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ON BEING A MENA SCHOLAR IN AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES

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Introduction

I begin from the end and shall end where I hope we are inspired to find alternative beginnings. I identify as a writer who happens to be a social scientist and not the other way around, though the two roles deeply cross-pollinate my work. If I could sum up the most valuable lessons learned from my praxis thus far, they are as follows: I learned that if you are not producing knowledge to please any power, then it follows that no power will be pleased with the knowledge you produce. Ideally, scholars and writers should not be beggars at the heavily guarded gates of donors, funders, philanthropists, and other powerholders with sinister intentions to police knowledge to serve their interests. It is wiser to walk away than to write even a single word to please powerholders. Walking away is costly, but compromising is costlier. What distinguishes the life of the mind from any other way of living is that it becomes self-defeating under complicity. For the layperson, silence can be a survival tactic; for intellectuals, it means acting in bad faith. Compromising the mind is losing all, because ultimately, a writer's only real home is the few cubic centimeters inside their heads.

Knowledge and power have always been entangled yet incompatible. I therefore see the freedom to produce meaningful knowledge as akin to how the Chinese poet Bei Dao defines freedom in *The August Sleepwalker* as "nothing but the distance between the hunter and the hunted" (Dao 2001). I learned that no meaningful epistemic contributions can be made by simply consuming knowledge produced from within the constraints and orientalist gaze of Western academe. As many decolonial thinkers have rightly pointed out, one cannot expect solutions from those who create the problems. This emphasizes the importance of not dismissing but carefully examining and analyzing any knowledge produced in the West about the rest of the world. I learned that if we identify intentional imperial silences and erasures of questions that we deem critical, we should be the ones to write about them. I learned to let go of the illusion of changing systems from within. As Audre Lorde warns us, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 1984). Being aware of the futility of changing systems from within does not equal defeat. Rather, I see this awareness as aligned with freedom in its deepest meaning of creating the conditions required for meaningful and equitable knowledge production.

Lastly, I learned that our fixation on doing and our obsession with learning often leads us to forget that the focus should equally be on unlearning and undoing what has been done to our imagination and self-worth. We do this by dismantling the inferiority complex imperial education has woven into the fabric of our intellectual, spiritual, and physical existence. When knowledge production is at the mercy of wealthy funders and donors, as it is in most Western academic institutions today, it should not surprise us that academic institutions have increasingly become about the negation of education—much as healthcare can become about the negation of health when ruled by pharmaceuticals more invested in keeping people on daily meds than finding cures. This, of course, applies to many other walks of life.

After earning three master's degrees and a doctorate from renowned Western universities, I walked away from Western academe because, with rare exceptions, I see it structured to force MENA scholars either to serve the imperial agenda under different guises or to be thrown into depleting battles, smear campaigns, blacklists, slander, and countless other tactics deployed by gatekeepers appointed to monitor and attack anyone who deviates from the way they want the entire region to be studied and perceived.

My Decision to Walk Away

Despite my passion and commitment to the life of the mind—including academic research and teaching—I decided to break ties with the Western academic system after earning my doctorate because, deep inside, I could not tell myself in good faith that the academic system in its current state would allow me to think, write, and teach creatively and uncompromisingly. I could not in good conscience tell myself that attaining a tenured position was worth the fight while also preserving my intellectual integrity and mental well-being. Between graduation and making the final decision to walk away, I applied for and received invitations to multiple tenure-track interviews at prestigious universities. I observed red flags in several interviews that further solidified my decision to walk away, because I saw the writing on the wall: scholars studying the MENA region in the U.S. are either expected to think and write in a manner that, one way or another, ends up serving imperial projects in the region, or alternatively, they are fired, harassed, smeared, or have their creative energy drained in fights and controversies based on false and groundless accusations.

A more elusive and reductive form of marginalization and censorship I observed is asking academics to teach classes on Arabic language, literature, or culture for students who are mostly taking such classes to boost their CVs when seeking posts in government, intelligence, cybersecurity, and other spaces designed for surveilling, controlling, and bombing the very communities whose languages and cultures academics teach. In brief, I concluded that, with rare exceptions, MENA scholars in the U.S., especially first-generation scholars, have an extremely difficult time succeeding academically without risking failure intellectually, humanly, and spiritually. I am not suggesting that those who chose this path have necessarily failed. I am suggesting that, if one is to succeed, the fight is so intentionally draining and soul-crushing that one's very existence becomes centered on fighting and defending that existence at the expense of focusing energy on what needs to be researched and written about.

As a war survivor who has witnessed the horrors of multiple wars in Iraq, I don't think the fight was worth it. Surviving those wars taught me that living and making a living should be aligned; when they are not, I do not choose to make a living at the expense of living. I did not stop the fight. Rather, I opted to fight independently to preserve my creative energy. I chose to do whatever it takes to support my writing. As my decolonial mentor, Walter Mignolo, often reminded me, "Western academe shouldn't be the only game in town." I add that a big part of decolonizing knowledge production entails not always being in a reactive position, trying to prove to the imperial university that our thinking and writing are cutting-edge according to their measures and standards (Chatterjee and Sunaina 2014). I am not only interested in measures but also in measuring the measurers and holding them accountable. The academic oppression against MENA's diasporic scholars is worsening, especially for those writing about Palestine or any topic that challenges the imperial agenda. In many cases, succeeding as a MENA academic in American universities is akin to shooting oneself in the foot. I say this not only from my own experience but also from conversations with many respected Arab and non-Arab MENA scholars who have shared similar reflections.

Gatekeeping in Interviews, Citation Politics, and Job Design

A common thread emerged in several of the tenure-track interviews I attended. In each interview, there were at least one or two mean-faced,

aggressive, and unfriendly gatekeepers whose role seemed to be to vet me intellectually and ideologically to ensure that my presence on campus would not threaten the status quo or lead to what Walter Mignolo calls "epistemic disobedience" (Mignolo 2010) It is as though the five years or so on the tenure-track are not enough to vet academics; these gatekeepers were present to make sure that my thinking and research were aligned with the imperial goals of the American elite, despite the unofficial script that you must present yourself as "liberal," "progressive," "leftist," "Marxist," "Foucauldian," and so on. They welcome citations of Marx and Foucault to explain the region, but are less receptive when you rely on Arab writers and thinkers without validating Arab epistemic contributions by connecting them to carefully chosen, elitist Western authors. This strong grip on citation practices is itself an imperial tool controlling knowledge production.

The second alarming pattern I observed was that, despite holding a doctorate in cultural anthropology and contrary to what several posts I applied to described, interviewers often made it clear that my role would be reduced to that of an Arabic instructor: a heavy load of language courses combined with a few social-science classes. I saw a pattern of attempts to undermine epistemic contributions or at least to police and monitor them. This policing ranges from who one cites and what topics and research questions are fundable to the so-called peer-review process, which, in an ideal world, is a quality mechanism but, in practice for many MENA scholars, becomes another layer of censorship depending on who reviews your work and has the power to reject it. Reviewers often expect authors to engage with and cite canonized and carefully chosen authors. Even when you engage heavily with Arab authors on their own terms, reviewers expect you to tie that engagement to chosen Western authors in order to be considered "rigorous." I am not dismissing the value of peer reviewing, but we should seriously consider how it can censor knowledge about the region; when it does, it defeats its original purpose and can easily turn into "gatekeepers' filtering."

The same dynamic applies to publishing independently while connected to the academic world. Publishing with academic presses and journals is privileged. In my second year of the doctorate program, I publicly published a piece criticizing the corporatization of Western universities. I was attacked and warned by multiple faculty and graduate students that such public pieces would hurt my academic career if future hiring committees disapproved of my perspectives. One renowned professor attacked the piece on social media, personally criticizing me and stating that if this is what I thought, I did not deserve to benefit from a scholarship in graduate school. It was basically an

upscale liberal version of "fuck off and go back to your country." Even in public writing, I encountered outlets that wanted to reduce me to an "Iraq expert." After publishing two pieces on Iraq in one European magazine, I submitted a third piece unrelated to Iraq; they told me they would rather I be their Iraq expert, which I refused, and I never pitched to them again. This, in my assessment, was the opposite of what freedom of writing and thinking are about.

Tenure, Vetting, and Institutional Purpose

The tenure-track process functions as an unofficial ideological and intellectual vetting mechanism that ensures alignment with donor priorities and institutional stakeholders. It is usually framed as making sure you are "the right fit for the department." Yet there are many well-documented cases in which academics were denied tenure despite—and because of—their publications and contributions. The real purpose of the tenure-track process, from hiring to granting tenure, is so controlled that its unwritten purpose often contradicts the official script about fit, teaching, and research productivity.

During on-campus visits and high-level interviews, I was once bluntly asked how I would feel about teaching students who might use their education in ways I considered unethical. I replied that I would teach to make students open and curious and to encourage them to critically reexamine everything they know or have heard about the region. Other absurd questions came from committees composed entirely of privileged white people—I recognize that white people do not all have the same privileges—asking how I would contribute to diversity. In the end, none of the questions I answered in these interviews aligned with my view of scholarship, knowledge production, and teaching. Thus, after withdrawing from some interviews and being rejected by others (a blessing in disguise), I decided to walk away from the American academe—a decision that did not surprise me, given what I had witnessed during graduate school.

Patterns of Repression and Delegitimization

I had previously seen countless red flags throughout academic socialization and professionalization in graduate school. I was aware, as many scholars and

academics might be in different ways, that almost any MENA scholar who made serious epistemic contributions—from Edward Said to Joseph Massad, from Steven Salaita to Norman Finkelstein, and on goes the list—was subject to tenure denial, firing, smear campaigns, slander, and various other forms of psychological warfare and discrediting attempts.

On top of these tactics of silencing lies another tactic: dismissing anyone who exposes structural problems as a "conspiracy theorist." This dismissal is not accidental; it is a critical part of keeping the structure intact. It is a feature, not a bug, in the imperial university. It ensures that exposing the system does not lead to meaningful structural change and instead scapegoats the individual who exposed the problem. As Sara Ahmed points out, "when you expose a problem you pose a problem. It might then be assumed that the problem would go away if you would just stop talking about it or if you went away" (Ahmed 2017). When that happens, attention shifts from exposing the system to dealing with you as a "threat," a "terrorist sympathizer," and so on. This shift aims to drain your intellectual energy and force you to choose between your livelihood and intellectual integrity. We should not be intimidated by the "conspiracy theory" tactic: when we have ample evidence showing how many MENA academics are subjugated and silenced, the situation ceases to be mere conspiracy or just a theory. We have ample evidence of MENA scholars being targeted and censored.

Freedom, Imperial Power, and the Global Frame

Despite all this, we still hear counterarguments: isn't the West still freer than many parts of the world? Isn't the West freer than our Arab world? My response is that no place is free, and freedom of thinking and writing anywhere shrinks or expands in proportion to what matters for writers and academics. If, for example, Palestine is central to one's writing and thinking, then the answer about how free the West is for writers or academics becomes clear compared with many countries the West labels "unfree," where one might freely write and research on Palestine. In any country, power operates in such a way that one can almost write about anything except what they should really be writing about, because ruling classes will allow anything except what threatens their interests. Yet it is precisely those topics that conscientious writers must expose if we hope for meaningful awareness and change.

Examining freedom of writing and scholarship in the West is particularly pertinent because the West is the actor that invades and bombs countries, changes governments, installs or protects puppets and proxies, sanctions countries to death, and commits countless other violent acts of aggression—all in the name of democracy and freedom. Therefore, it is more critical than ever for diasporic scholars and writers living in the West—many of whom escaped their countries due to Western wars and interventions—to expose the myth of Western academic freedom that many still subscribe to. Furthermore, Western countries often impose models of writing, thinking, and teaching on countries they invade or through economic and interventionist strategies. This is dangerous because it imposes specific frames of thinking, teaching, and writing on the rest of the world and undermines diverse ways of creating, inventing, and being. For example, we increasingly hear about American, Canadian, German, and French universities opening branches around the world, including in Arab countries. Such institutions often inspire reverence in host countries as beacons of freedom of thought and teaching. This reverence feeds the inferiority complex the West engrains in the minds of others and reinforces the dangerous notion that education, writing, and thinking are more valuable when acquired from Western institutions or carry their stamp of approval and validation.

Intellectual Assassination and Safe Research

The appeal of so-called Western freedoms comes from the fact that academics or writers may not be assassinated, imprisoned, or killed. Instead, the structure ensures they become isolated, marginalized, and discredited if they challenge it. Moreover, those who dare to expose the structure are often seen as bitter or blaming their individual failure on an otherwise "competitive" or "rigorous" system. This, I argue, can be as damaging as other extreme forms of violence against intellectuals. In Western academic spaces, academics are assassinated intellectually: not behind bars but deprived of livelihoods tied to institutional positions that reward compromise, subservience, and docility. This dynamic helps explain why many MENA scholars conduct what I call "safe research," which I define as researching topics that do not get you in trouble—topics that either serve imperial interests or, from the perspective of MENA people affected by them, are a waste of time and resources with respect to priority and impact.

Some of the imperial university's favored topics depict the region as being chronically in conflict, always ruled by dictators, oppressive regimes, religious leaders, and terrorists; they emphasize the hijab and oppression against women, the dangers of Islam and radicalism, oppressed minorities, corruption, and similar convenient research topics. These topics secure funding and feed a massive academic-industrial complex dedicated to inflicting more damage, division, and hate in the region while preserving the region's orientalist image in the Western imagination. If we trace the funding for such research, it is easy to see disturbing patterns of who benefits from funding such narratives and discourses. To those who counterargue that these topics are legitimate, I respond with Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib's words: **"ḥaqqun yurādu bihi bāṭil"**—a truth used to serve falsehood. Truth and research can be abused; deeds matter in proportion to the intention behind them and the impact we expect in good faith.

Delinking and Alternatives

I strongly believe Western academic spaces have reached such a critical point of suffocation and marginalization for MENA scholars that delinking and finding alternatives beyond the West should be a serious option if we cannot contribute on our own intellectual terms. The current ruling class in the West exerts broad control over many walks of life and has worked to make even naming or boycotting them risky. It is my hope that academic spaces in the MENA region recognize the danger of this situation and the value of diasporic scholars who have much to contribute if given space and safety in the region itself.

When researching Iraqi academics in exile, several of them spoke to me at length not only of the pain of displacement but also of having their intellectual contributions displaced or treated as irrelevant (Yako 2021). Many lamented what could have been accomplished had they been granted safety to think, write, and teach in Iraq or elsewhere in the Arab world. I still believe we should concentrate our efforts towards making our countries places to run to, not from.

Conclusion

Walking away does not equate to an abdication of scholarship; as a strategic choice it preserves intellectual integrity and creates conditions for meaningful knowledge production. Decolonizing knowledge requires critique and institution building—with regional presses, journals, research centers, and teaching spaces that value epistemic plurality and protect scholars from coercive donor and institutional pressures. We must measure the measurers, hold them accountable, and build alternative infrastructures that allow MENA scholars to contribute on their own terms. We must stop supporting the structures that insist success cannot be attained without shooting oneself in the foot. The foot carries the entire body, including the brain, and is therefore worth preserving.

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