted to get matches and gasoline
for lanterns.
But no avail.
He ended up buying two eggs for eight
piasters and was left bewildered.
He had eight children, the eldest of
whom was ready to go to college.(21)

Here the prisoners deconstruct the guard's place on top of the prison wall from which he exercises power and surveillance over them by turning it into a site of resilience and counter surveillance.

Prisoners also engage in constant reverse questioning of the wardens' humanity and even the regime's legitimacy of rule. They constantly question and deconstruct the identity of the warden. El-Salahi depicts the guards who torture him and his fellow prisoners as colonial soldiers, or invaders. He writes: "The soldiers came, broke the cell's door./With their cannon, they split open my/chest in a horizontal line" (30). By replicating colonial practices in dealing with reform advocates and freedom fighters, the regime itself contributes to the intensification of its people's feelings of animosity towards it and their desire to revolt. It breaks the unity of the nation it has imagined and thus loses its legitimacy for rule. Images of prisoners being transferred from one cell to another or one prison to the other while being tortured are analogous to images of enslaved Africans being uprooted from the homeland, tortured, and buried in the West. El-Salahi draws a graphic war image of a man in a tomb whose chest is horizontally ripped open, his left eye gone, and his fingers twisted. He writes:

They took my body westward to the
foreigners' cemetery.
At sunset, they buried me in the foreign
ers' earth.
My blood boiled up; I jumped, pain-
lessly, in my grave.
The soldiers poured more earth,
Fought with cannons and machine guns. (30)

El-Salahi's use of words like "westward," "foreigners' cemetery," and "foreigner's earth" alludes to the predicament of the enslaved Africans. These images are recurring motifs in El-Salahi's prison creative memoir. El-Salahi depicts the state's repressive apparatus system with its weapon machinery turned against its subjects. With his visual images, he concretizes and emphasizes the state's paranoia and brutality.

The drawing that follows depicts a boat, and inside it is a boa constrictor whose body is torn into pieces. El-Salahi in his commentary on this visual says, "This is a reflection on the jail

and the cell, on being tortured. You are torn apart" (31). The boat itself, however, functions as a reminder of slavery boats, another historical allusion to the colonial oppression that the enslaved Sudanese were subjected to[20]. Scholar George Michael La Rue (2010) writes, "[m]any of the captured Africans moved across the Sahara from the Sudan or Abyssinia to Egypt. They generally walked, while other trade goods were carried by camel, and the merchants walked or rode. Some particularly valuable slaves were permitted to ride on camels or donkeys. Later, to reduce slave mortality, slave merchants and the Egyptian government moved slaves on Nile boats for a portion of the journey northward" (102, 103). El-Salahi's drawing of the boat is a powerful visual that connects the present with the colonial past, vividly showing how the neocolonial regime replicates colonial violence. The conditions of prisoners in Cooper Prison are not dissimilar to the conditions of the enslaved during the Trans-Saharan slavery route. El-Salahi writes:

> I realized that we had been moved to
> different cells
> To the west of where we kept for a
> while.
> They ran from south to north, like the eastern cells.
> They were grim, bleak, and ugly. (30)

El-Salahi's depiction of this forced removal from the eastern cells to the western cells of torture and death is again analogous to the removal and transplantation of the enslaved Africans from the east to the west and from the south to the north. While historical slavery ended, neoslavery still manifests itself in the colonial violence of political imprisonment.

El-Salahi describes scenes of torture and death in surreal images using the first-person pronoun, conveying the message that other prisoners' experiences of pain and death are his, a message of resilience and solidarity. He writes:

> They ordered us to come out.
> I came out in the form of a python.
> Through three doors at once.
> I came out alone.
> No one else.
> I lay on the ground, motionless,
> My head to the south, anticipating
> The sunrise in the east. (30)

El-Salahi compares his body to a python, a metaphor indicative of the hole-like cells prisoners are locked in. This metaphor of the python also signifies his delicate, smooth skin before torture. After torture, however, his back becomes "like that of a crocodile: three roasted blocks of flesh" (31). Many Arabic prison narratives are permeated with animal metaphors and bestial language that highlight the dehumanization that prisoners are subjected to and explain the urge prison writers feel to ascribe meaning and find rationales for the series of inhuman acts of torture the wardens

[20] When I asked Sudanese-American Hassaballa Omar Hassaballa, Dr. of Socio-Cultural Anthropology, during my interview with him, about slave trade in Sudan and the use of boats, he explains that slaveholders, not only used the overland route, else known as the Trans-Saharan slave trade route, but also used boats to cross the White Nile and the Blue Nile to Aswan, and then smuggle the enslaved from the Mediterranean to Western countries or Libya or arrange forced marriages for the enslaved in some Arab countries. This may explain why the guard whose story El-Salahi relates was born in Gaza.

inflict on them and their fellow prisoners to. However, El-Salahi uses metaphors of very powerful and dangerous animals to depict himself and/or his fellow prisoners. By doing so, El-Salahi is creating a "pessoptimistic" atmosphere that fluctuates between fear, hope, and steadfastness. He is also mitigating the shocking effect of the graphic images of torture on the reader by using the metaphors of the python and the crocodile, which are famous for their resilience and coping mechanism under harsh conditions. El-Salahi's defamiliarization of torture, moreover, protects his artwork from unintentionally serving the authorities' agenda, whose aim is to spread and ingrain in the masses fear of the consequences of civic engagement and political activism. His line, "My head to the south, anticipating/The sunrise in the east," emphasizes the importance of hope for change and the necessity of a non-western solution for a sustainable decolonial reform (30).

El-Salahi continues narrating his torture, saying: "A saw-shaped knife was brought,/ Like the mast of a wooden boat on the /Nile./My head was chopped off from the neck,/And my python tail was cut off" (30). This use of simile that compares the "saw-shaped knife" to "the mast of a wooden boat on the Nile" is embedded in farming as a cultural practice in Sudan, but what is paradoxical and counter to one's expectation is that El-Salahi uses this colossal "saw-shaped knife" to signify the authorities' excessive use of force in dealing with the opposition. The authorities chop off as many heads as possible rather than exert effort in supporting the agricultural sector and bettering the country's economy. Again by using metaphorical language, El-Salahi creates an aesthetic experience in itself or what Kant calls "the monstrous." He does not let his readers get too close by maintaining a distance between them and his artistic depiction of torture to help regulate their feelings of fear.

Throughout the memoir, El-Salahi depicts the prison cells as pythons' holes, "[t]unnels, just wide enough for the body/to squeeze into, twisted and tight" (31). These images have haunted him even after release. They invade his dreams, turning them into nightmares. The drawing that accompanies these words refers to the state of loss and suffocation he feels. It shows a malnourished naked figure whose head, arms and back are sandwiched between two "volcanic rocks" underground. His mouth is shut, his back is "roasted blocks of flesh," and a bird stands on his arm. On one hand, these images are manifestations of El-Salahi and his fellow prisoners' feelings of pain and bitterness, feelings of being silenced. He writes, "My screams will reach no one so long as/my mouth is shut" (31). On the other hand, they are symbolic of hope and resurrection and foreshadow the coming revolution due to the systemic dehumanization and pent-up rage.

El-Salahi's last drawings reflect hopes of liberation and foreshadow the ending of prisoners' suffering and state's tyranny. El-Salahi draws the image of al-Buraq, this supernatural flying winged animal that looks like a donkey and a horse. This is one of the few drawings in the visual memoir that El-Salahi draws across two pages. He depicts his anxiety over the high prison walls and his dreams not only of national but also regional liberation. El-Salahi here alludes to Prophet Muhammad's celestial night journey on al-Buraq's back from Mecca to al-Aqsa Mosque and then to Heaven. The journey, otherwise known in Islamic beliefs as al-Isra' wa al-Mi'raj, was a sort of consolation to him after the death of his uncle and wife who supported him and his call to Islam and after the siege that his tribe Quraish subjected him to for calling out their racist mentality and practices. In Islamic belief, this journey carries political implications too. It prophesies the liberation of Palestine and the return of its rightful owners. This drawing, however, defamiliarizes this animal known in Islamic history. El-Salahi's Buraq with its unveiled female head and naked chest with a horse-like body stands for a liberated nation. It conveys not only an individual wish for escape from Cooper Prison but also national and regional aspirations for

liberation. El-Salahi describes his yearning for the ecstatic feeling of freedom in sexualized terms. He writes, "Immersed I would be, in the ecstasy of its/amber-colored horseback" (27). He also concretizes it in the image of the unveiled, chest-naked female. To the bottom left, he draws a rock inside which he writes, "Dreams of a martyr. Do we wake him up?" (27). The image of the naked female, however, is problematic. It implies "self-orientalism," in which members of the Orient contribute to the exoticization and fetishization of the Orient[21]. According to Lebanese designer and researcher Imad Gebrael, self-orientalism is self-representation in which a member of the Orient "relies on using the tools of western perception to represent one's own culture" (2017: 88). El-Salahi's drawing exoticizes and hypersexualizes the Arab woman, asserting this tension between cultural tradition represented by the veil and modernity's concept of progress and sexual liberation represented by female's nakedness. On the other hand, by underscoring the supernatural beliefs of religion, El-Salahi's drawing and words challenge Enlightenment's concept of rationalism that modernity is based on. He does so by adopting the very modernist artistic style he uses here.

On different occasions, El-Salahi emphasizes the power of the supernatural that rationalism opposes and considers backward. Prayers become this fortitude that many prisoners resort to by reminding each other that "[i]t is the will of our Creator, the Eternal/Refuge, Owner of Sovereignty, and/the One and Only" (27). They resist colonial violence of/in prison through holding onto traditional religious values like prayer, which thus represents one of the prescriptions for psychological wellness in prison. This knowledge that there is an absolute power in this universe that no tyrannical regime can compete with liberates many prisoners from fear, internalized inferiority, and despair because it gives them hope that justice will be served in the end. In different places in his memoir, El-Salahi explains how imprisonment tests one's core belief, faith, and will. He writes, "Affliction/By distress, grief, and petulance,/By coercion, hardship, and want/Are all tests of one's rigor and faith" (31). At the same time, El-Salahi stresses how religion or spirituality plays a significant role in the prisoner's steadfastness. For example, he writes: "And belief in the sacrosanct promise/With hardship comes ease,/With hardship comes ease" (31). El-Salahi uses intertextuality when he borrows the last two lines, "With hardship comes ease,/With hardship comes ease," from *Surat* Al-'Asr, the short Chapter 103 in the Quran. The lack of quotation marks seems to be a deliberate choice by El-Salahi to signify how deeply rooted these two verses of hope are in the collective consciousness of people in the Arab World.

In the next drawing, El-Salahi emphasizes the fact that awareness can't be reached and consciousness can't be built without experiencing hardship and pain. He draws a full-moon-like head with a face that smiles "[d]espite his agony, writhing in the throes of death" (32). He writes the phrase, "the beginning of awakening" at the top of the image of the head and underneath it he writes, "[h]is head on his wife's lap,/Sprinkling water on his head" (32). The head is a metonymy for prisoners or ex-prisoners who despite their pain realize that suffering will come to an end. And the "wife's lap" symbolizes this long-waited-for freedom, peace, and love. The following drawing and words that accompany it reinforce this idea of redemption. The face vanishes and what remains

[21]In 2016, Nadjat Drott traced the history of the idea of self-orientalism to Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and to research on tourism in China like Arif Dirlik's article "Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism" (1996) and Grace Yan and Carla Alameida Santos' article "China Forever: Tourism Discourse and Self-Orientalism" (2009). Helena Liu, author of the article "Beneath the White Gaze: Strategic self-Orientalism among Chinese Australians" (2017), writes: "Some research has argued that 'the Orient' is complicit in its own Orientalism, which primarily occurs through identities and representations (Dirlik, 1996; Iwabuchi, 1994; Umbach and Wishnoff, 2008; Yan and Santos, 2009). Said (1978), in fact, foreshadowed the rising tendency to self-Orientalize under western economic pressures to satisfy consumers' fantasies" (785).

are two circles, one inside the other, and in the center written "The Third Birth." While the second birth could refer to a prisoner's release from prison, the third birth suggests revival after death. El-Salahi then gives an apocalyptic description of the death of the universe upon the vanishing of the head. He writes, "The plains and ravines lost their bloom" (33). He stresses that everything has an ending, and after an end is a new beginning, after death is rebirth and resurrection (33). Here El-Salahi uses Biblical and Quranic allusions to the Day of Judgment, as when he writes, it is "[t]he day when 'ashes to ashes' returned" (33) and "[t]he graves threw up the coffins of the sleepers" (33). The sense of hope that justice will eventually be served and one's agency will be recovered on that day explains why many prisoners ground themselves in lived religious practices like reading and recalling verses about the Day of Judgment. El-Salahi ends his poem, saying: "Let the curtains go down./Let the mute, the muffled speak up" (33). This recurring motif of the curtain suggests that life in prison is a stage and the prisoners' experience is the subject of the play, which is a tragedy. But soon the curtains will be dropped as a just end is approaching. El-Salahi then follows that with another poem in which he describes himself as the director of a play, taking things into his own hands by lifting up the curtains and writing poems (34). Through these images, El-Salahi stresses the fact that pain is "the beginning of awakening" and civic engagement, which would liberate the land and its people.

A tone of rejoicing and an atmosphere of hope prevail in the next poem in which El-Salahi writes "[f]rom our flesh the Phoenix rises and flies away" and the rain pours down (34). He makes a prayer for the people and the land, a prayer for resurrection and freedom symbolized by the mythical bird of the Phoenix and for life and the end of drought represented by the rain. In the poem before the last, he celebrates the sacrifices of prisoners whose "[d]eeds replaced words" and who "shattered the seal of prohibition" by their political activism (35). He calls for their release and prays that no eyes taste sleep while prisoners are in chains. The drawing that accompanies these words is that of shapeless figures whose bodies are twisted in a way that makes them look like boa constrictors rolling their bodies ready to move or birds flapping their wings ready to fly. El-Salahi uses such natural images here to challenge modernity's celebration of the industrial and envision liberation. El-Salahi ends his visual memoir with a drawing of a robot that contrasts with the previous natural imagery. "The figure has to be upright, on two feet. Here the whole machinery of the state is facing downward, not upward," explains El-Salahi (35). This is the only drawing with no words, foreshadowing and forewarning of an upcoming revolution.

In conclusion, El-Salahi's *Prison Notebook* serves as a model for the decolonial work that the postcolonial Arabic prison narrative tends to do and accomplish.[22] The *Prison Notebook* teaches resistance and resilience in the face of the state's colonial violence. Every drawing and poem build onto the previous ones, narrating a story not only of pain but also of hope and connecting experiences of suffering across time and place. It is a warning that history repeats itself and that the ending of oppressive regimes is inevitable. Such an ending will be brought about by the violence of revolutions if we don't invest in decolonial education. It is up to humanity to choose wisely![23]

[22] Many other Arabic prison narratives take up similar motifs and tropes, even though each of them is different and creative in its own way.

[23] This paper is originally Chapter Three of my doctoral dissertation titled "Arabic Prison Narratives: Resisting Ongoing Colonialism." Therefore, I would like to express my gratitude to my dissertation committee (Prof. Dorice Elliott, Associate Prof. Phillip Drake, Associate Prof. Marie Grace Brown, Prof. Anna Neill, Prof. Robert Warrior, and Prof. Muhsin Jassim al-Musawi) for their insightful feedback and to Samuele Capanna from Brown University for his reading recommendation. I would also like to extend special thanks to Hassaballa Omar Hassaballa, Sudanese-

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