A Grave for New York and *New York 80*: Formulating an Arab Identity through the Lens of New York

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From the skyscrapers of mid-town Manhattan to the Brooklyn Bridge, from the Statue of Liberty to the prostitutes of Time Square, from Harlem to Wall Street, images of New York City are some of the most potent representations of the United States around the world. This paper explores how two Arab authors use New York City as a lens through which they formulate an Arab identity in and for their literary texts and I am concerned in particular with the way in which gender and race are used in these formulations. The two works I discuss are Adonis's *Qabr min ajl new york* (*A Grave for New York*)[1] and Yusuf Idris's *New York 80*[2], published in Arabic in 1971 and 1980 respectively, and both written in Arabic, for an Arab audience. There is no doubt that either work is anything but a scathing critique of New York, used as a metonym for the United States, and in particular its claim to technology and 'advancement.' Both pieces clearly advocate resistance to American hegemony in the world and harshly condemn the capitalist greed with which the United States has become synonymous throughout the world thus manifesting the political commitment of their authors and conveying a message of Third World solidarity.

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Works that deal with relationships between Arabs and Europeans or Arabs and Americans (assumed of course to be distinct categories) are discussed by scholars of Arabic literature as part of the large body of literature dealing with what is usually referred to as the 'east-west encounter.' *A Grave for New York* and *New York 80* both certainly fall into this category and both can also be read more specifically as works that deal with the United States. This distinction is important. As Rashid Elenany points out in his thoughtful study, 'The Western Encounter in the Works of Yusuf Idris,' representations of Europe in Idris's works vary considerably from those of America.[3] Just as European and American Orientalist scholarship and literature have treated the Arab world differently because of their different histories and positionalities, so too do Arabic texts treat the different 'wests' implied by the 'east-west encounter' differently. Thus, though these works can be read usefully in relation to the trope of the 'east-west encounter,' their particular interactions with the United States and New York City specifically should be highlighted as such. I argue that in these works, New York City is used as a symbol of the strange and alienating city *par excellence* and highlights the fact that Idris's and Adonis's commentaries are specifically meant to be about America. I propose that New York City is constructed in both texts as an 'other' in order to articulate a textual (and authorial?) 'self' in opposition to it.

The formulation of an identity in opposition to an 'other' is also a common trope in literature and when coupled with the 'east-west encounter' has particular resonance in relation to Arabic literature. Since the publication of Edward Said's seminal study, *Orientalism*, the process of identity formation in relation to 'the other' (particularly how the 'west' defines itself as contrasted with an exotic 'east') has been theorized at great length—both in relation to literature and also more

broadly. Though the implications and the power dynamics of the reverse phenomenon—constructing an 'Arab self' against the idea of a western 'other'—are radically different because of the relative positions of the Arab world, Europe, and the United States, the processes are related. Some of the lively debates engaging with Said's work treat this issue—Sadek Jalal al-'Azm, for example, has called this process, 'Orientalism in reverse' and shows how it uses many of the same strategies.[4] My readings of Idris's *New York 80* and Adonis's *A Grave for New York* are informed by the ideas put forth by Said and 'Azm and show how these texts manipulate images of New York in order to propose an Arab identity that contrasts with it. I explore how they appropriate and refuse certain models of self-identification—Idris in relation to gender and Adonis in relation to race—in order to construct a positive notion of what it is to be Arab within their texts. Through these readings I will evaluate Idris's and Adonis's constructions of a positive Arab identity in their texts and whether they offer a model that can be read as liberating for Arabs in the context of the relationship of Arabs and New York/the United States.

Yusuf Idris's *New York 80*

New York 80 mirrors a typical genre of Arabic literary production that deals with the United States—the newly arrived, Arab traveler marvelling at the strange new land of America.[5] An unnamed Egyptian man has come to New York City in 1980, and he tells the story of his visit in the form of a travelogue, though most of the text is filled with descriptions of his discussions with an American woman he meets in a bar. The style of the narration is brief and cinematic, like much of Idris's work, and sections of it read almost like a play. Much of the dialogue, and indeed much of the action, is highly

improbable, but these features only add to the awkward feel of the text, which the reader cannot help but feel is intentional. The seeming lack of artistic skill that is projected in this work, shown in its repetitive sentences, repeated and lengthy explications of simple ideas, and unimaginative use of vocabulary, reflects the overall tedium and disgust that the narrator/ protagonist has for New York, and one can assume America more generally. As Rashid El-Enany has pointed out, Idris's negative feelings about the United States are well-known and this work specifically attacks the United States and not the 'West' or Europe. This is underlined by the fact that *New York 80* is published together in a single volume with another short piece, *Vienna 60*, implicitly inviting a comparison not only between the two stories but also the two locations where they are set.[6] To Idris, thus, New York compares unfavorably with Vienna, just as the New York text itself is considerably less engaging than that set in Vienna (and most of Idris's other published works). Not only is the quality of the story somewhat lacking in literary terms, but the way in which its message is encoded is not subtle: the male protagonist, clearly an avatar of Idris,[7] represents Egypt (and the Third World) and his female interlocutor represents New York City (and the United States). Also somewhat typically, the female character is explicitly described as a representative of her city and country, and perhaps not surprisingly in this case, the embodiment of New York City is a prostitute.

Though Idris's treatment of New York uses familiar and even stereotypical scenes, settings and characterizations in a less than brilliant piece of literature, the work is original in how it conveys Idris's critique of America and the protagonist/narrator's self-definition as an Arab. Both the content and the form of the work reinforce Idris's message that New York is false and materialistic. Neither strictly a narrative, nor

strictly a play, *New York 80* proposes that New York City itself is somehow an 'unreal location.' Idris furthers his complaint against New York throughout stilted dialogues which seem scripted and unnatural and suggest that New York is simply one large stage on which people perform roles. The falseness of New York is echoed in the lack of realism in the content of the work. Though the events in the story are portrayed as realistic, many elements of the story are highly implausible. For example, the prostitute has a PhD, was previously a sex therapist in a clinic, and lugs her dissertation around with her as she looks for a publisher—leaving it with the bartender if she manages to find a client!

Prostitution and the Construction of a Positive Masculine Identity

The 'over-educated' female prostitute serves a useful purpose in the text because she provides the highly educated male narrator, himself a writer, with a worthy adversary in the verbal sparring that occupies almost all of the text. The major preoccupation of the debates between the narrator and his interlocutor in *New York 80* is sex: human sexuality, sexual relationships and sexual mores. The protagonist (and author's) obsession with this issue is textually linked to the identity of the woman as a prostitute. As the work opens, the male narrator is sitting in the 'Cafeteria-Bar' observing a woman who he describes as 'educated and cultured'. He thinks that she might be an assistant to the director of the United Nations, remarking that she could possibly not be the director because she is too young (p. 9). When she tells him in her words that she is a 'call girl' (first printed in English in the text and thereafter transliterated), he has what at first seems to be an exceedingly prudish, and then a holier-than-thou, response. They

argue about her choice of profession: she claims that she likes this job because of the money she earns, considerably more than when she was a sex therapist paid by a clinic (p. 59), whereas he sermonizes about the need for sex to be connected to love (pp 58-59 and 67-68).

Both Arab and non-Arab prostitutes appear in a wide range of roles within Arabic literature and Idris himself uses them frequently in his stories.[8] In *New York 80*, Idris's use of the character of the prostitute and the discussion of prostitution more generally relates to larger issues in the text. Firstly, the language that is used to express the female character's profession and identity label is neither wholly negative nor used in a specifically derogatory way. Though the male character highly disapproves of this woman's choice of profession, the words he uses to describe her are 'baghi' (prostitute), 'maumas' (whore) 'muhtarif' (professional) and 'call girl'. Though the narrator does comment that the word is "ugly in any language, even French"[9] (p. 6), he never once uses the common and highly-loaded slang term, 'sharmuta,' or any other specifically derogatory terms in order to disrespect and denigrate these women. A second relevant aspect of Idris's treatment of prostitution in *New York 80* is that the male narrator never takes action on his feelings of disgust for prostitutes despite his continuing complaints that he hates and despises them. The narrator constantly repeats that he can hardly bear to hold a conversation with the woman he meets in New York because she is a prostitute, however, textually this is shown to be false. He never shows blatant disrespect for this woman and continues talking to her despite his protests—the entire sixty-nine pages of the work are taken up with their banter.

Even more interestingly, we learn that this meeting in the hotel's cafeteria-bar is not in fact the protagonist's first encounter with a sex-worker. In an interior monologue, the

narrator recounts that his college roommate not only frequented prostitutes when they lived together, but also that he would often invite them to their shared flat, which was "known to all the prostitutes of the Qasr El-Ayni and Muneera quarters" of Cairo (p. 19). The narrator's relationship to a number of these women is detailed even further when he describes a trip to the hospital to visit one woman with whom he had developed a friendly relationship. On this visit he learns that Cairene prostitutes carry vials of poison with them in case they are arrested by the 'morals police' ('bulees al-adab'), as they consider being laid up in the hospital, and even taking the risk of dying, a better alternative than prison. When he asks this woman for example, "Why would you drink it? A few days in prison is not worth suicide", she replies, "I live like a dog always being hunted down by dogs" (pp. 19-20).[10] With a mixture of revulsion and pity, he learns that they procure the poison by sleeping with male nurses in the lavatory. Though the narrator is repelled by what he learns in this scene, he never treats these women with disrespect. Rather than use this as an example to show the evils of prostitution, Idris includes these passages in order to deplore the poverty of so many people in Egypt, emphasize the importance of the dignity of human life, and to argue against materialism and greed. These are key features in his critique of both Egypt and the United States. While the Cairene prostitutes represent Egypt and the desperation of Egypt's poor, the American prostitute clearly is meant to represent New York City and America more generally and thus the debate about prostitution in *New York 80* is also comment on the city. The key difference between the Cairene prostitutes and Pamela Graham, the 'call girl' he meets in New York, is that the American woman constantly repeats that she has chosen this life. The Egyptian women are shown to be poor and desperate

to earn a living in any way that they can, whereas the American woman simply regards prostitution as a way to make more money than she otherwise could with her doctorate in psychology. Therefore, though he shows that Egypt's poverty must be combatted, Idris's critique of America here is sharper. He feels that the American woman could and thus should live with 'more dignity', highlighting his idea that the foundation of the United States is its excessive materialism and the idea that 'everything is for sale.'

The passages cited above show how the narrator constructs his masculine identity within *New York 80* through interactions between sexuality and gender in relation to prostitution, and in particular in opposition to the female prostitute. The narrator not only argues with the American prostitute with the aim of 'saving' her from this profession, but also cares for the Egyptian prostitute enough to visit her in the hospital. Through these actions, Idris portrays the Arab/Egyptian man in the text to be caring, as opposed to the American men who use women merely for sex, "I care about women and the human race" (p. 24). This contrast is reinforced throughout the work, for example in the scene in the work in which an American man propositions the woman with whom the narrator has been talking. The narrator distances himself from the actions of this man who does not care for the feelings and thoughts of the character that we are slowly getting to know. According to the narrator, prostitution has divested sex between men and women of its most important component—love. The narrator's observations have also lead him to the estimation that this sort of 'contractual sex' that is devoid of love is something that is normal and accepted in America by both women and men. The narrator takes his indictment of America further, however. The core of Idris's critique in *New York 80* is linked to the extremely different reasons why

American and Egyptian women sell their bodies to men for sex. While demonstrating his sympathy for and solidarity with Egyptian women whom circumstances force into poverty, Idris and his narrator show that in the United States women with advanced degrees and many other options, *choose* prostitution. In *New York* 80, thus, the character Pamela Graham is both incomprehensible and reprehensible because she willingly and enthusiastically accepts prostitution as her profession. Idris uses prostitution as a symbol in the text in a somewhat uncreative manner—he posits an image of New York City being 'for sale' despite all its modernization and achievements. Though Idris's critique of prostitution is informed by a highly conservative, moralistic, and paternalistic approach to sex work and control over women's bodies, in *New York 80* it also serves to challenge other entrenched paradigms. Through his treatment of the subject, the male Arab/Egyptian narrator is shown not only to be good-hearted and paternalistically caring as opposed to American men who are only interested in sex, but also is politically committed and links the selling of women's bodies to poverty. Idris thus manipulates the loaded symbol of the woman as a prostitute in order to mount his criticism of the greed and materialism of the United States, and in so doing formulates a positive Arab male identity opposed to both exploitation and poverty.

**Orientalism/O rientalism in Reverse:
Declining the Stereotypes**

Whereas Idris uses clichéd gender roles and images to create a positive, caring male character, he also uses the contrasting conditions of American and Egyptian prostitutes in order to challenge stereotyped assumptions about the opposition of east and west. Firstly, it is clear that Idris seeks to reverse the

stereotypical Orientalist paradigm of the east as 'uncivilized and barbaric' and the west as the location of 'civilization and progress.' In *New York 80*, the poverty-stricken sex workers of Cairo share nothing in common with the doctorate-holding Pamela Graham of New York City. New York's greed proves the city to be ridiculous if not inhuman, whereas Cairo's poverty is tragic and something that must be corrected. Moreover, Idris shows that New York City, as represented by this prostitute, is actually not as advanced as it may seem. Though this woman is attractive, polished and educated, she still 'adds up to nothing'. The obvious parallel drawn by Idris in the text is that despite its much vaunted technology and alleged superiority, the narrator sees that, in reality, just because New York may appear to be attractive, this does not mean that it has substance. This can be read as a comment not only on Orientalist portrayals of the Arab world as backward when compared to Europe and America, but also on the early Arab reformers and their articulations of how to deal with Arab traditions and authenticity when faced with western 'advancement.'

Another strategy Idris uses to criticize the United States in this work is to 'decline' stereotypes about Arabs, in order to comment upon the self-other/east-west divide. Here, I borrow the concept developed by Mireille Rosello in her, *Declining the Stereotype: Ethnicity and Representation in French Culture*. Rosello sees stereotypes as an immensely powerful location that authors manipulate in their works, and explores the double meaning of the word decline—to show the full range, as one declines a noun or verb, and to refuse. In this work, she discusses the strategies authors use to re-appropriate and challenge harmful stereotypes while making use of them at the same time. Idris declines stereotypes in several ways in *New York 80*, thus investing the text with additional, and sometimes

ironic, meanings. For example, the Arab character is shown to be overly sentimental and emotional in *New York 80* while the American is matter-of-fact about everything—even affairs of the heart. Idris's narrator faults the American woman for having no understanding of human emotion and describes the way she acts using the phrase, 'qillat adab': "In my country they call this 'qillat adab' and 'ayb'" (p. 39). The Arab/Egyptian is thus constructed as emotional in contrast to the American/New Yorker and this emotionalism is deemed to be positive when reflected against the crassness of American values. Idris relies on this notion of 'Arab emotionalism' throughout *New York 80* to prove the superiority of an Arab/Egyptian value system as opposed to that of Americans. It is also notable in these discussions of sex that Idris does not rely on stereotypical gender roles but rather reverses them. In one amusing passage, the female character argues passionately, invoking the influence of the 1960s on her thinking (p. 57), that sex for her is something that is merely physical like any other transaction she might conduct (p. 57). The male character responds that sex only has meaning for him if it is related to love for his partner and he chastizes her for pursuing him sexually without taking his feelings into account. He describes his conflicting feelings that make him feel like, "a fragile chick who transforms into a Cassanova-Gigolo-Wolf" (17). He is physically attracted to her, but nonetheless is unable and unwilling to touch this woman because they are not emotionally attached. Arab emotionality is valorized here, but with a gender reversal—it is an Arab *man* who is shown as an emo tionally complex character, who needs love in order to have sex.

'Customs and Traditions of the Natives': a Third World View

The reversal of roles and shift of power is also located in this text in the way in which the narrator frames his voyage in *New York 80* as that of a 'third-world resident' travelling to the 'first world' and reporting on its horrors. The colonial view of natives as 'animals' and European or American travelers observing the 'customs and traditions of the natives' is recast here with the horrified narrator reporting on the United States to the Arab/Egyptian reader. This is not an uncommon technique used in Arabic travel literature, and Idris manipulates it in *New York 80* to make several statements. Firstly, the question of what separates humans from animals is a leitmotif in the work's discussions about sex. In several passages, the American woman argues that for her sex is merely a physical act, relegating her to the animal realm, while the narrator's stance shows that emotionally he is the more highly evolved character. This is ironically reinforced by the title of the woman's PhD dissertation 'The Human Behavior of Animals' (p. 44) and underlined in the narrator's long reflection on what makes a civilization advanced or not, with the United States clearly not meeting the standard (p. 64).

It is important here to highlight how Idris frames these themes in explicitly political terms by identifying his narrator as from the 'Third World' (al-'alam al-thalith) (p. 36). Though we learn that he is Egyptian early in the text, rather than underline this affiliation or even that he is Arab, throughout the text he insists that he is only 'a person from this world' (p. 26). He also seeks out the broader solidarity and affiliation that the terms 'Third World' and 'Middle Eastern' (sharqi) provide him. Not only does he not dwell on his identity as an

Arab or Egyptian, on several occasions he refuses to tell the woman where he is from, thereby divesting her of the power of labelling him or understanding him as part of any group. This is one way in which he continues to hold power over her and refuses her ability (and symbolically that of the United States) to control and destroy him as well. This can be read as a clear reversal and rejection of the classic Orientalist project as defined by Said.[11] The narrator advances his political agenda through not only through his rejection of labels and categorizations but also by showing the insularity of the American view of the world. He points out, for example, that Pamela Graham knows virtually nothing about the world outside of New York and challenges her to see more of it. He raises this issue because she claims that she is poor and that she works as a prostitute because of the amount of money she can earn. He feels compelled to challenge her, telling her that she is lying to herself if she thinks she is truly hungry—one ring she is wearing could feed an entire family for three years 'in his country' (p. 68). This statement once again shows that the United States lives at a different standard than the rest of the world and shows his solidarity with those who do not have access to America's riches and have not fallen prey to American materialism.

The examples above indicate that the way in which Idris constructs an 'Arab self' as opposed to a 'western other' can be analyzed from multiple angles. Firstly, it is clear that Idris is arguing for human values to triumph over greed for money and material wealth. He praises the emotionality of the Arab protagonist while showing the American woman to be heartless, detached and concerned with money above all else. This is clearly a condemnation of the greed of American capitalism and how it creates exaggeratedly individualistic and selfish citizens.[12] Secondly, the end of the work shows that the

American woman, like all prostitutes, is herself a victim (p. 52). It is difficult for the narrator to see her in this role because she seems so strong, educated and self-assured when compared to the Egyptian sex workers he has known. Though as the narrator asserts, “she is not a scorned young woman in an Egyptian film or one of the victims of Dostoyevsky’s human tragedies” (p. 52), she is nonetheless shown to be a victim of America’s failure. The narrator judges this character harshly throughout most of the work, but she does not prove merely to be a heartless and unsympathetic character in the end. Just as the Cairene prostitutes are victims of Egyptian poverty, Pamela Graham is a victim of American greed. Finally, Idris shows that this American woman’s most praiseworthy attribute is her courage. Though he does not agree with the views she espouses and defends in *New York 80*, the work concludes with her holding fast to what she believes. In the somewhat abrupt and bizarre ending, the two characters have a fight in the cafeteria-bar. The American woman feels defeated in her argument, makes a scene and storms out. The Egyptian man then reflects, admiringly “Oh Lord, when will you give some men the courage/bravery of some prostitutes” (p. 74). Throughout the entire work the New York/United States is an ‘other’ against which Egypt/the Arab world defines itself and this dramatic ending shows that there may be some things that the Arabs should learn from New York, here courage and bravery. The narrator’s final reflection can be read as a prescriptive message to Arabs, urging them to fight against what is wrong and show courage in standing up for what is right. Thus, though Idris’s message about America in *New York 80* is not at all subtle, he effects his critique of the United States through a complex manipulation of genre, characterizations, positive

and negative stereotypes of Arabs, as well as male and female gender roles. It is particularly through male and female gender roles and manipulating them in relation to symbols of New York and the Arab world/the Third World that Yusuf Idris asserts a positive message about Arab identity through his male narrator.

Adonis's *A Grave for New York*

The absurdity and banality of the encounter between an idealistic and somewhat naïve Arab writer and an overeducated American prostitute in *New York 80* could not be further from the images presented in Adonis's complex prose-poem, *Qabr min ajl New York*. This extended meditation on New York City both describes and addresses the city itself through the voice of an unnamed, first person, narrative voice. Though this poem treats many of the same ideas and issues as *New York 80,* formally *A Grave for New York* is a considerably more sophisticated piece of literature. Adonis's piece laments the state of the Arab world while lambasting the greed and corruption of the United States, with wit and irony. Rather than Idris's focus on the relative wealth of Americans through his focus on the prostitute in *New York 80*, Adonis concentrates his commentary on the poverty of many people in New York itself and the hypocrisy of this situation. The artistry employed in the creation of this poem is a testament to the high value Adonis places on what he calls 'Arab creativity.' He has argued at length in his writing for the need for innovation by Arabs in the arts and literature.[13] Thus, in addition to how this poem mounts its criticism of America by manipulating symbols of New York, it can also be read as an example of how Adonis advances an argument about the need for Arab creativity and puts his literary theories into practice. I will argue

that this project is linked to the formulation of a positive Arab identity through the poem's opposition to mainstream, white America and through Adonis's explicit identification with African Americans.

Third World Solidarity and Adonis's Critique of New York

Though *A Grave for New York* does not pursue gender extensively as an avenue of criticism, it opens with female imagery immediately connected to the message the poem: New York is a city ridden with poverty and injustice. A breast is equated with a tombstone recalling the 'grave' of poem's title and it then moves on to invoke the most powerful image of a woman associated with New York, "NEW YORK,/ A woman—the statue of a woman// lifting in one hand a rag called liberty by// a document called history, and with the other// hand suffocating a child called Earth" (p. 141/ 647).[14] The woman here is of course not an individual woman but rather an even more potent symbol of both New York City and the United States—the Statue of Liberty. He exploits the statue's symbolic power here, questions how it inscribes the notions of history and liberty and suggests that it does the opposite of what it purports to, harming the earth. Through this, Adonis reveals the myth of the statue, and even links it to the image of an 'unfaithful' woman—she is a hypocrite and cannot deliver what she promises to people.

Adonis's poem thus opens with a statement consistent with the messages in *New York 80* and, like Idris, Adonis presents critiques of America that are linked to Third World solidarity. Adonis's statements in many cases, however, are stronger and more explicit, "And I confess: *New York*, in my country you own the corridor and the bed, the chair and the

head. And everything is for sale: night and day, the stone of Mecca and the waters of the Tigris" (p. 652/143). Here, Adonis is pointing out the way in which the United States has managed to take control and power over diverse parts of the world by 'owning' it all and putting even the most sacred items—religious, the Ka'ba, and secular, the Tigris River— up for sale. Moreover, the way in which his 'country' (biladi) is mentioned in this line is notably pan-Arab. Though Syrian, the land Adonis claims as his own includes both Mecca and the Tigris.[15] The broader identification and solidarity with the so-called 'Third World' is evident throughout the poem, in particular in relation to his political engagement on behalf of Vietnam, "Corpses in the streets of sunlight link *Hanoi* with *Jerusalem*, *Jerusalem* with the *Nile*" (p. 149/668). Just as New York City exists in these two works in a metonymic relationship with the United States, here Hanoi, Jerusalem and the Nile all obviously represent Vietnam, Palestine and Egypt. Moreover, not only are Palestine, Egypt and Vietnam linked to each other, but the United States' war against Vietnam is also implicitly invoked. Adonis thus points out that Egypt and Palestine are linked to Vietnam as victims of United States-sponsored aggression and that they all must be in solidarity against this.

**From Greenleaves to Greenbacks:
Defining Arabs through Race and Poverty in New York**

Adonis's message of Third World solidarity is not limited to locations outside America; it also extends to groups of people in America who are victims of American oppression and in need of support, in particular African Americans. *A Grave For New York* seeks justice for all people who have been oppressed

by the cruel American system, including those in the United States,

> NEW YORK-WALL STREET-
> 125th STREET-FIFTHAVENUE
> A Medusa phantom climbs up between one shoulder and another. A market for all kinds of slaves. Human beings who live like plants in glass houses. The wretched, the ones nobody ever sees, filter like particles of dust into the network of space—victims spinning in endless circles (p. 141/649).

Here, Adonis's specific interest in race, one of America's major social problems, becomes clear. His investigation and condemnation of American poverty and class divides are one focus of the poem, but he devotes considerable and specific attention to the experiences of African Americans. Adonis clearly opposes the structures that oppress black Americans and in his indictment of America identifies with them personally and politically. The poem shows this stance repeatedly. In the passage above, for example, he mentions three streets that represent different parts of New York. '125th street' which represents Harlem, a symbol of the black ghetto, is sandwiched between 'Wall Street,' where money is made, and the symbol of capitalism, and '5th Avenue,' where only the wealthiest New Yorkers live and shop, a symbol of conspicuous consumption. The victimization of African Americans specifically is highlighted not only by this reference to Harlem but also in the mention of slavery and how these 'slaves' are the 'wretched'—people who no one ever sees. The ambiguity of where this 'slave market' is located—is it Harlem, Wall Street, 5th Avenue, or in New York at the conjunction of all of these?—underlines the ongoing nature of the different forms of slavery which African Americans face

and how the institutional structures that keep black Americans enslaved did not simply disappear when slavery was legally outlawed.

One of the most noticeable formal features of this poem is the repetition of place names like New York, and places within New York, such as the example cited above. In addition to these place names, the names of Whitman (Walt) and Lincoln (Abraham) are also repeated in a similar way. These repeated names punctuate the text and are set apart in the original Arabic not only because they are, for the most part, transliterated foreign words, but also because they are marked in boldface type (in the translation this is represented by capital letters). These names set the rhythm of the poem and operate like a chorus in a song. The word 'Harlem' recurs in boldface no fewer than 14 times (more than any other single word except New York) and symbolizes not only the ghetto in which blacks are confined but also the segregation of the United States on both racial and class-based lines. In *A Grave for New York*, Adonis identifies strongly with Harlem and African Americans and shows his personal and political affinity with them, "HARLEM/ I do not come from the outside. I know your rancor, I know it's good bread" / "You are the eraser that will wipe out the face of New York"/ "HARLEM New York is in its death throes and you are the Hour" (p. 146/659). This is one of several passages where Adonis explicitly defines African Americans in contrast to America. As the eraser that will wipe out the face of New York, Harlem is an interloper that is not a part of New York, will help to destroy it and will triumph when New York dies. Harlem, and thus the narrator, is therefore defined in contrast to New York, which is thus necessarily a white space and linked to America more broadly. As Harlem and the black community are not included within

the definition of New York but as fundamentally opposed to it, so too are Adonis and the Arabs.

Adonis uses his identification with black suffering in a racist system in America to link their struggles together with those of people in other parts of the world who also suffer at the hands of white American power. He shows how Lebanon, for example, is trampled by American intervention, money, greed and hunger for power in *A Grave for New York*, "I read about rats in Beirut and elsewhere that parade themselves lavishly in WHITE HOUSE silk, that arm themselves with paper and gnaw at human beings, About the remnants of pigs that trample on poetry in the kindergarten of the alphabet" (142/650). The rats wearing 'White House silk' are a symbol of the spread of American influence and its corrupting influence and this passage shows a clear condemnation not only of America, but also of people within the Arab world who are willing to become a part of the system that is divesting Arab people and other of their rights to justice. Like Idris, within his condemnation of America and its expansionism abroad, Adonis also critiques Arabs who are actively involved in its propagation.

Reversing the Paradigm: Who Needs to Help Whom?

A Grave for New York can also be usefully read in conjunction with *New York 80* in relation to how it reverses binary oppositions between east and west in its suggestions for social change. Adonis's poem emphasizes the need for both Third World solidarity and revolution, as well as a new conceptualization of what America offers Arabs and what Arabs offer America. Adonis writes, "And while I look at you among the marble stones of Washington, and discover your likeness in Harlem I think, When will your next revolution come? And

my voice rises: Set LINCOLN free from the whiteness of marble, from NIXON, from the guard dogs and the hunting dogs. Let him read with new eyes what Ali ibn Muhmmad, the black leader, read, what Marx and Lenin and Mao Tse Tung read…" (p. 147/662). America needs a revolution! The first change that Adonis suggests is again framed in terms of black and white, reflecting his specific identification with the African American community and his suggestion that they hold the power to change America. Lincoln is trapped within the 'whiteness' of marble reflecting how power dynamics need to change in racist America. A black leader, Ali ibn Muhammad, is needed to educate Lincoln and thus America. The people in power need more information and it must come from sources outside of America itself. Ali ibn Muhammad, is identified as a black leader, and is also a symbol for Adonis himself further underlining his identification with blacks throughout the poem. Liberation is clearly linked to the Revolution as is evidenced by the references to Marx, Lenin and Mao and this will happen in the Third World, where Adonis locates and affiliates most of his poem.

These reversals of entrenched paradigms and power dynamics recall the similar strategies of 'Orientalism in reverse' as employed by Yusuf Idris. Here, the powerful country, the United States (as represented by New York City) needs to be reformed and take its lesson from 'Arab Afro-Asia.' The terminology used by Adonis here reflects not only the rhetoric of Gamal Abdel Nasser and Third World concerns but also extends its solidarity to African Americans. One specific example of this can be found where Adonis argues that one positive thing that the Arabs should take from America is the jazz café—a symbol linked clearly to African Americans.[16] *A Grave for New York* emphasizes that America's most valuable contributions to world society come from people who are

grossly undervalued and in fact oppressed within the American context. Adonis's suggestions for revolutionary change in the United States and his valorization of African American contributions to society are linked the formation of his own Arab identity within the text. Adonis argues here that the construction of a positive Arab identity must be free of the racial and social inequalities of the American system, especially greedy racism linked to capitalism. For Adonis, New York City is synonymous with modernity and thus fraught with greed, corruption and inequality. His message in the *A Grave for New York*, as elsewhere in his writings, is that the Arabs must fight against this force and reclaim the ancient beauty of their own civilizations.

The reform that *A Grave for New York* seeks in America in relation to injustice, poverty and racism, and the Arab world in terms of corruption is consistent with Adonis's other writings. On another level, however, the poem is also about art and culture and Adonis has written at length about the need to reclaim Arab traditions in creative production in the Arab world. Like *New York 80*, this poem also uses reversed Orientalist paradigms in order to achieve this goal. Sadek Jalal al-'Azm argues that Adonis is a classic example of 'Orientalism in reverse' as many of his writings in the 1970s propose Islam as the 'prime mover of the east' (p. 23). 'Azm cites from an article published in *Mawaqif* in which Adonis lists the west as synonymous with 'system, order, method, symmetry' and the east as 'prophetic, visionary, magical, miraculous, definite, fanciful and ecstatic' (p.23).[17] *A Grave for New York* is an obvious example of Adonis's larger project of reversing the Orientalist paradigm to re-claim what he terms 'eastern' values as positive. Like Idris, therefore, Adonis reverses the classic ideals of Orientalism in order to propose a positive Arab identity. Both Adonis and Idris subvert the power relationship between east

and west that was articulated by Orientalist scholarship in their creative works in order to articulate positive Arab identities within and for their texts.

Conclusions

A Grave for New York and *New York 80* offer challenges to existing paradigms through which the 'east-west encounter' is understood in literary terms generally and Arabic literature specifically. What I explore here are the ways in which Idris uses gender and Adonis uses race in their poems in order to refract their notion of an Arab self through the lens of New York City. New York is used in both texts as a symbol for America and thus opposition to it leads to possibilities for Third World solidarity and ways of envisaging a more productive and positive future for Arab world by not repeating the problems of world powers like the United States. Though the critiques mounted here are powerful, each work takes the United States to task in relation to different issues. Idris attacks America on an issue for which it is reputed to be a world leader, gender equality and Adonis treats an area where America is notoriously weak, race relations. The ways in which the positive identities of the texts/narrators of *A Grave for New York* and *New York 80* are constructed are not without flaws, however. Neither text proposes new or creative ways in which to think about identity and both rely on highly problematic and essentialized notions of self and other in order to propose their arguments.

In conclusion I would like to propose that further exploration of the complex and changing relationships between the United States and the Arab world be pursued in relation to the literary production of Arab American poets and authors. Suheir Hammad's collection of poetry, *Born Palestinian Born*

Black, for example, also uses New York City as a lens through which identity is read, though in her work gender and race are refracted through an Arab American perspective. Rather than the position and perception of the outsider looking in at a foreign society and identifying with its most disadvantaged people, Hammad recasts the concept to assert both an American and an Arab identity for her poetry. She does this by aligning herself not only with African Americans but also Latinos and 'New Yorkers.' Thus, rather than New York representing United States and its hegemony in the world, so that a politically committed Arab must feel excluded and oppressed by it, Hammad subtly subverts this by privileging the experiences of the American dispossessed as part of the identity of New York itself. I would like to conclude by suggesting that a more detailed investigation of the poetry written by Suheir Hammad and other young Arab American writers will reveal suggestions for the articulation of a positive and inclusionary self-definition as both Arab and American.

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Notes

[1] Adunis *Qabr min ajl new york* in *Al-Athar al-kamila “sh‘ir” volume 2*. (Beirut: Dar al-Awda, 1971) [This poem is from the collection *Waqtin ma bayna al-ramad wa’l ward*]. Translated by Lena Jayyusi and Alan Brownjohn as ‘A Grave for New York’ in Salma Jayyusi, *Modern Arabic Poetry: An Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 137-151.

[2] Yusuf Idris, *New York 80* (Cairo: Maktabat masr n.d [1980?]). Scholars date the work to the early eighties, see Abdel-Malek, Elenany.

[3] Elenany's study on Idris's 'encounter with the west' explores the multiple ways in which this author has treated the 'east-west encounter' in a number of his works including *New York 80*.

[4] See Sadik Jalal al-'Azm's 'Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse.'

[5] This is also true of Arab travel accounts to Europe, which tend to have many similar themes. On Arab travellers to America see Kamal Abdel Malek's anthology of writings translated into English. The stories of Ahmad Mustafa 'An American Immigrant' and Zaki Khalid 'America Under the Microscope' reflect this preoccupation, in particular.

[6] Rashid Elenany pp. 37-38.

[7] Elenany gives many reasons for this, for example, that the protagonist is Egyptian, the same age as the author and a writer and the fact that both Idris and the narrator have blue/green eyes, which is unusual for Egyptians. See Elenany p. 38 and p. 53.

[8] There are a number of articles that deal specifically with the role of prostitutes in Arabic fiction, see for example two articles on Mahfouz by Cooke (1996) and Hartman (1997).

[9] All translations of the original Arabic are my own. The original Arabic quotations from *New York 80* and *A Grave for New York* are included as an appendix to this article.

[10] There is an interesting intertextual link between this comment and Naguib Mahfouz's 1961 novel *Al-Liss wa'l kilab*. Not only is the prostitute Nabawiyya one of the most interesting characters in the novel, the idea of people being hunted down and oppressed by the powers that be is represented again here by dogs.

[11] See the introduction to *Orientalism*, especially pp. 5-6.

[12] While this is most obviously a condemnation of New York specifically and America more generally, it could also be read as an indictment of Sadat and the changes happening in Egypt under his rule. Though there is no explicit critique of Egypt, his condemnation of the American other and the greed that a materialist, capitalist system engenders raises this as a possible interpretation.

[13] See for example, *Al-Thabit wa'l-mutahawwil* and *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*

[14] In quoting from Adonis's poem, I first list the page of the translation and then that of the original text. All translations are from the Jayyusi anthology.

[15] It should also be noted in this pan-Arab context that this poem was originally published in a collection of poetry, *Waqt bayna al ramaal wa'l ward*, dedicated to Gamal Abdel Nasser, perhaps the most visible symbol of Arab nationalism, and also known for his support of Third World solidarity and, more specifically, ties between Africa and Asia.

[16] This recalls the Léopold Sédar Senghor well known poem, 'À New York' which is introduced with the words, 'for a Jazz orchestra: solo trumpet'. Many of the ideas expressed by Senghor are recalled in the poem by Adonis, though the mood of Senghor's poem is more uplifting and oriented toward re-claiming New York as an African American space. See Senghor pp. 78-79.

[17] Azm groups him with other 'Islamanic' thinkers who see an unchanging Islam as something inherently 'eastern' as opposed to the technological west. See pp. 23-24 for his discussion of Adonis.