CHAPTER 4

The Proletarian Revolution That Never Was

Idris ‘Ali’s Nubian Perspective

“Habibak ili tihibuh wa law kan ‘abd Nubi.”
Your true love is the one you’d love even if he were a Nubian slave.
—Egyptian Proverb

National unity and the temporary effacement of difference were essential in the struggle against colonialism. In the aftermath of independence both are a matter of decision, of unforced volition . . . The husk of nationalism withers, but what it reveals is not Fanon’s “social consciousness” bountifully emerging “on the day that independence is proclaimed”, but rather, a polity disfigured and traumatized.
—Robert Spencer, “‘The Zone of Occult Instability’”¹

Introduction

To recap briefly, Chapter 1 established how the project of modernity (under Khedive Isma’il and later under the British) was inscribed in the space of downtown as an act of staging the modern. The intended spectator and subject of this staging was the Egyptian class of effendis, an upwardly mobile segment of the population who initially served as a kind of comprador middle class for the British. Chapter 2 mapped the way in which the Egyptian and foreign elite controlled this modern space only to have it destroyed (at least partially) in the fires of 1952 and later appropriated and Egyptianized under Gamal Abdel Nasser. In ‘Ashur’s novel, the space of the downtown becomes the primary site of social contest, exemplified by the fires and the anticolonial
demonstrations in the 1950s. Later this same district would bear the traces of an American neoimperial presence in the city. Her return to this space, I argue, is an attempt to retrace the violence of Egypt’s colonial past and recover the collective sense of optimism Egyptians felt with the promise of the nationalist movement. Through a reading of Khayri Shalabi’s *Salih Hisa*, Chapter 3 suggests the way in which the popular district of Ma’ruf served as the site of an alternative and parallel modernity alongside that of the official cultural establishment in Wust al-Balad. Shalabi’s novel critiques the notion of an official definition of the modern to suggest ways in which the rich cadences of the vernacular and particular long-standing traditions of Egypt’s urban underclasses offer us indigenous forms of the modern well worthy of examination.

This chapter examines the novel *Taht Khatt al-Faqr* (Under the Poverty Line; 2005) by the Nubian writer, Idris ‘Ali (translated into English by Elliott Colla as *Poor*, 2007). One of the most severe attacks on the nationalist project, this novel describes the barbaric underside of Cairo during roughly the same period in which Radwa ‘Ashur’s novel takes place. Unlike her narrator, who lives in the city center, Idris ‘Ali’s protagonist (his fictional double) migrates to the city following the flooding of his village after the construction of the Aswan High Dam. He lives with his father in the popular neighborhood of Bulaq and finds odd jobs in Wust al-Balad. The downtown here comes to represent all that is denied those of the underclasses, most of whom live in poor neighborhoods on the fringes of the city center. In this regard, we may read this novel as a direct response to Shalabi’s celebration of the life of the underclasses in Hayy Ma’ruf. Unlike Salih, whose way of life stands as a corrective to the bourgeois values of the liberal intelligentsia, here, Idris ‘Ali outrightly criticizes the liberal establishment following the 1952 revolution not only for denying the mass displacement of thousands of Nubians but also for not decrying the conditions under which the popular classes live. If indeed the nationalist movement took up the banner of the project of modernity and promised another form of utopian social modernity, for ‘Ali’s protagonist, postrevolution Cairo ended the tyranny of one ruling class only to replace it with the tyranny of another. Nasser’s populist platform fails to radically alter ‘Ali’s life, and in fact, the completion of the Aswan High Dam—the ultimate symbol of Nasser’s modernization program—brings about the flooding and complete obliteration of the villages of Nubia. Here, Cairo comes to represent a world where social hierarchy is in every way inscribed in space. The neighborhood of Bulaq is not presented as a comforting site of nostalgia (recall Denning’s ghetto pastoral) or the site of an alternatively modern, yet rural way of life, with a unique local culture, but rather it is described as a wretched space of squalor, crowdedness, and desperation. In contrast, downtown for the Nubian migrant represents a space of arrival—a space of promise, and most of all, a space of work and wages. The reality of life