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Latter-day Levantinism, or “Polypolis” in the Libretti of Bernard de Zogheb

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Spending a few days in Rome in 1957 as part of his annual trip to Europe, Bernard de Zogheb noted in his diary: “I went to mass at the Greek Catholic church round the corner: Saint Athanase. I wondered how many people in the congregation were Levantines.”¹ (see fig. 1) The reference to Levantines, though of a piece with some of the constituents of Greek Catholicism, is far from a random reflection prompted by the occasion. Levantinism, I would wager, was central to the sensibility and self-perception of this artist and librettist – that and his city, Alexandria. Whereas identification with one’s city, especially one as freighted with mythological and literary associations as Alexandria, is not uncommon, identification with Levantinism would seem to be less obvious. Geographically speaking, Alexandria is not located in the Levant, a term associated with the East Mediterranean. Warranted, perhaps, by de Zogheb’s descent from a family, long resident in Alexandria, of predominantly Syro-Lebanese origin? But would that not make him *shami*, the Egyptian Arabic term for one who hails from the Arab East Mediterranean? And what if one recalls the colonial genealogy of the adjective “Levantine,” and the fact that the borrowing “*lifantini*”² barely exists in Arabic, unlike the loan word from cosmopolitan, “*kuzmubulitani*”? What would be the connection between identifying as Levantine and Alexandria’s enduring association with cosmopolitanism? How do such issues play out in de Zogheb’s libretti, most of which remain unpublished, written in pidginized Italian?

The surviving corpus of ten libretti was written between the 1940s and 1990s, against the backdrop of the dissolution of empire in the eastern and southern Mediterranean and the postcolonial period. The Alexandrian cosmopolitanism of de Zogheb’s immediate formation, I argue, was the product of a Eurocentric discourse that precariously perched it between “quasi” and “pseudo,” multiply Europeanizing the city’s heterogeneity while ambivalently placing it under the sign of “Levantine” to impute a shifty derivativeness. Born to the manner of an Alexandrian-Levantine elite that would lose ground, the librettist’s grappling with that formation gained complexity from his queer orientation. The performativity of the libretti, as the discussion demonstrates, is instantiated in a parodic Camp reclamation of verbal mongrelization and gilded mores. In this sense, the libretti undertake a dual process of self-actualization, of homoeroticism and an upper-crust Alexandrian-Levantine cosmopolitanism. But a reading of four libretti that represent signal points in de Zogheb’s operatic output reveals the limitations of this aesthetic project. The anti-essentialism that valorizes the hybridity of the Levantines to bring it in line with a queer sensibility falls short of including other ethnicities and less privileged classes. The libretti’s extraordinary exploits of pastiche and macaronics ultimately betray an undertow of interpellation that prevents them from fully coming to terms with the survival of colonial tropes of Levantinism in a Mediterranean reinscribed in terms of the North and the South.

¹ Bernard de Zogheb, diary, entry of November 3, 1957, in English. De Zogheb papers, Centre d’Études Alexandrines; all material in this center will be hereafter cited as CEAlex.

² The only example of that usage in Arabic I know of is by Yusuf Idris in which he associates it with fraudulence; see his “Nahwa Masrah Misri,” a set of articles first published in 1964, reprinted in Yusuf Idris, *al-Farafir* (Cairo: Maktabat Gharib, 1977), 23. The same text, 24, contains one of the earlier instances in Arabic of the loan word *kuzmubulitaniyya* (cosmopolitanism), which has gained currency in recent years; on this see Hala Halim, “The Alexandria Archive: An Archaeology of Alexandrian Cosmopolitanism,” (PhD dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2004), 295.

There are various speculations about the etymology of “Levantine,” one of which suggests that it was coined in the sixteenth century by the French, who are said to have derived it from “*soleil levant*” (rising sun). In any case, the ethnicities the term covered changed over time from European traders resident in the Levant, to Westernized bourgeois members of minorities including Syro-Lebanese Christians, Sephardic Jews, Maltese, Cypriots, Armenians, and Greeks living in the East Mediterranean and involved in Ottoman trade with the West. But the colonial designation “Levantine” gradually acquired the pejorative connotations of a mercenary person “whose business dealings were ethically tainted.”³ Indeed, I would cite Lord Cromer, British Agent and Consul-General in Egypt in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who, in what may be an echo of Thomas B. Macaulay’s call for “a class of interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern,”⁴ turns to the Syrian Christians. “A high-class Syrian,” according to Cromer, “is an accomplished gentleman [. . .] He can understand why the European does what he does [. . .] It may be said with truth that he really is civilized. In this respect, he is probably superior, not only to the Copt, but also to the Europeanized Egyptian, who is but often a mere mimic.”⁵ By contrast, he describes a “process of manufacturing Levantines,” namely their being “more or less Orientalized Europeans,” in the most acute cases “tainted with a remarkable degree of moral obliquity” seen in their exploitation of Egyptians.⁶ The distinction between the Levantines and the Syrians in his account rests on the perception that the former are self-serving whereas the latter can be induced to act in service of the British colonial authority. But the questionable wholesale amenability Cromer locates in the Syro-Lebanese, particularly the Christians, belongs to the broader colonial trope that generally goes under the self-same label of Levantinism, a form of ersatz hybrid of Middle Eastern and European values – often figured as a “dragoman”⁷ construed as a treacherous translator – whose suspect but hoped for complicity can then be endorsed with the label “cosmopolitan.”

Considered the “paradigm case of Middle Eastern cosmopolitanism,”⁸ Alexandria’s exemplariness in this respect does not arise, or not solely, from the multi-ethnic, multi-confessional, pan-Mediterranean, Arabo-Islamic, African heterogeneity that its space has supported. As I have argued elsewhere, what is at stake is a Eurocentric quasi-colonial discourse of cosmopolitanism that accrued in the modern period whether in many of the literary texts construed as canonical of Alexandria or in the larger portion of scholarship about the city. The discourse that I designate as “Alexandrian cosmopolitanism” resorts to a historiographic paradigm that associates the ethnically hybrid, polyglot composition of the city’s population in the modern period with that of Hellenistic Alexandria, whereby the modern city is cast as recapitulating its ancient “Golden Age.” Concomitant on this is an elision of Medieval, Islamic Alexandria as a moment of decline, an elision that is combined in some recent scholarship and

³ I rely here on Jean-Marc R. Oppenheim, “Levantine,” in *Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East*, vol. 3, ed. Reeva Simon et al. (New York: Macmillan, 1996), 1098-1100; quotation from 1099. For an Italian etymology of the word, see the title essay in Bernard Lewis’ *From Babel to Dragomans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 25. Despite certain ideological issues with this essay, its discussion of etymology and the dragoman figure is useful.

⁴ Quotation from Macaulay in Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 87.

⁵ Evelyn Baring (Earl of Cromer), *Modern Egypt*, vol. 2 (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 218.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁷ See Lewis’ *From Babel to Dragomans*, 25-30.

⁸ Sami Zubaida, “Cosmopolitanism and the Middle East,” in *Cosmopolitanism, Identity and Authenticity in the Middle East*, ed. Roel Meijer (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999), 26. I abridge here an extended argument I make about Alexandrian cosmopolitanism in “The Alexandria Archive.”

memoirs with the omission of an Egyptian Alexandria, specifically the post-Suez, decolonized city seen as fallen prey to a chauvinistic nationalism. Alexandria-as-cosmopolis depended on an “invented tradition”⁹ – one that enlisted the Greeks of modern Alexandria, the largest foreign community in the city, to conjoin the Hellenistic period with the modern – consolidated by a whole range of motifs.¹⁰ For example, the guidebook written by Evaristo Breccia, one of a series of Italian directors of the Graeco-Roman Museum of Alexandria in the early twentieth century, reactivates in its title, *Alexandrea ad Aegyptum*, the epithet applied to the city in antiquity that depicts it as adjacent to Egypt (and adrift towards Europe). The book speaks of the “resucitat[ion]” of the town whereby in view of “the elements and nationalities that compose [the city], it is true to say, *mutatis mutandis*, that the conditions of the Graeco-Roman epoch are closely paralleled; once more Alexandria can be defined as a cosmopolitan city.”¹¹ Yet, in this Hellenizing cosmopolitanism the adjective “Levantine” was also allocated the city to indicate a “colonial mimicry [as] the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” that could turn into menace.¹²

By the time Bernard de Zogheb (1924-1999) was born, that colonially-conceived “Levant” was a setting sun, even as the fortunes of his family were on the wane. A Greek Catholic family who originated in Damascus, the Zoghebs are thought to have settled in Egypt in the early nineteenth century, an ancestor, it is speculated, having worked with the French during the Napoleonic occupation.¹³ Having prospered in Alexandria, they acquired the title of count from

⁹ See Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

¹⁰ For a distillation of these motifs, see Hala Halim, “Forster in Alexandria: Gender and Genre in Narrating Colonial Cosmopolitanism,” *Hawwa* 4:2-3 (2006): 240-43.

¹¹ Evaristo Breccia, *Alexandrea ad Aegyptum* (Bergamo: Istituto Italiano d’Arti Grafiche, 1922), viii and 1. This book was first published in Italian in 1914.

¹² Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 86. I cite Cromer and adduce Bhabha to make these points about Levantinism with relevance to Alexandria in a chapter on Lawrence Durrell in my 2004 “Alexandria Archive”; see specifically 237-42 and 288. See also Gil Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition: Jews, Arabs, and the Limits of Separatist Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 44-72. Her book and Ammiel Alcalay’s *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) have deployed “Levantinism” to address Arab-Israeli issues.

¹³ For the outlines of Bernard de Zogheb’s life, I have drawn extensively on my profile of the librettist, “Bernard de Zogheb: Waiting for the Zervudachis,” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, May 2-8, 1996. A slightly abridged version of this article was reprinted under the same title in *Mediterraneans* 8-9 (1996): 374-79. All subsequent references to the article will be to the *Ahram Weekly* version. See also Hala Halim, “Against the Dying of the Light,” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, August 26-September 1, 1999. This obituary for the librettist is available online at <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/1999/444/cu4.htm>. For material that was not included in the profile, I also draw on my recorded interviews with de Zogheb in March 1996. Prior to writing the profile, I had interviewed de Zogheb in the first of a series of articles I wrote between 1995 and 1998 in *Al-Ahram Weekly* in an effort to save from demolition the mansion formerly owned by an Italian-Jewish family, the Ambrons, in Alexandria, the top story of which Lawrence Durrell had lived in, and a small villa in the garden, originally built as an atelier for Amelia Ambron, in which Egyptian artist Effat Nagui resided for the last thirty years of her life. In the course of investigating the cultural and architectural history associated with the houses as well as Durrell’s residence in Alexandria (including material on the Alexandrian artist Clea Badaro, one of the sources for the Clea of the *Alexandria Quartet*, interviews with Paul Gotch, Durrell’s roommate in the Alexandria years, and with the novelist’s Alexandrian second wife, Eve Durrell), I had interviewed de Zogheb about the Ambrons – including their daughter Gilda (mentioned twice in the *Quartet*, as I noted) and son Emilio, both artists – and also published a reproduction of a portrait by Amelia Ambron of Princess Emina Halim that was part of the librettist’s collection. See Hala Halim, “Raising the Roof,” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 31 August-6 September 1995; the last of this series of articles, “A Poet in the Turret, Serpents in the Garden,” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 23-29 July 1998 is available online: <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/1998/387/fe2.htm>. It

the king of Sardinia, and dabbled in artistic patronage. Although Bernard's immediate family was to lose its wealth over time, its status and activities in Alexandria would remain untouched, his father Georges de Zogheb co-authoring and acting in revues in French, the lingua franca of the city's elite.¹⁴ Mostly an autodidact who kept meticulous lists of books read and films and plays watched, Bernard de Zogheb (see fig. 2) received art lessons in Alexandria from a student of André Lhote's and would later give up oil painting in favor of watercolors – mainly Mediterranean cityscapes and landscapes of Egypt, Italy, Greece, France, and England – apparently regarding his art as a useful craft that could tide him over when his finances were in shambles.¹⁵ In the 1950s he also contributed society columns and satirical feature articles to the Alexandrian weekly publication *La Réforme Illustrée*, employing his draftsmanship, talent at collage, and skill at “faction.”¹⁶ In 1960, de Zogheb left Egypt for what would turn out to be

was subsequently that Michael Haag wrote about this material in his *Alexandria: City of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

¹⁴ On the Zoghebs' title, see Halim, “Bernard de Zogheb” and Christian Ayoub Sinano, “Levant,” in *Dictionnaire du Snobisme*, ed. Philippe Jullian (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1958), 109. Concerning the librettist's family's loss of fortune, I rely on Olry, in interview, Paris, 10 January 2009; see also Halim, “Against the dying of the light.” For revues by the librettist's father, see Mario Lumbroso and Georges de Zogheb, *De Revue en Revue* (Alexandria: Société de Publications Egyptiennes, 1915), presented in Alexandria on 25 September 1915. SO collection. Two other typescripts of libretti were in the Georges de Zogheb revues folder currently in SO collection, neither of which has a title or dramatis personae page, though both carry notes in Bernard de Zogheb's handwriting, suggesting that one was held in Alexandria, possibly in the 1950s, while the other may have been performed in the late 1940s or early '50s, no venue given. The collection of Jacky Lumbroso Nimr – Mario Lumbroso's daughter, and a close friend of Bernard de Zogheb's – includes a program for a revue entitled *Galette et Gratin*, performed in Alexandria on 24 November 1917, in which Georges de Zogheb doubled in several roles, and a libretto entitled *La Revue des Astres*, authored by “XYZ” (Alexandria: L. Schuler, 1912), carrying the handwritten note “Chez Mme Isabelle Michala par Ziquet [Georges de Zogheb] et les Lumbroso.” Jacky Lumbroso Nimr collection.

On the Zogheb's origins, I have also referred to *The Zoghebs: An Alexandrian Saga*, edited by Mohamed Awad and Sahar Hamouda (Alexandria: Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 2005), which assembles three main texts: “Alexandria Memories,” by Patrice de Zogheb; “The Zogheb Saga,” a memoir by Janie Sinano Horwitz translated from the French by Carole Escoffry; and “From Abukir to Alamein,” an extended letter by Christian Ayoub Sinano to his friend Pierre Riches. See specifically “Alexandria Memories,” 16-17 and “From Abukir to Alamein,” 121. I obtained a copy of the unpublished French original of Horwitz's memoir, “La Saga Zogheb,” from Stéphane Olry. For convenience, subsequent citations will be to the given text referred to in this volume. All material in the Olry collection will be hereafter cited as “SO collection.”

¹⁵ See de Zogheb's comments on his art in Halim, “Bernard de Zogheb.” The CEAlex collection contains two of de Zogheb's list books one dating roughly from 1943 to 1973, the other from around 1982 to 1998. In his diary of 1957, at the end of each month, he draws a list of readings and films and plays watched. CEAlex. On his art teacher, Andrée Sasson, see the note by de Zogheb quoted in the “Préface” co-authored by Josiane Boulad-Ayoub to her husband's posthumously-published book, C. Ayoub Sinano, *Piera de Pola* (St Paul de Fenouillet: Editions de l'Agly, 1999), 9. Sasson had given these lessons to de Zogheb and his childhood friend, the artist Adrien de Menasce (1925-1995), the dedicatee of *Le Sorelle* with whom the librettist had initially started composing lyrical repartees before writing his first operetta. See Halim, “Bernard de Zogheb.” In his diary of 1954, entry of 17 February, de Zogheb says he spent the afternoon at the opening of an exhibition at the Atelier in which he, Sasson and de Menasce participated. CEAlex. According to the biographical note on de Zogheb in the catalogue for his exhibition “Il Mediterraneo di Bernard de Zogheb” (Italian Cultural Institute in Alexandria, 19 to 27 March 1997), he also studies art at Saint Martins in London. SO collection. On the profit he made from posters and cards, see, for example, de Zogheb, diary entry of 20 February 1954 and diary entries of 11 March and 10 and 11 July 1958. CEAlex. Also, de Zogheb to Christian Ayoub Sinano, 10 November [1948?], Christine Ayoub collection. All references to material in this collection will hereafter be cited as “CA collection.”

¹⁶ The SO collection comprises four photocopied texts, all in French and bylined by de Zogheb. Of these articles, all undated and with no note on place of publication, two mention the *Réforme* within the text. Like “Voyage à travers le temps...,” “A qui rêvent les jeunes filles,” another “reportage photographique et fantaisiste de Bernard de

more than two decades of living first in France where he worked in journalism and in tourism, an occupation he would continue with in Morocco and Greece through the 1970s and early '80s. He was to return to settle in Alexandria in the mid-1980s where he held exhibitions and wrote one last libretto, *La Vita Alessandrina*, which also remained unpublished – “Je serais posthume,” he would quip.¹⁷ In 1999, while in Paris, de Zogheb was diagnosed with a terminal illness;¹⁸ he decided to return to Alexandria where he died a few months later.

I will now dwell on three aspects of de Zogheb's biography – his languages, cultural identifications, and sexual orientation – that provide coordinates for situating my reading of his libretti. Growing up in Alexandria's polyglot environment, de Zogheb picked up several languages early in life, a fact so puzzling to British newcomers to Egypt, that he wrote an essay arguing that it is the language one swears – rather than dreams or thinks – in that should be considered one's mother tongue, in which case his would be English. By his own admission, he was trilingual, the other two languages being French and Italian. His weakest language was Arabic, his colloquial being Greek-inflected, and his knowledge of classical Arabic virtually non-existent, as was typical of a certain Europeanized “Levantine” background, as distinct from Arabophone Syro-Lebanese.¹⁹ To this, one should add “code-switching” – a term coined by linguists to refer to “the selection by bilinguals or multilinguals of forms from an embedded variety (or varieties) in utterances of a matrix variety during the same conversation” – which would amply manifest itself in his libretti.²⁰

Asked why he had left Egypt – his family's loss of fortune, after all, meant that they were untouched by the post-revolutionary pro-socialist nationalization and sequestration laws – de Zogheb had spoken of his desire for privacy and the lure of an image of Europe first conceived in childhood sojourns in France, where he had been born, then nurtured by his wartime contact with European servicemen and exiles.²¹ Indeed, the evidence from de Zogheb's pre-1960s diaries is

Zogheb,” which refers to *La Réforme Illustrée* within the text, follows the collage-sketch format to represent what each young woman would have liked to be – a tigress, a model, a surgeon, an opera singer, Venus, etc. “Recueilli dans un vieil album,” referring to *La Réforme Illustrée*, is a series of anonymous photographs of young girls with the dare that if the reader cannot identify at least five, he is not “un Alexandrin mondain” (Alexandrian socialite). “Vernissage” is undated and there is no reference within the text to the publication. However, de Zogheb's 1954 diary has several entries where he talks about this feature article; see entries of 2, 3, and 4 December. CEAlex. For a book commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of *La Réforme*, see *Le Livre d'Or du journal la Réforme 1895-1945*, ed. Victor Adm and R. Avellino (Alexandria: Société de Publications Egyptiennes, 1945). For an article on this volume, see Jean-Yves Tadié, “La vie culturelle francophone à Alexandrie (1895-1950) d'après *La Réforme*,” in *Alexandria ad Europam*, ed. Sophie Basch and Jean-Yves Empereur (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 2007), 147-152. The Syro-Lebanese Count Aziz de Saab had bought the newspaper in 1923 according to his daughter, a friend of de Zogheb's, then launched the Sunday edition of the newspaper, *La Réforme Illustrée*. Lucette de Saab in interview with the author, Alexandria, 8 November 2008.

¹⁷ As quoted by his friend Pierre Riches who oversaw the publication of the Italian edition of *Le Sorelle Brontë* (1968) and has since tried without success to publish the rest of the libretti in Italy. Riches in interview with the author, New York, 5 January 2009.

¹⁸ Olry, in interview with the author, Paris, 10 January 2009.

¹⁹ Bernard de Zogheb, “On Swearing,” unpublished essay, copy obtained by the author from the librettist in 1996. See also Halim “Bernard de Zogheb.” For two reference works on the Syro-Lebanese in Egypt, see Mas'ud Dahir, *al-Hijra al-Lubnaniya ila Misr: “Hijrat al-Shawam”* (Beirut: Manshurat al-Jami'a al-Lubnaniya, 1986) and Thomas Philipp, *The Syrians in Egypt 1725-1975* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1985). For biographies of members of the Lebanese community in the country, see Faris Yuwaqim, *Dhilal al-Arz fi Wadi al-Nil: Lubnaniyun fi Misr* (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 2009).

²⁰ See Carol Myers-Scotton, *Duelling Languages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 3.

²¹ Halim, “Bernard de Zogheb.” De Zogheb had worked as a civilian in the Royal Air Force in Alexandria during World War II.

largely of an enacted identification with an “Alexandria ad Aegyptum”; that is, Alexandria as detached from Egypt and as reminiscent of a desired Europe. Hence an *évolué*'s disdain for Egyptians at large (as distinct from the upper-class set he frequented), seen as an undifferentiated subaltern mass once referred to pejoratively, including by Westernized Arabs, by the label “les Arabes”;²² the holding up of monuments and vistas in his hometown against the yardstick of Italy;²³ the posing as a tourist in Egypt;²⁴ and a paranoia about what “the Egyptians” might do to “the European colony” in the wake of decolonization.²⁵ Yet again, a perusal of his letters from his long sojourn abroad indicates that whereas Europe would continue to be the object of de Zogheb's cultural desire, Alexandria would rise to the status of the capital of his universe – more so when he was finally based in Europe.²⁶

But the queer orientation, which was to have so much bearing on the aesthetics of de Zogheb's operettas, was no less part of why he left the country. The fact that it was his wish that his diaries be made available to scholars allows us to touch on this issue for the purposes of the discussion of his texts.²⁷ It would also seem that the fact of being gay in de Zogheb's generation and his background was not discussed, an aspect of the librettist's that his contemporaries would refer to as “a difficult personality” or by saying “Bernard, being the way he was. . .”²⁸ The euphemisms and the known but disavowed are symptomatic of the “phenomenon of the ‘open secret’ [which] does not, as one might think, bring about the collapse of those binarisms [of ‘private/public, inside/outside, subject/object’] and their ideological effects, but rather attests to their fantasmatic recovery.”²⁹ In terms of the Arab world, Joseph Massad has cogently argued that with the advent of colonial modernity, intellectuals in the region, albeit often writing in

²² Bernard de Zogheb, diary, entry of 27 March 1958. CEAlex. On that usage of “les Arabes,” see Hala Halim, “On being an Alexandrian,” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 11-17 April 2002; online at: <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/581/cu1.htm>. This point is made within a broader discussion of Alexandrian cosmopolitanism in relation to the Alexandrian filmmaker Youssef Chahine (1926-2008), likewise originally of Syro-Lebanese origin, whose work, in Arabic, thematically overlaps with and in some ways makes a nice contrast to de Zogheb's, for example in the quick satirical cameo of two Levantine ladies knitting on the beach, one of whom turns to the other and says: “Les Arabes à coté rient comme s'ils étaient chez eux” in the film *Iskindiriyya Lih?* (Alexandria Why? 1978). This article was originally a presentation given at the MLA convention in 2001 on a panel organized by Deborah Starr of Cornell University. In the course of a study of de Zogheb's 1954 diary, Dominique Gogny, in “Les notables alexandrins, 1924-1970: Des héritiers sans héritage” (*Mémoire pour l'obtention du D.E.A. d'histoire sociale, Université Paris-IV Sorbonne, 2003-2004*), 105, also speaks of the servants as “that other” who is “outside the field of representation.”

²³ Bernard de Zogheb, diary, entries of 26 September and 22 October 1954. CEAlex.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 5 and 31 October.

²⁵ Bernard de Zogheb, diary, entry of 20 July 1958. CEAlex. De Zogheb's use of colony – a term that, as Robert Ilbert has observed, designated nationality, in contradistinction to “community” which referred to religion – to describe the various European ethnicities is indicative. Robert Ilbert, “A Certain Sense of Citizenship,” in *Alexandria 1860-1960: The Brief Life of a Cosmopolitan Community*, ed. Robert Ilbert and Ilios Yannakakis, trans. Colin Clement (Alexandria: Harpocrates Publishing, 1997), 25.

²⁶ See, for example, Bernard de Zogheb to Christian Ayoub Sinano, undated but postmarked in Paris on 4 October 1961. CA collection.

²⁷ According to Jean-Yves Empereur, director of the Centre d'Études Alexandrines, it was de Zogheb's wish expressed shortly before his passing in 1999 that his diaries and papers be preserved in CEAlex, to be made accessible to researchers. In my recorded interviews with the librettist in 1996, he had spoken of how friends of his had advised him that, “When I died I should leave [the diaries] to the state or some library and not destroy” them, because they are “a record of everything that happened.”

²⁸ Olry commenting on these locutions in interview with the author, Paris, January 10, 2009.

²⁹ D. A. Miller, quoted in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 67.

resistance to Orientalism, hotly debated issues of sexual desire in relation to unquestioningly internalized “European notions of ‘civilization’ and ‘culture’ and their commensurate insertion in a social Darwinist idiom of ‘evolution,’” as well as “Victorianism,” which would include the borrowed terminology concerning “homosexuality,” now as a concept and discourse rather than as sexual practices.³⁰ This Victorianism is immediately evident in de Zogheb’s comment on his generation in Alexandria that “We were brought up to think that sex was a mortal sin,” and indeed, his own papers – particularly early ones that betray little interiority and may have been edited – yield an “epistemology of the closet” exercise, full of traces, lacunae, and occasional disclosures.³¹ Though they comprise references to gays and lesbians in his entourage, his own sexuality is only hinted at in early diaries, as in collated postcards showing male nude statues (see fig. 1).³²

While it would be misleading to suggest any narrative of a progressive “coming out” – in 1972 in Morocco, for example, he “was amused reflecting on how my new [British] employers would react if they knew that the last two times I danced like this were [. . .] in Malindi and at a queer club in London!” – there are somewhat more, and slightly more full-fledged, references to his queerness later.³³ It is no surprise that the two libretti by de Zogheb that engage homosexuality belong in the latter part of his corpus – *Stoningtonia* (1970) and *La Vita Alessandrina* (early to mid-1990s). (see and hear “Phaedra1.mp3 through “Phaedra4.mp3”: Recording of Bernard de Zogheb’s *Phaedra* as performed by the Little Players, courtesy of Jack Hagstrom) To account for this, one might suggest primarily his relative independence from his family, the experience of living abroad, the 1960s counter-culture that his letters suggest he was keen to immerse himself into³⁴ and, finally, having had his first libretto published as well as two other operettas staged. It was thanks to James Merrill, who had heard of the librettist from common friends and met him in Paris, that *Le Sorelle Brontë* was published in the United States (it would later be reprinted in Italy), and *Le Vacanze a Parigi* was performed in New York in 1969 by a puppet theatre, The Little Players (see fig. 3), which also put on his *Phaedra* in 1971.³⁵ Indeed, his 1970 *Stoningtonia*, dedicated “to the people of the States” and set in New England,

³⁰ Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 5 and 15; see also 30-31.

³¹ De Zogheb, quoted in Haag, *Alexandria*, 184. On the possible editing of his diaries, see de Zogheb, diary of 1957, entry of 30 August, where he says he has finished copying his diary of 1944 and plans to copy the 1945 one. See also de Zogheb’s diary, entry of 26 May 1958. CEALex. Gogny, in “Les notables alexandrins,” 99, remarks that there is hardly any introspection in the diaries. But for her, there has been no profound change in the diaries over the years; *ibid.*, 97.

³² For references to gay and lesbian acquaintances, see de Zogheb, diary, entries of 19 January, 15 April, and 3 June 1958. CEALex.

³³ De Zogheb, diary, entry of 1 March 1972. CEALex. A scrapbook the librettist kept in later years comprises suggestive images and an article about homophobia in Russia; see Sam Seibert, “Another Kind of Glasnost,” *Newsweek*, 26 October 1992. Bernard de Zogheb, scrapbook. SO collection.

³⁴ See, for example, the account of his 1962 trip to Spain, which has references to beat culture and a citation from “a nice beatnik poem by someone called Lawrence Ferlinghetti.” Account enclosed in a letter to Christian Ayoub Sinano, undated but postmarked, in Paris, 6 November 1962. CA collection.

³⁵ Halim, “Bernard de Zogheb.” *Phaedra* was adapted from Racine and written with five personae in mind in keeping with the number of puppets. Merrill had offered de Zogheb a grant from the Ingram Merrill Foundation to write more operettas. On the Little Players team, by Francis J. Peschka and W. Gordon Murdock, see John J. O’Conner, “TV: Hand-puppet Theatre on Cable,” *New York Times*, July 7, 1982. De Zogheb attended the premieres of the two Little Players productions of his libretti.

seems to have been written in response to Stonewall in that it explicitly tackles homophobia towards a sailor and a hunter who discuss male love and embrace.³⁶

De Zogheb seems to have left no expository essay concerning Alexandria and Levantinism, but he has said that he endorses the view put forward by the writer Christian Ayoub Sinano (1927-1989),³⁷ the librettist's cousin and confidant, in an entry on "Levant" he contributed to a *Dictionnaire du Snobisme* (1958). This opens with the valorizing image of a southern-eastern Mediterranean pan-city so intricate in its construction of pedigree and prestige as to be a veritable "labyrinth" to the non-indigenous snob. Designating this prototypical regional cosmopolis as "Polypolis," Ayoub Sinano endows it with a tongue-in-cheek etymology of variant names:

S'il n'a recours à un guide éclairé, s'il ne possède aussi une petite expérience et quatre grains de discernement, le jeune snob se rendant au Levant risque fort de se perdre dans les venelles du faux snobisme. Dans *Polypolis* (la Pelpel des Phéniciens et de la Bible, la Boulboul des Arabes et des Turcs, la Polople des Croisades) qui tient de Smyrne et d'Alexandrie, de Péra et de Salonique, de Beyrouth et de Damiette, du Caire et de Damas, de Jérusalem et de Sidon, d'Antioche et de Tripoli, d'Alep et de Césarée, d'où qu'il vienne il sera dépaysé, et de plus habiles que lui s'y sont égarés.

If he does not have recourse to a well-informed guide, and if he also lacks a bit of experience and a dash of discernment, the young snob who goes to the Levant runs a high risk of straying into the alleys of fake snobbery. In *Polypolis* (Pelpel of the Phoenicians and the Bible, Bulbul of the Arabs and the Turks, Polople of the Crusades), which has a likeness to Smyrna and Alexandria, to Pera and Salonika, to Beirut and Damietta, to Cairo and Damascus, to Jerusalem and Sidon, to Antioch and Tripoli, to Aleppo and Caesarea, wherever he comes from he will be disoriented, others much cannier than him having lost their way.³⁸

That the article's main concern is with the elite goes some way towards explaining its focus on a cosmopolitanism understood as the acquisition of European trappings of worldliness and privileged inter-mixing – "bit by bit, thanks to Progress, [Levantine] snobbery became Europeanized," reaching for titles and placing a high premium on marriages into the European aristocracy. On the other hand, there is a foreclosure in the assumption that other, non-elite forms of cosmopolitanism did not exist in the Mediterranean cities distilled in Polypolis. Ayoub Sinano's account also betrays curious silences lodged in the heart of its eloquence: he suggests

³⁶ I checked my translation of this libretto with Jennifer Newman. This libretto articulates an association between the all-male company of sailors and homosexuality. De Zogheb himself was wont to wear a sailor's suit. See Halim, "Against the Dying of the Light" and Paolo Terni, *Suite Alessandrina* (Milano: Tascabili Bompiani, 2008), 55. There are too many references to his wearing a sailor's suit in the librettist's diaries to be listed.

³⁷ In Halim, "Bernard de Zogheb," the librettist cites Ayoub Sinano's article in response to a question about Alexandrian cosmopolitanism in which I sounded him out on the "golden age" trope; he described Alexandria's modern period as "more an age of gilt bronze than gold." Other publications by Ayoub Sinano include the novel *Artagal* (Paris: Correa, 1958), the short story collection preceded by poems, *Pola de Péra suivi de Proses Pour Pola* (Paris: René Julliard, 1964), translated into English by Maud Burnett under the title *Pola de Pera* (Erin, Ontario: The Porcupine's Quill, 1989), and the posthumously-published *Piera de Pola*.

³⁸ Ayoub Sinano, "Levant," 108. All translations from this text mine.

that “[i]f he does not apply himself, the young snob would have a hard time distinguishing the Turks from the Arabs, and these from the Syrians, Lebanese, Palestinians, Jews, Copts, Greeks, Armenians, Maltese, and other Levantines.”³⁹ The series that ends with “and other Levantines” includes several Arab ethnicities, yet these are to be distinguished from the Arabs. Would the distinction then be religious, as in the Levantines being Christian and Jewish, with “Arabs” functioning as short-hand for “Muslims”? Although Arabs are to be distinguished from Turks – presumably on account of ethnic differences – they are both marked out from the series of Levantine groups, which would seem to endorse the religious criterion.

If Ayoub Sinano offers a riposte to Orientalist takes on Levantinism here, I would suggest that it is only “partial.” Mimicry, and amenability thereto – touchstones of Western constructions of Levantinism – are central to his account. While the historical condition of such mimicry, imperialism, is merely alluded to, if in an ironical euphemism, as “Progress,” his article “rehabilitates” that imitativeness by steering away from the morally suspect associations of Levantinism and bringing to the fore a complexity of identifications that predate Western imperialism. In describing the “habitus”⁴⁰ of the Levantines, he adumbrates a multicultural richness; and it is here that one would locate an “ennobling” of that mimicry in place of an impoverishment of identification often attributed to them. But the ethnic-elitist elisions surrounding “les Arabes” are the point where his construction of a regional cosmopolitanism gives way.⁴¹ As I read him, de Zogheb’s own articulation of an Alexandrian-Levantine sensibility – partly in dialogue with Ayoub Sinano’s take – is embedded within his libretti. Profoundly fascinated with the *soi-disant*, with things semiprecious and things seen-better-days, with intimations of immortality that prove illusory, with the frivolous taken to heart as much as the epochal reduced to miniature proportions,⁴² this man-about-town and Mediterranean flâneur’s contribution to Levantinism was a parodic Camp sensibility.

The particular convergence in de Zogheb of a superannuated aristocracy and a queer orientation enabled his construction of the Levantines’ extravagance and theatricality in Camp terms. As Susan Sontag declared in her 1964 “Notes on Camp,” of what would have been his generation with a partially closeted experience, “Aristocracy is a position vis-à-vis culture (as well as vis-à-vis power), and the history of Camp taste is part of the history of snob taste. But since no authentic aristocrats in the old sense exist today to sponsor special tastes, who is the bearer of this taste? Answer: an improvised self-elected class, mainly homosexuals, who constitute themselves as aristocrats of taste.”⁴³ Eminently heir on two genealogical counts to this taste, de Zogheb would have agreed that “[t]o perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role.” But to claim that he found in the posturing of Levantines an apt equivalent of Camp’s “metaphor of life as theatre” is not to suggest that the denizens of the East Mediterranean or the Syro-Lebanese at large are exemplary of Camp.⁴⁴ If a specific

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 169-226

⁴¹ Ayoub Sinano was to acknowledge, tacitly, such elisions; see his “From Abu Kir to Alamein,” 128.

⁴² I refer variously to: a collection of semiprecious stones and fossils de Zogheb kept in his Alexandria apartment; a framed photograph of the then-Prince Farouk, later to become the last king of Egypt, looking up from his desk at the moment when he was informed that his father, King Fouad had died; a framed collection of butterflies; and his paintings on bits of marble shored up from the sea in Greece, including one that carried a miniature representation of the Battle of Navarino. See Halim, “Bernard de Zogheb.”

⁴³ Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982), 117.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 109. Sontag also observes that “Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical,” 107.

cultural formation associated with a given upper-crust Levantine society could appeal to such a sensibility, this also owed something to de Zogheb's status as an insider; after all, other non-Levantine writers, such as Robert Liddell, queer but colonially sovereign, rather than elicit an amenability to Camp in the Levantines reacted with repulsed ambivalence.⁴⁵

The queer aestheticization of Levantine lifestyles and artifice responded to an implicit dual process of self-legitimization in de Zogheb. The mutual investments of cosmopolitanism and queerness in anti-essentialism came together in his libretti in the form of Alexandrian-Levantine Camp. His was a semi-closeted sensibility, self-actualizing by promoting "Camp taste, which definitely has something propagandistic about it [. . . being] a solvent of morality. It neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness."⁴⁶ In this sense, the form itself, the light opera, was a perfect match for, indeed part and parcel of, the queer aesthetics de Zogheb was adumbrating, one that was open to the beauty of bad taste and kitsch. In this, his libretti were doing their own "queering [of] the pitch," the title of an influential collection of essays advocating a "gay and lesbian musicology" that has variously demonstrated both the commonalities of music production and queer identities – central to which is performativity – and the "social control" equally at work in the terms "musicality" and "homosexuality."⁴⁷ While, as Philip Brett and Elizabeth Wood have argued, "the entire opera world (and to some extent that of musical comedy and other music-theatre genres) had long been a stage on which gays and lesbians could perform," "people in music all share to some extent the taint of the effeminate or feminized," hence traditional musicology's heteronormative closeting of the connection.⁴⁸ Brett and Wood identify Camp – in its capacity as a "self-marking performative style" – as one of "the most effective tactics" the music world had recourse to prior to the 1970s when "coming out" became the more effective act.⁴⁹ As a further parody of the high art of opera, offering an "opportunity [. . .] for a contrast between silly or extravagant content and rich form,"⁵⁰ to de Zogheb the operetta form was exceedingly conducive to the histrionic and outlandish. In its appropriateness for a Camp take on Polypolis, the light opera genre he opted for proffered the Levantines an insouciant *carte d'entrée* bearing an aesthetic rather than social insignia. Insouciant because it genially, non-judgmentally delighted in the foibles, excesses, and ostentation of Levantines, as much as it undercut the assumptions of good taste, purist language, and genre conventions of the European Mediterranean.

To speak of Polypolis in de Zogheb's libretti, then, is to speak of parody. Levantines and Levantinized Europeans populate his dramatis personae; but it is in the vein of camped up parody – of the ersatz mores dismissed in European representations – that they are reclaimed. The operettas also engage European high art's conventions and the canon's figureheads, but

⁴⁵ I am thinking here of Robert Liddell's novel *Unreal City* (London: Peter Owen, [1952] 1993), in which the central figure, inspired by the Alexandrian-Greek poet Constantine P. Cavafy, is seen as the one redeeming grace of an Alexandria cast as Caesarea and emphatically invoked as "Levantine," with the Western pejorative baggage of the term intact.

⁴⁶ Sontag, "Notes on Camp," 118.

⁴⁷ See Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood and Gary C. Thomas, eds., *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, second edition (New York: Routledge, 2006). I refer here specifically to Philip Brett's essay "Musicality, Essentialism, and the Closet," 9-26.

⁴⁸ Philip Brett and Elizabeth Wood, "Lesbian and Gay Music," in *Queering the Pitch*, 351-89; quotations from 359 and 356. This essay was added to the second edition.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 355.

⁵⁰ Sontag, "Notes on Camp," 107. That de Zogheb was attuned to exemplars of Camp is evidenced, among other things, in his *Salome*, adapted from Oscar Wilde.

these are likewise camped up and rendered burlesque. In these libretti illustrated with his faux-naïf drawings, the scores are culled from popular tunes, their recognizability enlisted either to inspire, amplify, or furnish ironic commentary on the sung words.⁵¹ Yet, it is the unrestrained performative play with language that lies at the heart of the parodic energy of the operettas. In their use of pidginized Italian, de Zogheb's texts can be read as a Camp celebration of the verbal mongrelization elsewhere denigrated in context of the Levantine dragoman and the middleman. Simultaneously, this celebration of pidginization forges a convivial appeal to a common language and a language of commonality.

One such Mediterranean common language of commonality existed, namely *Lingua Franca*, and the prefaces to the two editions of *Le Sorelle Brontë* do well to invoke it.⁵² As a "contact zone," Alexandria's polyglossia comprised *Lingua Franca* – the nineteenth-century Egyptian intellectual Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi, passing for the first time through Alexandria in 1826 en route to Paris, observed that "the majority of the commoners speak a species of Italian or the like" – but there were other partially hybridized languages such as "Franquette," in addition to colloquial Egyptian Arabic, with its quality of ingesting lexical items from several languages, including Italian.⁵³ That linguistic hybridity fascinated de Zogheb is attested in two consecutive entries in one of his "list books." The first is an etymological note about a word of uncertain origins:

COPT KYPT – OR GYPT – TWO THEORIES:
 1/ FROM THE GREEK FOR EGYPT: ΑΙΓΥΠΤΟΣ
 2/ FROM THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN NAME FOR MEMPHIS: HAKAPTAH.

Whether or not the Coptic language as such, which is a hybrid, interested de Zogheb is not known; in any case, the second entry comes from a contemporary context:

FRANCO-ARABIC USED IN ALGERIA
 "TOMBIL KRAZAT WAHID BIL TORNA

⁵¹ It was James Merrill who first commented, apropos of de Zogheb's use of tunes from popular songs, that "even where the melody is unknown, the song's title may provide a suggestive rubric." See James Merrill, "Foreword," in Bernard de Zogheb, *Le Sorelle Brontë* (New York: Fibor de Nagy Editions, 1963), n.p. This libretto was later reprinted in Italy; see Bernard de Zogheb, *Le Sorelle Brontë* (Milano: Adelphi Edizioni, 1968); I get the date of publication from the copyright page, though it is sometimes given as 1969. Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent references to this libretto will be to the first American edition. The American poet's "Foreword" was later reprinted in James Merrill, *Recitative* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986), 166-168.

⁵² See Merrill, "Foreword," *Le Sorelle Brontë* (1963), n.p., and the short introduction, anonymous but reproducing some of the points in the American poet's "Foreword" to the 1963 edition of *Le Sorelle Brontë*, in the Milan (1968) edition, 7.

⁵³ I borrow "contact zone" from Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes* (London: Routledge, 1992), 6, who herself appropriates "contact" from linguists who apply it to the pidgins that come into being when speakers of different languages need to communicate during transactions. See Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi, *Takhlis al-Ibriz fi Talkhis Bariz* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Misriyya al-'Ama lil-Kitab, 1993), 97; translation mine. Likewise, Tahtawi's translator into English identifies this as *Lingua Franca*; see Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi, *An Imam in Paris*, trans. Daniel Newman (London: Saqi, 2004), 131. On "Franquette," see Horwitz, "The Zogheb Saga," 48-49. For a source on Italian words in Arabic, see Socrates Spiro, *Note on the Italian Words in the Modern Spoken Arabic of Egypt* (Cairo: Al Mokattam Printing Office, 1904). On *Lingua Franca*, see Henry and Renée Kahane and Andreas Tietze, *The Lingua Franca in the Levant: Turkish Nautical Terms of Italian and Greek Origin* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1958) and Keith Whinnom, "Lingua Franca: Historical Problems," in *Pidgin and Creole Linguistics*, ed. Albert Valdman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 295-310.

WA DRASSOULOU BROUSS BIRBAL”
(L’AUTOMOBILE A ÉCRASÉ
QUELQU’UN AU TOURNANT,
ET ON LUI A DRESSÉ UN PROCES VERBAL)
(FROM ANNA BAJOCCHI)⁵⁴

With its Arabizations redolent of the contact zone and not far removed from the sorts of verbal exploits de Zogheb would perform in his libretti, one can see why such a reported nugget was logged in.⁵⁵ If others, such as Molière in *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, comprised a speech in Lingua Franca in their texts, “it was a macaronic joke fit for the mouths of comic characters,”⁵⁶ de Zogheb would produce something of a parallel pidgin for a wider range of purposes. In writing his libretti in “kitchen Italian,” de Zogheb, rather than merely making a virtue of necessity – an imperfect knowledge of the language – seems to have been experimenting with the production of a sort of lingua franca with Italian as matrix. Introducing an *a cappella* performance he gave of *La Vita Alessandrina*, de Zogheb commented that “j’écris les libretti des ces opéras en italien, parce que pour moi l’opéra n’existe qu’en italien, et sur des thèmes un peu inventés, très, très imaginatifs. . .”⁵⁷ Still, the question begs to be asked why specifically Italian for operettas, rather than opera.

A Syro-Lebanese adapting something from Italian operatic tradition for very different purposes was hardly unprecedented in Egypt. For its part, the Italian community in modern Alexandria – the second largest foreign one in the city – enjoyed performance arts by Italian visiting, later sometimes local, troupes.⁵⁸ Apart from a long history of indigenous dramatic performances in Egypt, the emergence of modern theatre, as well as more obviously opera, was a European-inflected process in the first half of the nineteenth century before Egyptian and Syro-Lebanese dramatists and directors would forge an Arabic theatre. Against the backdrop of

⁵⁴ Bernard de Zogheb, list notebook, c. 1982-1998. CEALex.

⁵⁵ See also the playful panegyric de Zogheb wrote, in the pidginized colloquial Arabic of a foreigner, to his Alexandrian friend Josephine Wissa, “Poem to Josephine,” dated December 1982: “Iza t’rouh fil Midan Attarine / Fen fi koulou el setat el Helwine / – ou Kaman fil Manchia / Mafiche zai Hiya – / El Helwa Madame Josephine....” De Zogheb, list notebook, c. 1982-1998. CEALex.

⁵⁶ George Lang, “The Literary Settings of Lingua Franca (1300-1830),” *Neophilologus* 76:1 (1992): 66. On survivals of Lingua Franca in theatre circles in England, see Ian Hancock, “Remnants of the Lingua Franca in Britain,” *The USF Quarterly* XI:3-4 (1973): 35-36.

⁵⁷ Bernard de Zogheb, introducing his performance sung *a cappella* of *La Vita Alessandrina* in a recording made in 1998 by Stéphane Olry and Jan Vromman, linked to this article. There may be some variations between the libretto as performed and the written text.

⁵⁸ On the Italian population, see Robert Ilbert, *Alexandrie 1830-1930*, vol. 2 (Cairo: Institut Français d’Archéologie Orientale, 1996), 616. On Italians in Alexandrian archaeology and as directors of the city’s Graeco-Roman Museum, see Donald M. Reid, *Whose Pharaohs? Archaeology, Museums, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 151-52; 161. For a general article on the community, see Anouchka Lazarev, “Italians, Italianity and Fascism,” in *Alexandria 1860-1960: The Brief Life of a Cosmopolitan Community*, 72-88. On Italian literature in Egypt, see Lucia Re, “Alexandria Revisited: Colonialism and the Egyptian Works of Enrico Pea and Giuseppe Ungaretti,” in *A Place in the Sun*, ed. Patrizia Palumbo (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 163-196. On Italian architects in Egypt, see several essays in *Le Caire-Alexandrie. Architectures européennes 1850-1950*, ed. Mercedes Volait (Cairo: Centre d’Études et de Documentation Économique, Juridique et Sociale, 2001), including Simonetta Ciranna, “Italian Architects and Holy Space in Egypt,” 49-56, and Mohamed Awad and Cristina Pallini, “The Italianisation of Alexandria: An Analogy of Practice,” 89-104. See also Mohamed Awad, *Italy in Alexandria: Influences on the Built Environment* (Alexandria: Alexandria Preservation Trust, 2008).

Napoleon's occupation of Egypt followed by the policies of modernization along Western lines adopted by Muhammad 'Ali Pasha and later in the century differently undertaken by his grandson Khedive Ismail, "it was the European theatre, performed in French or Italian, that was paramount and was given precedence by the authorities, not the nascent Arabic theatre."⁵⁹ The number of European theatres grew by the 1840s, "audiences [being] particularly fond of lighter works: operettas, comedies, farces and vaudevilles."⁶⁰ The "first Italian opera performance recorded in Alexandria" was "of Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'Amore*" in 1841, to be followed the next year during carnival time by "L. Ricci's *Chiara di Rosembergh*, Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, and Bellini's *I Puritani di Scozia*," with the Italian theatre becoming such a presence in the city that regulations, written in Italian, were issued by the Minister of Foreign Affairs placing it under the authorities' supervision.⁶¹ Among the Alexandrian theatres specializing in French and Italian performances from the 1860s onwards – the Zizinia, the Vittorio Alfieri, the Vittorio Emanuele, and the Teatro Rossini⁶² – the latter belonged to the Syro-Lebanese Comte Debbané, an ancestor of de Zogheb's on the maternal side.

Setting aside new Arabic plays sometimes drawing on indigenous texts such as *The Arabian Nights*, both Syro-Lebanese and Egyptian dramatists engaged European theatre and opera through translation and adaptation. While Ghislanzoni's libretto for Verdi's *Aida* was translated into Arabic for the use of the audience of the Italian performance in Cairo in 1871, the Lebanese dramatist Salim al-Naqqash who had moved to Egypt in 1876 brought a repertoire comprising three Arabic plays and five European texts he had adapted, including an *Aida* Arabized into an operetta set to popular tunes.⁶³ But it is arguably the career of the playwright Ya'qub (or James) Sannu' (1839-1912), an Egyptian Jew of half Italian origin at whose hands modern theatre in Egypt first began to take shape in the early 1870s, that illustrates a "contrapuntal" dialogue with Italian and French drama and lyrical theatre.⁶⁴ Sent as a teenager, through royal patronage, to study in Livorno (his father's native city) for two years where he is said to have written a few plays in Italian, he developed a further interest in drama while watching French and Italian theatrical and operatic performances in Cairo.⁶⁵ Having, by his own account, taught himself dramaturgy by reading Molière, Sheridan, and Goldoni (the latter apparently frequently performed by European troupes in Egypt), Sannu' "became keenly aware of the need to arouse the interest of the average, non-Westernized Egyptian in drama."⁶⁶ In the short period when his Cairene theatre was thriving before Khedive Ismail turned against him, Sannu' wrote and directed plays of social criticism mostly in colloquial Arabic, "the influence of Italian opera" seen in the emphasis on song as much as the imprint of the local pre-modern genre of shadow

⁵⁹ P. C. Sadgrove, *The Egyptian Theatre in the Nineteenth Century 1799-1882* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2007), 2.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 3; on the audiences, see 33 and 37.

⁶¹ Ibid., 37 and 40. See also the text of the "Regolamenti Teatrali" in ibid., 169-170. On seasonal Italian theatrical journals in nineteenth-century Alexandria, see 73-74.

⁶² Ibid., 44.

⁶³ Ibid., 64 and M. M. Badawi, *Early Arabic Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 53-56. Al-Naqqash was the nephew of the playwright Marun al-Naqqash, credited with having authored one of the first modern Arabic plays.

⁶⁴ A "contrapuntal reading," to borrow Edward Said's approach in *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, [1993] 1994), of this Arab engagement with Italian and French drama and lyrical theatre, particularly with reference to Said's critique of Verdi's *Aida*, 111-132, would merit a separate discussion unto itself.

⁶⁵ Badawi, 31-32; see also Sadgrove, 89-90.

⁶⁶ Badawi, 31. See also Sadgrove, 91.

theatre.⁶⁷ *Bursat Misr* (The Cairo Stock Exchange), a comedy critical of arranged marriage set in the milieu of bankers and speculators at the stock exchange, reproduces the Italian borrowings in their lingo, together with the Nubian-accented Arabic of a servant and the pidgin of a local European house-keeper. Another play, *al-Amira al-Iskandaraniyya* (The Alexandrian Princess), set in Alexandria and replete with the pidginized Arabic of foreigners and Frenchified Arabic of Egyptians emulating them, is a delightful comedy of manners critical of Westernization.⁶⁸ This latter play was adapted into Italian under the title of *L'Aristocratica Alessandrina* and was performed in Cairo and Alexandria, other plays by Sannu' in Italian having been put on in Genoa and in Italian theatres in Turkey.⁶⁹

Whatever resonances of that nineteenth-century Italian musical tradition in Egypt, no doubt given impetus by Verdi's *Aida*, may have reached de Zogheb through family accounts of the Teatro Rossini owned by his ancestor or otherwise, is not known. What can be ascertained is that while Italian musicians and actors continued to appear on Egyptian stages in the twentieth century, the theatres hosted performers from a range of ethnic backgrounds and dramatic and musical traditions. While Alexandria's illustrious Theatre Zizinia was demolished in 1907, to be replaced by the Theatre Muhammad 'Ali, there were other thriving venues such as a new Theatre Alhambra.⁷⁰ But it was the Theatre Zizinia that had witnessed the "époque d'or de l'opéra italien" – in which Giacomo Puccini attended a performance of his *Madama Butterfly* – in the words of Enrico Terni, the Alexandrian-Italian musician, whose second wife was the novelist Fausta Cialente. In a nostalgic *compte rendu* on the European musical scene in the city in the first half of the twentieth century, Terni laments what he sees as a lack of appreciation among Alexandrians for "la musique pure" (chamber and orchestral music), ascribing it, somewhat questionably, to a lack of an indigenous musical tradition, a lacuna which affects second-generation foreigners, hence, in his view, the fondness above all for opera.⁷¹

De Zogheb wrote an entire operetta, *Il ultimo giorno di Pompeii* (1978) in "the style of a Neapolitan *opéra comique*," using for tunes only Italian songs, and while never pretending to be musical himself,⁷² he did frequent musical milieus. In addition to friends who taught at the Conservatoire de Musique in Alexandria – he helped design the décor for a production of Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's opera *La servante maîtresse* (*La serva padrona*) at that venue⁷³ – he numbered among his friends several Italians involved in the music scene. These included the composer Piero Guarino, whose concerts he attended, as well as Enrico Terni's grandson the future musicologist Paolo.⁷⁴ (see fig. 1) In fact, some of the performances de Zogheb gave of *Le*

⁶⁷ Badawi, 52. On shadow theatre's influence on Sannu', see 'Ali al-Ra'i, *Masrah al-Sha'b* (Cairo: Dar Sharqiyat, 1993), 215-235.

⁶⁸ See Ya'qub Sannu', "Bursat Misr" and "al-Amira al-Iskanaraniyya," in *al-Masrah al-'Arabi: Dirasat wa Nusus*, ed. Muhammad Yusuf Najm, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dar al-Thaqafa, 1963), 1-33 and 133-71 respectively.

⁶⁹ Sadgrove, 118.

⁷⁰ See Jean-Athos, "Le Théâtre Alhambra," in *Le Livre d'Or du journal la Réforme 1895-1945*, 333.

⁷¹ Enrico Terni, "Un demi siècle de musique à Alexandrie," in *Le Livre d'Or du journal la Réforme 1895-1945*, 340.

⁷² As he himself acknowledges in the introductory words to his performance of *La Vita* recorded by Olry and Vromman. Quotation from de Zogheb in a recorded interview with the author, March 1996.

⁷³ Bernard de Zogheb, diary, entry of 6 February 1957. CEAlex.

⁷⁴ For one concert conducted by Piero Guarino that de Zogheb attended, see the librettist's diary, entry of 12 August 1954. CEAlex. There are too many references to Guarino, as well as his wife Fay, and Paolo Terni in the diaries to be cited. Suffice it to say that in 1957, de Zogheb helped Laura Terni with preparations for her brother Paolo's return from Italy, frequently saw Paolo while he was in Alexandria, and then stayed with him in Rome. De Zogheb, diary of 1957, entries of 6-16 August (pasted into the entry of 15 August is a press cutting in French, clearly from *La Réforme*, by de Zogheb, giving an account of a *Réforme* gala attended by the two Ternis), and, for the Rome entries,

Sorelle, attended by Alexandrians of different ethnic backgrounds, were hosted by Guarino (1955) and Terni (1955 and 1958).⁷⁵ In his memoir *Suite Alessandrina*, Terni pays tribute to de Zogheb as emblematic of Alexandria in the years following World War II and recalls having hosted at his home a performance by his Syro-Lebanese friend of *Le Sorelle*. Although he cites de Zogheb's avowed reason for the linguistic choice – “perché tutte le opere sono italiane” – Terni is initially bemused that Bernard who is neither musical nor particularly proficient in Italian has composed an opera in that language.⁷⁶ In any case, Terni describes de Zogheb's very successful “one-man-show” in which he made multiple use of his foulard and shifts in tone to match characters' speeches with airs then in vogue, and ascribes the language of the libretto to the “lingua franca” used among masters and servants in Alexandria.⁷⁷

The sources of loan words in de Zogheb's libretti seem to vary somewhat from one operetta to the other, in response undoubtedly to subject-matter, though variations in language were also bound to occur in a corpus produced between the 1940s and the 1990s. Given that only the first one has been published in book form, it is worth listing them: *Le Sorelle Brontë* (1947-1951); *Byrone* (1959-1962); *Le Vacanze a Parigi* (March 1962); *La Cava Delle Antiquita* (October 1965); *Phaedra* (April-May 1969); *Malmulla ou Il Canale* (1965-1970); *Stoningtonia* (9-12 March 1970); *Salome* (1971); *Il Ultimo Giorno di Pompeii* (July 1978); and *La Vita Alessandrina* (early to mid-1990s).⁷⁸ While making reference to other libretti, I shall focus on the first and the last ones, *Le Sorelle Brontë* and *La Vita Alessandrina*, as well as on two from the

31 October to 4 November. CEAlex. Guarino is mentioned in *Il Canale* in a lovers' duet that I quote later in this essay.

⁷⁵ See de Zogheb's list, from 1951 to 1982, giving venues, of “My Solo Performances of *Le Sorelle Brontë*,” List notebook, c. 1982-1998. CEAlex. Both Guarino and Terni attended performances de Zogheb gave at other friends' homes according to the same list.

⁷⁶ Terni, *Suite Alessandrina*, 56.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 58, in English in the original, and 57.

⁷⁸ De Zogheb provides the date of composition on the title page of each libretto in the Jack Hagstrom notebook. This manuscript, which was given by the librettist to Hagstrom in 1996, comprises the first nine libretti. I checked my copy of *Malmulla ou Il Canale* that I had obtained from the librettist in 1996 against the one in the Hagstrom notebook and they appear to be identical, hence all quotations from the first nine libretti are from that notebook, hereafter cited as “JH notebook,” with the exception of *Le Sorelle Brontë* which I cite from the first American edition, unless otherwise indicated. As for *La Vita Alessandrina*, which is not in JH notebook, I have relied on the copy I obtained from de Zogheb in 1996; this is typed and, unlike the other libretti, does not carry an illustration. Another copy of *La Vita* is in the SO collection; I checked my copy against this and they are identical. Both JH notebook and *La Vita* carry page numbers inserted by the librettist. It should be emphasized that the first nine libretti in JH notebook are all handwritten, and though mostly legible, certain words present difficulties. For convenience, I italicize the titles of the libretti, whether published or not. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from *Il Canale* are by Jennifer Newman. All translations from the rest of the libretti are by me. It is likely that *La Vita Alessandrina* was composed in the early to mid-1990s. In my recorded interviews with him in 1996, de Zogheb mentioned that he had first started adapting Cavafy poems into pidgin Italian and setting them to music when he was approached to submit something to a 60th birthday gift book for James Merrill with contributions by his friends. The book is J. D. McClatchy et al., *For James Merrill: A Birthday Tribute* (New York: Jordan Davies, 1986). De Zogheb contributed to this volume “Two Adaptations of Constantine Cavafy Poems Translated into (bad) Italian and Adapted to Popular Songs”: “Muri,” set to the tune of “Yesterday,” and “Preghiera,” set to the tune of “Morning Has Broken”; n. pag. These would be integrated, with some changes, into *La Vita Alessandrina*. It was after the American poet's death that de Zogheb completed this libretto, which is dedicated to the memory of Merrill and Robert Liddell, the former having died in 1995, the latter in 1992. In the recording of *La Vita* by Olry and Vromman, de Zogheb goes over part of this history. In the same recording, made in 1998, a year before he died, he mentions that he wrote ten libretti. But since most of the libretti have not been published, it is not inconceivable that an unknown one, begun after that recording was made, may come to light.

middle period, *Le Vacanze a Parigi* and *Malmulla ou Il Canale*. This selection, in addition to spanning signal points in de Zogheb's career as librettist, is also informed by thematic considerations.

One of the most basic forms of pidginization is loan words smuggled in with recourse to orthographic/phonetic tweaking. Here, the characteristic tactic is a phonetic rendition of foreignisms à l'italienne, as in “j” transcribed as “z” or “dz,” for instance in the French “jour” in “Andiamo presto / Che fa ancora dzour” when Anna Brontë decides to join her sister Emiglia on her outing “sopra il moor” in *Le Sorelle*.⁷⁹ This and similar transcriptions – such as “Dzen Ayre,” “Dzen Austin,” and “dzin”⁸⁰ (for gin) – are, of course, meant to generate a humor that would relish “impure” accents. Nor are the marked accents confined to Italian: consider the Greek-accented French of La Lupa, a gaudy, shop-lifting woman who barges into the titular *Cava Delle Antiquita* (Cavern of Antiques) in Athens with the greeting: “Khamon Talivou, mie signor?”⁸¹

Among other recurring techniques of embedding borrowings in the matrix language is their grammatical adjustment to Italian. Hence, when the courtesan La Pola in *Il Canale* seduces de Lesseps, he is led away “protestando molamente” (protesting feebly),⁸² the French adverb “mollement” being given a quasi-Italian ending. This technique seems to be at the base of two kinds of neologisms in the libretti. There are portmanteau words – Lewis Carroll-style, or perhaps à la James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* – composed of borrowings given a quasi-Italian morphology, as in the use “Cimanfesan” (a combination of the French “chemin faisant”) when Cavafy, in *La Vita*, is reciting his poem “Ithaca”: “sperare la strada sera lunga, / Con aventure Cimanfesan . . .” (wish that road may be long / with adventures on the way . . .).⁸³ If de Zogheb could translate his verbal play visually, as in a rebus-like triple pun on “mole” (see fig. 4), the libretti contain what may be described as typographical puns, dependent on an alternative phonetic transliteration of a word, acronym or phrase, as when the two American tourists in *Le Vacanze* are waxing lyrical about Paris to the effect that it's not true that its skies are grey, “Come dicono nel you essah” (as they say in the USA/you essah).⁸⁴

The more complex *jeux d'esprit* of the libretti are in part enabled by the tendency of grammatically Italianizing loan words. When, in *Le Sorelle*, Anna Brontë, disenchanted by scandals and misfortunes, decides to enter a monastery, she announces that “Vado io, entrare nel covento / Devro dimenticar le hauts di hurlo vento.”⁸⁵ In what she resolves to forget only the article “le,” the preposition “di” and the noun “vento” (wind) are immediately recognizable as Italian, while “hurlo” only *looks* Italian because of its ending and its reminiscence of the cognate “urlo” (to howl). What is at stake is a partially Italianized rendition of the French translation of

⁷⁹ De Zogheb, *Le Sorelle*, 4. The quoted words, from Anna's and Emiglia's speeches respectively mean “Let's go quickly / while it's still daytime” and “on the moor.” Properly-speaking, there are no foreignisms in the libretti's hybrid language, but I use the word as shorthand for non-Italian elements.

⁸⁰ De Zogheb, *Le Sorelle*, 3 and 17; 21; and 27, respectively.

⁸¹ De Zogheb, *La Cava Delle Antiquita*, JH notebook, 90.

⁸² De Zogheb, *Il Canale*, JH notebook, 119. My translation from *Il Canale*.

⁸³ De Zogheb, *La Vita*, 19. The librettist provides a footnote explaining the French origin of the expression. De Zogheb was acquainted with Lewis Carroll's work from an early age. His childhood sketchbook has a drawing of “Queen Alice.” SO collection. He later alludes to *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* in his 1972 diary, entry of 21 March, when, getting ready to fly to Morocco and anxious that his luggage may be overweight, he notes that “I shall be wearing 3 pairs of trousers, and 3 sweaters and a raincoat and shall look like Twiddledum and Twiddledee [sic] in the Tenniel illustrations in Alice!” The librettist was also familiar with James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, which he mentions reading in the entry of 26 July in his 1957 diary. CEALex.

⁸⁴ De Zogheb, *Le Vacanze*, JH notebook, 79.

⁸⁵ De Zogheb, *Le Sorelle*, 33.

Wuthering Heights, Les Hauts de Hurlevent.⁸⁶ There is at least one instance where what seems to be a loan word encodes a philological puzzle involving etymological play. When in *Il Canale* the Sultan of Turkey prostitutes his mistress, La Pola, to de Lesseps, her aunt Madame Marigoula Pacha harangues him, insisting that when she brought her niece to him “Lei era un birlante, non era un putan”⁸⁷ (“She was a birlante, she wasn’t a whore”). To the Italian-speaking reader/listener, “birlante” may register merely as a foreignism. But, as de Zogheb is likely to have known, it is actually an Egyptian colloquial Arabic loan word from the Italian “brillante”⁸⁸ (in both cases meaning diamond), often used of a woman to suggest a cross between “sterling character” and “a pearl among women.” “Birlante,” therefore, functions as a mirror image of what is called “false friends” – identical or very similar words in two languages that carry different denotations – being nothing less than a true kin, hiding behind a falsely foreign mask of reshuffled consonants.

Solving some of the linguistic riddles that the libretti present by thinking in terms of anagrams is one solution. Merrill seems to have considered it when writing the preface to the first edition of *Le Sorelle Brontë*. In a letter de Zogheb sent to Ayoub Sinano from Paris in 1962, he writes, “Today Jimmy [Merrill] sent me his preface of ‘Le sorelle Bronte’ for my approval before sending it to the publishers. It is beautiful, excepting for one great mistake. He identifies venti para as being a form of ‘paravent.’ I quickly wrote explaining about paras [. . .] I hope he gets it in time to stop the publication.”⁸⁹ Merrill clearly received the letter in time and wove in the information while apparently retaining his perceptive proposal, made parenthetically, for approaching textual conundrums: “(What is *venti para*? the Italian student will ask. It is in fact an old Turkish coin. Lacking such information, the Italian student could do worse than to think first of the French—in this case, *paravents*—so that later he will be able to fathom Carlotta’s *falsa cuccia* and Dickens’ *libro di chevetto*).”⁹⁰ If de Zogheb, rightly one would argue, seldom condescends to provide a gloss in a footnote,⁹¹ the strategy of overcoming cognitive dissonance by plunging headlong into an exercise of decoding puzzles as anagrams in other languages as groundwork for reading the texts translationally is a sound one.

As part of the translation work into Italian that the libretti undertake, idiomatic expressions rank high. Dickens’ comment in *Le Sorelle* that *Vanity Fair* is his “libro di chevetto”⁹² (*livre de chevet*, or bedside book) – comprising a French phrase translated verbatim (“libro di”) and what

⁸⁶ The Italian translation of this title is *Cime tempestose*. Myers-Scotton, in *Duelling Languages*, provides an extensive discussion of grammatical procedures in code-switching. I have not used any technical terms from her work as my interest is less to parse the linguistic patterns in code-switching as it is to address the aesthetics of pidginization in the libretti in service of the broader theme of a camped Levantinism. Likewise, my use of “pidgin” and “pidginization” would be construed by a linguist as loose; Myers-Scotton, for example, hypothesizes about the role of code-switching in the development of pidgins and creoles as distinct phenomena, see 226-227.

⁸⁷ De Zogheb, *Il Canale*, JH notebook, 119.

⁸⁸ El-Said Badawi and Martin Hinds, *Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic* (Beirut: Librarie du Liban, 1986), 69, confirms that the word derives from the Italian “brillante.” Birlanti and Birlanta were used in Egypt in the past as a woman’s first name. It may be suggested that this was a typo on de Zogheb’s part; he was no doubt aware of the Italian form of the word: in *Le Vacanze* – written in 1962 and hence earlier than *Il Canale* (1965-70) – the character called the Levantina is described as wearing too many “brillainte.” But, given that the image used by Madame Marigoula Pacha exists in Egyptian Arabic, it would be subliminally informed by the word’s usage in that language.

⁸⁹ Bernard de Zogheb to Christian Ayoub Sinano, undated but postmarked 6 November 1962. CA collection.

⁹⁰ Merrill, “Foreword,” *Le Sorelle Brontë*, n.p.

⁹¹ It is only in the late, typed *La Vita Alessandrina* that de Zogheb has inserted footnotes. The published versions of *Le Sorelle*, both the American and Italian, carry footnotes, but these, presumably, have been inserted by the editor.

⁹² De Zogheb, *Le Sorelle*, 19. See also Halim, “Bernard de Zogheb.”

is likely a compound word combining “chevet” (bedside) and the Italian “letto” (bed) – is not the only such instance. There is the little speech in *Le Sorelle* that Carlotta, laughing hysterically according to stage directions, makes when Dickens and Thackeray, there to meet her in London with editor MacMillione, are shocked by the scandalous accusations she exchanges with her siblings and decide to leave:

Andate, vai, vai, vai, vai, Thackeray,
Io non ho piu, piu, piu bisogna Lei,
Ni di tu Signor MacMillion,
Ni tu Signor Dickens–
Farò la mia billion,
Non conterò mie tsickens!⁹³

Dismissing the three men with the claim that she no longer needs them, Carlotta has recourse, amid megalomaniac assertions, to the idiomatic English expression about not counting one’s chickens, rendered in the characteristically code-switching part-translation, part-phonetically-adapted transliteration formula. The rhyme with “Dickens,” after all, could have been preserved if “chickens” had been rendered as is. The accented “tsickens” garners further hilarity in its rhymed conjunction with the great writer even as it echoes the Anglicism “billion” which likewise rhymes with – and, in an implicit mathematical pun, outbids – another name, “MacMillion.”

The Anglicisms in Carlotta’s speech are part and parcel of an aspect of pidginization best described as the internal code-switching of a given character, mimicking the interpenetration of his or her language and Italian. Another, if less frequent, aspect of pidginization is a sort of linguistic dialogism – to loosely invoke Mikhail Bakhtin, whom I shall return to later – not dialogue as such but the mutual corruptions, in dialogue, of a character’s speech by another’s code-switching. In other words, these are symbiotic slippages of foreignisms into one character’s speech that would properly belong to another character’s linguistic environment. The same Carlotta resorts to Gallicisms, paired with an Italian verb, when she says she would “shout from the rooftops” her love for and wish to marry Signor Hegez in Brussels, whose child she claims she is carrying: “... Signor Hegez lo sposerò, Signor Hegez lo amerò / Perche m’ha fatto un bambino, *sur les toits lo griderò!*”⁹⁴ One of the achievements of the libretti is their interweaving of both modes, the internal code-switching of a given character and the dialogic mutuality of code-switching, with aptly-chosen tunes that enhance them. Queen Victoria’s first words in *Il Canale*, addressed to Prince Consort Albert, are set to the tune of “Mein Lieber Augustin”: “Mein Lieber little Albertin’ / Albertin’ Albertin’ – / Son qui per far la Parlantin’ / Ecco mi qui.”⁹⁵ Before she segues into Italian, the opening lines of Queen Victoria’s speech comprise a word from her language, “little,” and a phrase from Albert’s own language that is taken from the German lyric with his name having been tweaked to echo “Augustin.” In such instances, regardless of whether the original lyric was patriotic, its tune is pressed into service of linguistic hybridity and a Camp effect.

⁹³ Ibid., 24. Her words are: “Leave, go, go, go, go, Thackeray / I don’t need you any, any, any more / Nor you, Mr. MacMillion / Nor you, Mr. Dickens / I’ll make my billion / I won’t count my chickens!”

⁹⁴ De Zogheb, *Le Sorelle*, 16; emphasis added.

⁹⁵ De Zogheb, *Il Canale*, JH notebook, 121. Her words, in Newman’s translation, read: “My dear little Albertin’ / Albertin’ Albertin’ – / I’m here to chat / Here I am.”

It is *Malmulla ou Il Canale* and *La Vita Alessandrina*, by virtue of their settings, Alexandria in the latter and Egypt, mainly, in the former (albeit with scenes in Turkey and England), that immediately come to mind as consummate examples of Alexandrian-Levantine Camp. But it would be a mistake to suggest that a camped up Polypolis is confined to these two libretti, not least because things Alexandrian explicitly or implicitly infuse the most far-flung settings in other libretti. Of course, at the most basic level, there is an assumption in the libretti, regardless of their setting, of an “insider” elite Alexandrian audience possibly identical to the society that read *La Réforme*. Indeed, the winks at such an audience sometimes draw on de Zogheb’s society-column strategies. In *Byrone*, for example, one comes across Farfallina Piha, “A fat Venetian Jewess,” as one of the dramatis personae and recalls that, in a previous incarnation, Piha was one of the characters de Zogheb had invented and regularly added to his *Réforme Illustrée* accounts of parties in Alexandria. In the same vein, compliments to Alexandrian acquaintances or digs at them are woven into the libretti in the most unlikely contexts.⁹⁶ In the published version of *Le Sorelle*, to take another example, the Brontë sisters meet a somewhat vulgar couple at their hotel in Brussels, Rosa and Giovanni S---; the use of the man’s initial would seem to have been an editorial decision probably intended to avoid libel, the footnote following the initial in both editions of the libretto explaining that this is a reference to “a wealthy family in Alexandria.”⁹⁷ Meanwhile, de Zogheb’s manuscript of the libretto continued to cite Giovanni’s surname, “Stagni,” an Alexandrian-Italian acquaintance of his.⁹⁸ The compliments to Alexandrian friends could be so subtle as to be recognizable only to their recipients. An entry in de Zogheb’s 1958 diary records that he had given his first performance in two years of *Le Sorelle* at the Ternis’ in honor of “the reverend father Pierre Riches”; fifty years later, the librettist’s Alexandrian friend recalled that the detail of Emiglia receiving the last sacrament from a priest had been added in tribute to his having entered the order.⁹⁹

At a second remove, the citations of Alexandrian names and cultural referents can be said to be a reflection of the latter-day moment in which the libretti were composed, the period immediately preceding and following decolonization. Not only was the first operetta – *Le Sorelle Brontë* (1947-1951) – written at the beginning of this sea change, de Zogheb himself would

⁹⁶ On Farfallina Piha, see Bernard de Zogheb, *Byrone*, JH notebook, 27: “UNA GROSSA EBREA VENEZIANA.” The librettist had mentioned Piha as one of his invented characters in the society columns he wrote for *La Réforme Illustrée* in Halim, “Bernard de Zogheb.” *La Vita*’s muse Anoleri is modeled, on a request for a role, on Anne O’Leary, then director of the American Cultural Centre in Alexandria. Halim, “Bernard de Zogheb.” The libretto *La Cava Delle Antiquita*, dedicated to Tony Parigory, is set in Athens to which de Zogheb’s old collaborator from *Réforme* days had relocated, and is likely inspired by Prigory’s new profession as antique dealer. In addition to having a character called Tony who owns the “Cava,” it also has two Alexandrian women characters, La Lupa and La Kiki. For information concerning Tony Parigory, I am indebted to Lucette de Saab, Alexandria, 8 November 2008. Merrill thanks “Mr. Tony Parigory of Athens” for help with the preparation of the libretto for publication in his “Foreword” to *Le Sorelle*, n.p.

⁹⁷ De Zogheb, *Le Sorelle*, 13. The Italian edition of *Le Sorelle*, 25, follows suit.

⁹⁸ De Zogheb, *Le Sorelle*, JH notebook, 12. Information on the Stagnis obtained from Jacky Lumbroso Nimr in interview with the author, Paris, 14 January 2009. Maddalena De Leo, in “Rediscovering *Le Sorelle Brontë*,” *Brontë Studies* 27:3 (2002): 241-46, observes in an endnote, 246, that “The presence of Rosa and Giovanni [. . .] is a device to introduce some Egyptian features in the work.” The article, while it refers to the libretto’s “blend of many regional dialects [. . .] definitely not for the purist,” 241, does not otherwise address the language, its focus being the changes introduced to the Brontës’ lives.

⁹⁹ Bernard de Zogheb, diary entry of 30 June 1958. CEAlex. Pierre Riches, in interview with the author, New York, 5 January 2009. Riches alludes to the inclusion of this detail in *Le Sorelle* in Gini Alhadeff, *The Sun at Midday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 65. In this memoir he is identified only as “Pierre” but has confirmed in interview that these references were to him.

compose all the rest, with the exception of *La Vita*, while living abroad. Consider the names of Alexandrian contemporaries of the librettist's in the lovers' duet between de Lesseps and his mistress La Malmulla, fictively projected about two centuries earlier and set to the tune of "It's You, It's You, It's You":

LESSEPS-

Non e Joyce Ades, ni Mika Vitiades,
E te, e te, e te –

MALMULLA-

Non e Marke Zervudachi, ni Costia Mitarachi –
E te, e te, e te –

LESSEPS-

Non e Mary Totah, ni Gloria Saporta,
Ne meno un de quelle vale mio bébé –

MALMULLA-

Non e Avellino, ni Piero Guarino –
Nessuno altro voi per me –

TUTTI DUE-

E te, e te, e te...

LESSEPS-

Non e Lilia Ralli, ne anche Jeanne Palli,
E te, e te, e te ...

MALMULLA-

Non e Mario Colucci, ni Jeannot Beneducci –
E te, e te, e te –

LESSEPS-

Non e Billy Christou, non e Dorothy Sistou,
Ne meno un de quelle e fata per me –

MALMULLA-

Non e Georges Mavridis, ni Pani Coumidis –

TUTTI DUE-

E te, e te, e te...¹⁰⁰

[LESSEPS: It's not Joyce Ades, nor Mika Vitiades, / It's you, it's you, it's you – /
MALMULLA: It's not Marke Zervudachi, nor Costia Mitarachi – / It's you, it's
you, it's you – / LESSEPS: It's not Mary Totah, nor Gloria Saporta, / Not even
one of them is worth my baby – / MALMULLA: It's not Avellino, nor Piero
Guarino – / None of them do I want for me – / BOTH: It's you, it's you, it's you...
/ LESSEPS: It's not Lilia Ralli, neither Jeanne Palli, / It's you, it's you, it's you ...
/ MALMULLA: It's not Mario Colucci, nor Jeannot Beneducci – / It's you, it's
you, it's you – / LESSEPS: It's not Billy Christou, it's not Dorothy Sistou, / Not
even one of them is made for me – / MALMULLA: It's not Georges Mavridis,
nor Pani Coumidis – / BOTH: It's you, it's you, it's you...]

¹⁰⁰ De Zogheb, *Il Canale*, JH notebook, 130.

In the years when de Zogheb was writing this libretto (1965-1970), most Alexandrians of the backgrounds summoned in these names – likely also chosen to attest to multiculturalism – had emigrated, as had his friend Molly Tuby, who inspired *La Malmulla* according to the dedication.¹⁰¹ In a sense, then, one function of the lovers' duet is an act of memorialization and a lyrical appeal to a polyglot, multiethnic Polypolitan society rendered diasporic. His friend Jacky Lumbroso Nimr who, after leaving Alexandria, lived for a while in Morocco, remembers getting together there with de Zogheb, "it must have been in 1972, he was wearing his Union Jack... and he was working for a company taking tourists around... And my daughter was about nine at the time, and she was laughing, laughing, laughing with Bernard doing all his operettas and singing."¹⁰² De Zogheb's diary entries about that reunion indicate that whereas he sang *Phaedra* which his friends enjoyed, it was certain arias from *Le Vacanze* and *Il Canale* that were most successful.¹⁰³

But such exercises, even as they addressed the dispersal of that society, also aesthetically reinscribed it in terms amenable to a queer sensibility while diffusing it in other cultural contexts, de Zogheb having eventually come to think of his audience as including Americans.¹⁰⁴ This is perhaps what Merrill was gesturing towards when he prefaced the first edition of *Le Sorelle* with the observation that:

The reader will search in vain for the gloomy, introspective Brontës of his literature class. In their place, three wild extroverts ride the familiar Mediterranean pendulum between the most lavish endearments and the coarsest recriminations. They are concerned with money, food, sex, and renown. It is what one had always suspected of great writers, and it is but a single strand in the web of truths that M. de Zogheb has woven.¹⁰⁵

In *Le Sorelle*, as seen also in the foregoing linguistic discussion, de Zogheb was putting to use the high canonicity of the Brontës' lives and works in order to throw further into relief his reworking of the story into the melodramatic and the outrageous. As in the hysterical speech by Carlotta cited above in which she dismisses Thackeray and Dickens, the reinscription of the story elicits a drag-like quality that parodically casts the perceived fixities of Victorian morality and literary value in Levantinized garb. Of the rest of his operatic texts, it is *La Vita*, being his last known libretto, that combines explicit references to queerness with an Alexandrian setting populated by Levantine dramatis personae.

¹⁰¹ For example, Mario Colucci was a close Alexandrian-Italian friend of the librettist's whom I met in London, to which had relocated, in 1997. Avellino was de Zogheb's boss at *La Réforme*. Molly Tuby, an Alexandrian friend of the librettist's who had moved to London, is often referred to in his diaries and letters. Additional information about the Alexandrian contemporaries of the librettist's cited in the duet obtained from Lucette de Saab.

¹⁰² Lumbroso Nimr in interview with the author, Paris, 14 January, 2009.

¹⁰³ Bernard de Zogheb, diary entries of 29 and 30 April 1972. CEA. Significantly, the two arias in question are "L'alakerda est de Gerda..." from *Il Canale* and "E ben, Prout!..." by the Levantina from *Le Vacanze*, ones that I read as theme tunes of Levantinism in its historically waxing and waning phases.

¹⁰⁴ *Stoningtonia* is dedicated to Americans, *Salome* to the librettist's American fans, and *Phaedra* to the Little Players team and the puppets. In interview with me in March 1996, de Zogheb mentioned that he had written an English version of *Phaedra*, since lost, for American consumption, and that Merrill had considered the text less successful.

¹⁰⁵ Merrill, "Foreword," *Le Sorelle*, n.p.

Long before de Zogheb based *La Vita Alessandrina* on the life of Cavafy, the Alexandrian-Greek poet had become an icon of sorts among his literary friends, constituting an intertextual connection between their writings. The life of the poet that the librettist drew on was *Cavafy: A Critical Biography* (1974), by the friend he had first met in 1940s Alexandria, Robert Liddell, dedicated “à Bernard de Zogheb et aux autres amis alexandrins,” these possibly including Ayoub Sinano whose insights into the social history of Alexandria the biographer acknowledges, the biography itself having been reviewed by Merrill.¹⁰⁶ In fact, the genesis of the libretto was two Cavafy poems de Zogheb had translated into Italian and set to a popular tune for *A Birthday Tribute* book Merrill’s friends had compiled for him. After the death of the American poet, the librettist completed *La Vita* and dedicated it to the memory of Merrill and Liddell both of whom were his most devoted admirers who gave him the incentive to write it.¹⁰⁷ It should be noted that there had been social connections between the Cavafys and the Zoghebs, long before the librettist was born, as well as the Debbanés (the librettist’s maternal family).¹⁰⁸ Stéphane Olry has made the valid observation that the librettist’s method of distributing his texts resembles the poet’s,¹⁰⁹ and one could add autobiographical parallels such as doting mother figures and impoverishment. But it is above all in the fact of their being two Alexandrian gay writers, albeit of different generations and producing differently-articulated homoerotic texts, that the affinity lies; one might even suggest that in this libretto, de Zogheb came close to rendering a veiled “vita” of himself.

This “biographical opera in three acts” – “the fortunate years,” “the reversal of fortune,” and “old age”¹¹⁰ – modulates on the life of the poet through two tonalities: pathos and bathos. The pathos is allocated to the poet’s voice in the libretto and elicited from situations into which he is thrust. The bathos arises from the mores of mondain and demi-mondain Alexandrians of Levantine backgrounds pushed to a parodic extreme and, as such, embraced. These two keys are at moments set up as dissonant – the gay sensibility of Cavafy versus social constraints – and at others as assonant – in the sense that the poet’s entourage is camped up in a comic vein that amplifies the queer theme summoned in the central figure of the text. The opera opens with a mise-en-abyme frame story in that Cavafy’s poem “Expecting the Barbarians,” where a decadent society awaits in vain the arrival of Barbarians who might have reinvigorated it, is miniaturized and transposed to the Alexandrian salon, specifically the poet’s mother’s “at home day.” Everyone in the opening scene – including a monsignor, a consul and a general, these inspired by figures in the poem – awaits the arrival of a lady from a Greek family, the Zervudachis.¹¹¹ The social satire enhances the sense of the poet’s claustrophobia as he is called on to recite one of his compositions – the melancholy “Candles” on one occasion and on another “As Much as You

¹⁰⁶ See Robert Liddell, *Cavafy: A Critical Biography* (London: Duckworth, 1974), dedication, n.p., and, concerning Ayoub Sinano, “Acknowledgements,” n.p., as well as 23 and 51. For the review of Liddell’s *Cavafy*, see “Unreal Citizen,” in Merrill, *Recitative*, 96-108.

¹⁰⁷ See note 78.

¹⁰⁸ See Liddell, *Cavafy*, 22, 27 and 102.

¹⁰⁹ Olry in interview with the author, Paris, 10 January, 2009, referring specifically to de Zogheb’s crossword puzzle book-diaries, an aspect of his production I was unable to deal with here for lack of space.

¹¹⁰ De Zogheb, *La Vita Alessandrina*, translated from the title page, n.p. All translations from this libretto are my own.

¹¹¹ See Halim, “Bernard de Zogheb.” Several members of the Zervudachi family are also frequently referred to in de Zogheb’s diaries. The librettist is playing off Liddell’s discussion of the Cavafys’ status vis-à-vis the Zervudachis’ in *Cavafy*, 41-2 and 111-12.

Can” (the latter ironically cautioning against cheapening one’s life through social transactions and quotidian trivialities)¹¹² – to much cloying adulation from the assembled ladies.

Establishing a queer atmosphere are homosocial spaces or ones in which the poet moves mainly among male friends. These include a brothel from which the French madame, having welcomed Cavafy to the tune of “Milord,” dismisses at his behest the female prostitutes for the evening: “Sta sera e speciale, serrata maschile...”¹¹³ set to “Mon Ménage à Moi.” There is also the seafront café in which Cavafy gets together with Giuseppe Ungaretti, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and later E. M. Forster, as well as the Billiard Palace where the Alexandrian-Greek poet gets introduced to the “archangels,” three louche young men he is known to have frequented in later life. The archangels, together with the figure of the muse and patroness, Anoleri, described as an Irish-American woman, contribute signal Camp hallmarks to the libretto. When in Act I the timid young Cavafy is being coaxed by his mother and her lady friends to recite a poem, Anoleri makes her first appearance:

Anoleri: Son Anoleri, Anoleri, County Kerry, Tra la la
 Son Anoleri, Anoleri, Brooklyn Ferry, hop la la.
John, Peter,
Paul: Anoleri, Hakelberi,* Tomangieri,* Umpapa
Tutti: Anoleri, Anoleri, Bladimeri,* Tra la la.¹¹⁴

That footnotes gloss the asterisked words as, respectively, “An American Finn,” “American cat and mouse,” and “An American tomato juice”¹¹⁵ puts the last touch to the ludic pop apostrophes introducing this most epic of figures, the muse, set to the tune of “Hallelujah.”

The multiethnic background with which de Zogheb endows the three archangels (who at the end of the opera will bear the dying Cavafy on their wings),¹¹⁶ amplified through culturally apposite tunes, is iconic of the intersection of Levantine cosmopolitanism and queerness. In one of the Billiard Palace scenes, observing that Cavafy is interested in them, the archangels “si mettano ‘al gardavou’”¹¹⁷ and introduce themselves to something in the order of ethnic theme tunes: Gaby, father from “Ispahan,” mother from Cairo, himself a football champion of a Macchabi club in Alexandria, to the tune of “My Yiddishe Mama”; Raf, a Neapolitan seeking to make his fortune in the Egyptian city, as he recounts in an aria set to “Ciao, Ciao Bambina”; and Michali, come from Crete to look for work, to the tune of “Eime Andros.” The archangels are

¹¹² I cite the titles of these poems as rendered in C. P. Cavafy, *The Complete Poems of Cavafy*, trans. Rae Dalven (New York: Harcourt, 1976). Apart from “Expecting the Barbarians” which provides a frame, Cavafy poems that he recites in *La Vita*, with a good measure of adaptation, include: “Candles,” “Supplication,” “Thermopylae,” “As Much as You Can,” “The Tobacco-shop Window,” “The Windows,” “The God Forsakes Antony,” “Ithaca,” “Walls,” and “The City.” It would be interesting to investigate the language from which de Zogheb was translating Cavafy’s poems.

¹¹³ De Zogheb, *La Vita*, 5, meaning: “This evening is special, it’ll be all-male [. . .]”

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹¹⁵ In the original: “Un Finn Americano,” “Un gato e un topo Americani,” and “Un sugo di Pomodoro Americano.” *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ See Liddell, *Cavafy*, 191-2. Significantly, it was de Zogheb who decided to give the three young men such emphatically multiethnic backgrounds, for in Liddell their names – Spyro, George and Toto – while indicative of their belonging to the foreign colonies of Alexandria are not so marked. The intertextual resonance of *La Vita* with Cavafy’s poetry merits a full-fledged discussion elsewhere. On the Alexandrian-Greek poet in relation to cosmopolitanism, see Halim, “The Alexandria Archive,” 35-122.

¹¹⁷ From the French “se mettent au garde-à-vous”; or stand at attention. De Zogheb, *La Vita*, 3.

later moved to flights of multilingual lyricism about their mothers by Cavafy's recitation of "Supplication," a poem that centers on a sailor's mother who, unaware that he has drowned, lights a candle in church and prays for her son's safe return while the Madonna's icon listens, knowing he will never be back.

Raf, to the tune of "O Sole Mio," says, "O Mamma mia, dove sei tu? a d'aspetarmi... / Nel porto, a Santa Lucia, O Mamma mia, o Mamma mia" (O mommy dearest, where are you? Are you waiting for me... / In the port, at Santa Lucia, O mommy, mommy dearest). Michali waxes in Greek, alternating with Italian, set to "Irisse": "Mamamou, e si pou este Mamamou / Spetando mi nel Pirea, con tutto sua para / Mamamou Egho thelosis, Mamamou / Grigora ritornare del altra parte l'mare" (Mamamou, where are you Mamamou / Waiting for me in Piraeus, with all her group of friends / Mamamou, I want you, Mamamou / Grigora will be back from the other part of the sea). Glosses on the first and third lines in Greek are provided in footnotes to the text, but one should also note the assonance of the Greek words Pirea and para embedded within the Italian line. Gaby's aria, to the music of "If I Were a Rich Man," is: "Mia buona madre / Lei e molto molto fina, lei e very very good / Spetando la, nel Kharet el Yahoud / legendo piosamente il Talmud" (My good mother / She looks very, very refined, she's tellement bonne / Waiting there in Jews' Alley / Intoning piously the Talmud). Underscoring the pathos/bathos tonalities of the text, stage directions have Cavafy "laugh[ing] with some bitterness" here before musing about "terrible" mothers who are "veritable castrators."¹¹⁸

Another signal moment in which homoeroticism and Levantine hybridity are brought together is one that plays off a biographical event in Forster's sojourn during World War I in Alexandria, namely the passionate relationship he shared with Mohamed El Adl, an Egyptian tram conductor.¹¹⁹ It is at a seafront café, soon after Cavafy recites to Ungaretti and Marinetti "The Tobacco-shop window," which seems to be the one explicitly homoerotic poem of his cited in the libretto, that Forster joins the company and is cajoled into divulging his latest adventures on the tram. Set to a tune that ironically recalls a fleeting, obscure object of heterosexual desire, "The Girl from Ipanema," this portion is worth quoting at length:

Forster: E ben...
 Inspirato del Bush Telefono
 Son salito a San Stefano*
 Che dicono un gran' merchato d'amore
 Fermato a la stazion Zizinia*
 Trovato uno Copto di Minya
 Chi mi volevo subito dare suo cuore.
 E Puoi, arrivato a Rouchdy*
 Un Greccho che sempravo un puo "pouchti"
 Mi ha deto "Bon Giorno Signore,
 Accetate di me questi fiore"
 Puoi, arrivando a Sidi Gaber,*
 Ho cominciato un gran' palaber

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 6. "Cavafy ridi con qualche amertuma" and, from Cavafy's speech: "Le mamme son terribile, ce son che sono vere castatrices." Ibid.

¹¹⁹ On Forster and Mohamed El Adl, see Halim, "The Alexandria Archive," 190-99 and "Forster in Alexandria: Gender and Genre in Narrating Colonial Cosmopolitanism," 237-73, and Haag, *Alexandria: City of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 47-53, 89-92 and passim.

Con un nubiano parlandomi con calore

Ungaretti, Marinetti e Cavafy
(Parlando) E puoi? e Puoi? e Puoi??

Forster: Un puo piu tarde a Ibrahimia,*
Uno vestito di galabia,
M'ha offerto mangiare pomodoro
A Campo Cesare,* in Stazione
Ha avuto dele proppositione
Di un soldato biondo venuto di fuori
A Chatby,* un bel studente
M'a fato diclarazione ardente
Mi offriva con lui di andar
Nela sua famiglia pranzar
Ma pensando promenata finita
Son ceso del tram a Mazarita*
E ecco mi, amice, senza dolore¹²⁰

[Forster: Well, here goes. . . / Apprised by the Bush Telephono / I hopped over to San Stefano / Which they say is a great market of love / Stopping at the station in Zizinya / I found a Copt from Minya / Who promptly lost his heart to me / Then, having reached Rushdy, / A Greek, always a bit "pushty," / Said to me, "Good day, Sir, / Please accept from me these flowers" / Arriving next at Sidi Gaber, / I got into a huge palaber / With a Nubian, speaking with much fervor. / Ungaretti, Marinetti and Cavafy (speaking): And then? And then? And then? / Forster: Then, a bit later in Ibrahimia / A man dressed in a galabia / Offered me a tomato / In the Campo Cesare station / I got a proposition / From a soldier, blond and foreign / At Chatby, a handsome student / Made passionate declarations / Offering to take me / To have lunch with his family / But deciding that my outing was now finished / I hopped off the tram at Mazarita / And here I am, friends, whole and unscathed.]

The sheer variety of ethnicities and histories encoded in Alexandria's place names, including of tram stations, has long been a variously-articulated trope in literary texts about the city as well as scholarly texts about toponymy as a "lieu de mémoire."¹²¹ But in Forster's speech, the signifiers of cosmopolitanism in the names of tram stations are aligned with the homoerotic

¹²⁰ De Zogheb, *La Vita*, 13-14. The asterisks refer to footnotes explaining that these are tram stations.

¹²¹ For a discussion of deployments of place names in Lawrence Durrell and Edwar al-Kharrat, see Halim, "The Alexandria Archive," 224, 337 and 340. For other incantatory passages about the diversity encoded in the names of Alexandria's streets and trams, see Edward Atiyah, *An Arab Tells His Story* (London: John Murray, 1947), 52 and André Aciman, *Out of Egypt* (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1994), 245. The most obvious example of scholarship on the subject is the monograph by Radames Lackany, *Quelques notes de toponymie Alexandrine* (Alexandria: n. p., 1968) and Bashir al-Shindi, "Mudhakkirat 'an al-Iskandariyya," in *Cahiers d'Alexandrie* (Alexandria: Atelier, 1964), 1-3. For urban nomenclature as a "lieux de mémoire" (the concept underwriting Pierre Nora's project in the context of France), see Daniel Milo, "Street Names," in *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, ed. Pierre Nora, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, vol. II "Traditions" (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 363-89.

through the encounter in each with a male from a different ethnic and social background – the Copt, the Greek, the Nubian, the working-class Egyptian, the foreign soldier and the student. The speech that begins with a nod to an “in-the-know” gay subculture in the cryptographically capitalized “Bush Telefono,” then, sets up something of an equivalence between the Mediterranean cosmopolitanism of the city and queerness. That the use of pidginized Italian for the libretti speaks to their Camp texture is clinched in its instantiations here through the counterpoint of rhyme – for example, the adaptation of the English “pushy” rendered as “pouchti” to rhyme with “Rouchdy” and of “palaver” (a word from *Lingua Franca*¹²²) as “palaber” to echo “Gaber” – whereby the linguistic “form” is indivisible from the queered Alexandrian-Levantine “content.” Forster’s words also construe the tram – one of the urban spaces of mobility, bringing together individuals from different “walks of life” – as amenable to chance sexual encounters. This scene in *La Vita* is appropriately rounded off with Italianized loan-word toasts by Ungaretti of “trinquiam” (footnoted as derived from the French “trinquier”) and Marinetti of “drinkiam,” with Cavafy having the last word by directing the toasts to “our old tram”: “Drinkiam, beviam, al nostro vecchio tram!”¹²³ (see and hear “Vital.mp3 through Vital2.mp3”: Recording of Bernard de Zogheb singing his *La Vita Alessandrina* recorded by Stéphane Olry and Jan Vromman in April 1998 in the librettist’s home in Alexandria.)

Whereas *Malmulla ou Il Canale* does not have explicitly homoerotic content, its recourse to Orientalist tropes that it both replicates and renders kitsch makes something of an appeal to a queer aesthetic in the process of celebrating the would-be but doomed *ancien régime* world of Polypolis. The key political players on a world stage characterized by the scramble of France and Britain for territory over the body of “the sick man of Europe” are presented, together with the Ottoman Sultan, a Viceroy and a Khedive of Egypt, as in a costume drama with a satirical edge. This “historical opera in 3 acts” – “Birth of an Idea,” “The Great Project,” and “The Canal Gala” – centering on the Suez Canal project opens nowhere other than in Alexandria, in the antechamber of the Viceroy Mohamed Said, who welcomes de Lesseps’ proposal on the grounds that the waterway would be quite “a blow to perfidious Albion.”¹²⁴ Meanwhile, the Sultan of Turkey, whose authorization of the project de Lesseps has sought, fears precisely that the canal might jeopardize his control over Egypt. In England, where de Lesseps has next sought Queen Victoria’s approval of the project, the decision is made to construct the canal as long as Britain has the upper hand and beats the French to it.

The decision is sealed with a *mise-en-abyme* intertextual nod towards Verdi, who makes a cameo appearance, to tune of the “Marcia Trionfale” from *Aida*:

VERDI-	Io scrivero Una bellissima opera seria Per questo bell occasion, – Le Egyzzian Serano tutti tutti in isteria A quello inaugurazion –
ALBERTO-	In Cairo a l’opera – Ogni uno che stoppera Dira cosi – “comme c’est jolie –

¹²² See Hancock, “Remnants of the Lingua Franca in Britain,” 36.

¹²³ De Zogheb, *La Vita*, 14.

¹²⁴ De Zogheb, *Il Canale*, JH notebook, 115; “Un colpo al perfido Albion” in the original.

TUTTI- Comme c'est exquis."
 Lui scrivera
 Una bellissima opera seria
 Tutti andiamo a veder
 Non ci sera
 Altre cose cosi belle nella Berberia
 Tutto devrano lo saper –
 Tutto devrano lo saper¹²⁵

[VERDI: I will write / A beautiful serious opera / For this beautiful occasion / The Egyptians / Will all be hysterical / At the inauguration – / ALBERT: In Cairo at the opera – / Each one who will stop / Will say – “How pretty it is – / How exquisite.” / EVERYONE: He will write / A beautiful serious opera / We will all go to see / There won't be / Anything else so beautiful in Berberia / Everyone will have to know it – / Everyone will have to know it]

The sly wink at Verdi serves to measure the distance between the grandiose tragedy (the “beautiful serious[ness]”) of his opera and de Zogheb's own *Il Canale* as a spoof by a child of “Berberia” of the moment of genesis of *Aida*.

The spoofing variously draws into play tropes of the Oriental despot and of Eastern extravagance. The strategy at work seems to be to burlesque the Orientalist motif to a point where it is winningly innocuous. Ushered in by the castrati for an audience with the “stupendo [Viceroy] Mohamed Said,” de Lesseps and his wife meet a man whom stage directions describe as “very fat, jovial, covered in decorations and jewels,” as he sits enthroned amid the women of his harem. The viceroy rattles off compliments, to the tune of “Tea for Two,” about Mme de Lesseps before asking what she would like to drink: “Bella signora de Lessepsi / Vorei un cafe'? Vorei un Pepsi?”¹²⁶ But the libretto reserves its most farcical depiction of grand ceremonial to the Canal inauguration festivities, the stuff of historical legend. In a scene set in Cairo, Empress Eugenie is welcomed to the gala by Alexandrian hostesses who, speaking French, in deference to the Empress, present the buffet they prepared for her to the tune of “Mack the Knife”:

UNA DONNA	L'alakerda, c'est de Gerda – La Tabouli, c'est de moi
UN'ALTRA DONNA	La Coubeba est de Beba – La Bastourma, c'est pour toi –
UN'ALTRA DONNA	La Batiha est de Miha – La Cometra c'est de moi
UNA DONNA A LA SUA AMICCA	Yalla mange ton orange Si tu veux un chocolat – ¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Ibid., 124.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 114: “Beautiful lady of Lessepsi / Would you like a coffee? Would you like a Pepsi?”

¹²⁷ Ibid., 134. Translation mine, adapted from a quotation in Halim, “Bernard de Zogheb.”

[A LADY: The alakerda is from Gerda / The Tabouli is from me / ANOTHER LADY: The Coubeba is from Beba / The Bastourma is for you / ANOTHER LADY: The Batiha [watermelon] is from Miha / The Cometra [pear] is from me / A LADY TO HER FRIEND: Yalla [Come on], eat your orange / If you want a chocolate.]

The names, the foods, the fact of a predominantly French matrix, embedded with an Arabic filler (“Yalla”) – all render this a sort of Levantine theme song. In the endearing incongruity it introduces into an occasion of pomp and ceremony – the atmosphere of a potluck dinner, with the women making homemade introductions of the dishes they have contributed – is a fine instance of the naiveté Sontag locates in true Camp,¹²⁸ here elicited from the mores of Polypolitan society. And *Il Canale* underscores the *carte d’entrée* it is forging here for the Polypolitans when it has Empress Eugenie advising Prince Albert to pretend to like the food then later spit it out and vomit, before they are both converted to the delicious oriental dishes they thought would be “horrendo” and “carrion.”¹²⁹ If there is a “carnavalesque” at work here, it is not of the folk Bakhtinian order but rather belongs to Alexandria’s “carnival,” marking the beginning of Lent, an affair largely of the European colonies that, if anything, reaffirmed their hierarchically superior position.¹³⁰

The most Orientalist element in the libretto by far is the courtesan figure, and although de Zogheb had written another libretto entitled *Salome*, “Dopo Oscar Salvagio” (After Oscar Wilde),¹³¹ its principal intertext in *Il Canale* is Ayoub Sinano’s *Pola de Péra suivi de Proses pour Pola*. This opens with a sequence of nine poems, in a bitter-sweet elegiac tenor that sets the tone for the whole volume, tracing the life of the courtesan Pola: her childhood, her loves, short-lived career as diva at the opera of Péra (a Christian neighborhood of Istanbul), ambition to attain stardom in a harsh Paris where she works as a prostitute, return to Turkey and resumption of a prostitute’s life, then final testament legating her belongings to her nearest and dearest, some of whom, such as her cousin Chouchoula la Marigoula, germinate as the central figures in the stories that follow. These prose texts, in which Pola serves as an inverted moving spirit of sorts, describe in their urban settings the arc of Polypolis in Ayoub Sinano’s article on “Levant,” if inhabited in this book not so much by an elite as by a déclassé society.

While some of the stories bear a resonance with Alexandrian writers such as Cavafy, the main intertextual dialogue in *Pola de Péra* is with Orientalist texts that deploy the courtesan trope and the various figures associated with it,¹³² as already presaged in the second of the poems with which the book opens, “Pola Diva”:

¹²⁸ Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 110-111.

¹²⁹ De Zogheb, *Il Canale*, 137.

¹³⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). On Alexandria’s carnival, see Alexander Boddy, *From the Egyptian Ramleh: Sketches of Delta Life and Scenes of Lower Egypt* (London: Gay and Bird, 1900), 285 (“At Carnival time, young Italians, &c., go to and fro in fantastic costumes, but the Arabs are so accustomed to these vagaries that they take but little notice”); and Dr. Ralph, “Sa Majesté Carnaval,” in *Le Livre d’Or du journal la Réforme 1895-1945*, 119-120. For references thereto in de Zogheb’s family, see Patrice de Zogheb, “Alexandria Memories,” 36, XYZ, *La Revue des Astres*, 5, and de Zogheb as quoted in Haag, *Alexandria: City of Memory*, 167. Carnival in Alexandria comprised, in addition to masquerades, dramatic and operatic performances.

¹³¹ Bernard de Zogheb, *Salome*, JH notebook, 151.

¹³² The Story “L’Antinoüs du Modern’ Bar,” in Ayoub Sinano, *Pola de Péra suivi de Proses Pour Pola* (1964), 47-54, about a handsome young man who is bought by an unknown aristocrat, would seem to carry allusions to Cavafy’s poems in modern contexts. Indeed, Cavafy is mentioned in the story “Catherine d’Attarine ou La Dernière

Les grands effets ont de subtiles causes:
Quand tu chantais Madame Butterfly
à l'opéra
de Péra
Les spectateurs sentaient tes relents d'ail
Et c'est pourquoi l'on te couvrait de roses.

Ah, l'émouvant parfum de tes salades!
En se mêlant avec la mer calmée
dans l'opéra
de Péra
Il faisait se gonfler tes seins d'almée
Qui remuaient au rythme des roulades.

Vingt ans après – dans quelque lupanar –
Voyant, sans voix, sur un divan, la reine
de l'opéra
de Péra
Le client de la nuit, à ton haleine,
Reconnaît le rossignol du Phanar.¹³³

[In James Merrill's free translation: "Sensational effects have subtle causes. / Whenever you sang Madame Butterfly / At the Pera / Opera / The crowd inhaled the garlic of your high / Flat c's, and therefore pelted you with roses. / Ah how your salad fragrances afloat / One fine day over doldrums canvas blue / At the Pera / Opera / Would merge with bosomy undulation to / Defray the steep expenses of each note. / Years later, in the dive where ends our tale, / You loll, mute queen (a lame divan for throne) / At the Pera / Opera / Whom evening's client, by your breath alone, / Knows to have been the Phanar's nightingale."]

With its allusions to the Orientalist trope in its manifestations in the Far East (*Madama Butterfly*) and in the Middle East via Flaubert ("almée"), it may have been this poem that de Zogheb had in mind when he contributed a drawing to a limited-edition Egyptian offprint of the nine poems from *Pola de Péra*.¹³⁴ (see fig. 5.) But his own *Malmulla ou Il Canale* would compound his readings of the courtesan figure via Ayoub Sinano's take.

Fête," 56. The text foregrounds the tradition in which it frames Pola by invoking a set of figures associated with the hetaera/courtesan/odalisque trope in the final tale, "Mort et Apotheose de Pola," including Cleopatra, Salome, Laïs, Matahari and Ninon de Lenclos. Ayoub Sinano, *Pola de Péra* (1964), 151.

¹³³ Ayoub Sinano, *Pola de Péra*, 10. This poem, in Merrill's English translation, is reproduced in *Pola de Pera*, trans. Maud Burnett, n.p.

¹³⁴ See Christian Ayoub Sinano, *Pola de Péra* (Alexandria: Imprimerie de la Société de Publications Egyptiennes, n.d.). Gilles Beraud collection, given him by the librettist. According to Josiane Boulad-Ayoub, the writer's widow, this pamphlet was printed about a year before the Paris publication of *Pola de Péra*. De Zogheb also wrote a poem in French entitled "'Lines Inspired by Pola de Pera.'" List notebook, c. 1982-1998. CEAlex.

Among other dedicatees of *Malmulla ou Il Canale*, is “Christian Ayoub Sinano who first imagined the characters of La Pola and her Aunt Madame Marigoula Pacha.”¹³⁵ As the Sultan of Turkey’s concubine, Pola’s epithet in this libretto is “lusignola del Phanar” (or “nightingale of Phanar”) in a wink to “Pola Diva.” Several motifs amplify Ayoub Sinano’s Pola in the afterlife de Zogheb gives her, for example, the song she sings to the tune of “La Comparsita,” when, conniving with the Sultan, she seduces de Lesseps to distract him from his project: “To son la lusignola – / Lusignola del Phanar – / Menero la barcarola / Si deviam ricominciar –”¹³⁶ (I am la lusignola – / Lusignola of Phanar – / I will lead the barcarole / If we have to start again –). *Il Canale* also imagines a more illustrious launch of Pola’s Parisian career: at the canal inauguration ball, Verdi himself promises that “A Parigi, Bella Pola, / Ti faro cantare, / Dolce lusignola / Del lontan Phanare”¹³⁷ (To Paris, Beautiful Pola / I will have you sing, / Sweet lusignola / From far Phanar). In another latter-day textual infusion of lifeblood into the courtesan trope à la *Levantine*, de Zogheb provides his own answer to la Pola in the parallel figure of la Malmulla, the poor cousin of Khedive Ismail’s mistress la Moghnagua. Young and innocent, la Malmulla is offered to de Lesseps and becomes his mistress, only to discover at the canal gala that he is married; she therefore drowns herself in the canal. The libretto, which bears her name, grants her a tongue-in-cheek apotheosis in that it is decided to give her name “a la nuova strata / In dove si vende l’amor” (to the new street / Where they sell love) and it is even suggested that “Marinai de tutte le nazione / Saluterano sua statua di metal”¹³⁸ (Sailors of all nations / Will salute her metal statue) – thus, implicitly, displacing the statue of Ferdinand de Lesseps that has long stood at the entrance to the Suez Canal.

Granted, this is not a straightforward duplication of the courtesan trope, but rather a redeployment with affectionate spoofing. In de Zogheb, the courtesan figure – as a long-established literary, operatic and artistic trope – would have responded to a taste for theatricality, to a Camp “relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms.”¹³⁹ But it is not just that the odalisque figure could serve as emblematic of a larger-than-life femininity; it seems also to have been deemed useful as part of the stock currency of an Ottoman Levant in an Orientalist *imaginaire*. And therein lies the rub – that in the service of Alexandrian-Levantine Camp a bizarre perpetuity is belatedly lent this trope in an age of dissolution of empire and the project of “decolonising the mind,” in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s phrase. The parodic drive here hardly dispels a degree of interpellation in that the puckish celebration of the courtesan figure in *Malmulla ou Il Canale* comes quite close to auto-Orientalism. Consider, by contrast, an example from Algeria, a context I shall return to, namely Malek Alloula’s *Colonial Harem*, a compilation of quasi-erotic postcards of the *algérienne* under the French occupation in the first three decades of the twentieth century in a mass production of “the phantasm of the harem” that the critic analyzes and attempts to subvert, “lagging far behind History, [by] return[ing] this immense postcard to its sender.”¹⁴⁰ Yet again, it should be underscored that a taste for a showy femininity would yield, in another libretto by Zogheb, a figure whose conception, if hardly

¹³⁵ In Italian in the original. De Zogheb, *Il Canale*, JH notebook, 111. The librettist turns Mme Marigoula Pacha, Pola’s cousin in *Pola de Péra*, into her aunt.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 138. Verdi’s words are set to “‘Parigi,’ *Traviata*.”

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹³⁹ Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 109.

¹⁴⁰ See Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, trans. Myrna Godzich and Wald Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 103 and 5; first published in French in 1981.

politicized, is not altogether apolitical, namely the “Levantina” in *Le Vacanze a Parigi*, written in March 1962.

Tucked into this apparently most frivolous of de Zogheb’s operettas are traces of a submerged drama concerning European racism towards Arabs that call to be read in the context of the France of 1962 in which the text was written. The scene in this “comic operetta in one-act” unfolds both just outside and inside the Parisian restaurant Prunier at which Merrill and de Zogheb dined together when they first met.¹⁴¹ *Le Vacanze a Parigi*, which is “Dedicato a due vecchi Amicci conosciuti troppo Brevamente” (Dedicated to two old friends known all too briefly),¹⁴² is about two young American students vacationing in Paris who, accosted by a French prostitute, take refuge in Prunier where, unable to pay the bill for their lavish dinner, they hide in the *art nouveau* Ladies bathroom. No sooner have they won over Mme Lavabo (Madame Washbasin), an impoverished Russian aristocrat, then a Levantine woman barges in. Scandalized by the presence of the two young men in the Ladies, she hysterically berates Mme Lavabo who answers offensively. The Maitre d’Hotel who has come to investigate the fuss, sides with Mme Lavabo, kneeling in apology before her while the Levantina throws out that she has decided to leave France. In the meantime, the two American tourists have slipped out unnoticed and are accosted again by the prostitute, though this time they decide that in the bed of this beautiful woman “Noi possiamo studiar amare il vrai Paris”¹⁴³ (we can learn to love the True Paris).

De Zogheb had written *Le Vacanze a Parigi* as a thank-you for patronage received from Merrill. The operetta is replete with teasing of de Zogheb’s newfound friend, “Jimmy” Merrill, the well-heeled gay cosmopolite, in the farcical plot about American innocents abroad (“senza alcun esperienza”), “Dzimmy” and his friend David, on a limited budget who are lured into the Parisian heterosexual dens of sin.¹⁴⁴ The contretemps in the Ladies furthers the farce not least when the “Levantina isterica”¹⁴⁵ (“hysterical Levantine woman”) throws a fit that she “cannot even do Pipi / Without finding men here / Not even in my country, it’s not like this – no! no! no!” (“nemenò far Pipi / Senza trovare uomini qui / Nemenò in mio paese non è così – no! no! no!”¹⁴⁶). One can get so carried away by the sheer lightness of the comedy and witty situational ironies as not to notice the traces of race and class issues embedded in *Le Vacanze*’s dialogues. When they find that divulging their problem to Mme Lavabo does not help, Dzimmy and David appeal to her motherly instincts by suggesting that she must have a son and can therefore understand. Mme Lavabo softens and lets drop that “E sì, è vero, mio Bibi– / Soldato fa, di là in Algeria. . .” (Why yes, it’s true, my Bibi– / A soldier he is, there in Algeria). It is just when this piece of information about the “naturalized” Russian’s son serving the cause of France’s colonial war against Algerian independence is disclosed that the Levantina, an Arab, steps in. Stage directions describe her as wearing a Dior dress, “molto sic” (very chic), “but with too many diamonds and bracelets.”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴¹ For the background see de Zogheb’s comments in Halim, “Bernard de Zogheb.”

¹⁴² De Zogheb, *Vacanze*, JH notebook, 77. All translations from *Le Vacanze* are my own.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 77. The name David may be an allusion to Merrill’s partner, David Jackson.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 77; this is how she is referred to on the dramatis personae page.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 83; in Italian in original. These details are omitted in the Little Players’ typescript of *Le Vacanze*. The two American tourists are reduced to one (renamed Dzonny), a change presumably made to reduce the dramatis personae to five, in keeping with the number of puppets. The “Putana” is given the name Angele, the spelling and grammar are somewhat “tidied up,” and the stage directions are compacted (for example, the description of the décor of the Ladies at the beginning of Scene III is omitted). Little Players’ libretto for *Le Vacanze a Parigi*, SO collection. In a

What is fascinating about the fracas that ensues is the escalation of exclusions of the Levantina. Her sense of sexual prudery affronted, the Levantina accuses Mme Lavabo of being “nothing but an old prostitute,” to which the Russian replies, “But Madame, don’t say this / In my country I was a sultana / Before coming to live in Paris / But you are a stranger / Who knows where you’ve come from / To sow discord with your manner / Among everyone around you.”¹⁴⁸ Although admitting to being a stranger herself in Paris, she betrays a measure of xenophobia when she reserves the status of stranger for the Levantina, the demarcation line spelt out at this point being a known origin, and one of aristocracy for that matter. Such a line might seem to be a matter of face-saving self-aggrandizement on the part of Mme Lavabo vis-à-vis a customer who visibly sports status symbols; but the exchanges that follow ascribe it to a different frame of reference. When the Maitre d’Hotel materializes on the scene Mme Lavabo, to the tune of “Yellow Rose of Texas,” complains that

Lei m’ha deto quell signora che io son putan’
 In vece son contessa, e nata nel Kazan
 Non puosso suportare qu’un cliente oriental’
 Mi vien cosi troublare nel mio urinal

[That lady there called me a prostitute / Me, a countess, born in Kazan / I won’t have a customer who’s an oriental / Harass me in my urinal]

Here, over and above the irony of a grandiosity coupled with “my urinal,” the demarcation line between the “U” and “non-U” is drawn along a racial distinction in that the Levantina is identified as “oriental”: it is as such, not as someone who has behaved inappropriately, that she is marked out and identified as Mme Lavabo’s inferior.

As if to underscore that racism is not confined to this one voice and to hint that it is part of a broader phenomenon, *Le Vacanze* has the Maitre d’Hotel reply:

Scusati la contessa – lei non sa cosa fa –
 Nel suo paese certo, grande dame come lei non ha
 Come puote lei capere, che seduta tra le fior
 Siete una grande dame, e vi do il mio cuor---¹⁴⁹

[Excuse her, countess – she does not know what she’s doing / It’s sure that in her country they don’t have grandes dames like you / How could she understand that, seated amid the flowers, / You are a grande dame, and I give you my heart---]

letter to Ayoub Sinano dated only March 10 (presumably of 1969), de Zogheb gives an account of the premiere of the Little Players’ performance of this operetta: “La sale etait pleine a craquer à ma premiere (27 personnes) et j’ai été acclamé par tout le monde et ai passé une heure a signer des programmes et sabler du champagne apres le spectacle. Au fait, ce n’est pas, d’apres moi, tellement MON opera, qui est responsable pour le succes de cette premiere – c’est également le jeu de Frank Peschka, le puppeteer, qui est extraordinaire. Non seulement fait-il bouger les marionnettes, mais, c’est lui qui fait les cinq voix. Ma préférée etait ‘la grossa putana’ jouée par Mademoiselle Garonce, brillamment [. . .] Quant a la Levantina isterica – (interprétée par Elsie Lump... elle etait excellent dans sa chanson ‘E ben’ Prout – Io ritorno a Beyrouth’ qu’elle chantait avec un accent de nannie anglaise cockney...” Reproduced verbatim. CA collection.

¹⁴⁸ De Zogheb, *Le Vacanze*, 84; in Italian in the original.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 84.

With these words, the Maitre d'Hotel goes down on his knees in front of Mme Lavabo. The Levantina's signifiers of distinction, then, decode as something visibly "worn on the sleeve" in contrast to the matronly, tricot-knitting Mme Lavabo ensconced in her urinal whose true class, however, shines through. Yet, one would argue that what might seem to be "innate" about Mme Lavabo is no less "skin deep" than in the case of the denigrated Levantina. It is ascribable to being white in 1962 France, in contradistinction to the fact of being a "colored" Arab that annuls the intricacies of social structures which Ayoub Sinano was so keen to delineate in *Polypolis* ("It's sure that in her country they don't have grandes dames like you").

The Levantina's response suggests a further elaboration on the political climate in France vis-à-vis Arabs at the time. Seeing the Maitre d'Hotel's reaction, she rants to the tune of "Brazil":

E ben, Prout!
 Non voglio pui vostro choucroute
 Ni vostro buon pate en croute
 Io ritorno a Beyrouth – Beyrouth!
 E meglio che Prunier
 Mangio Coubeba a Zahlé,
 Mangio Tabouli a Saidé—
 Mangio Baklawa con café—
 Beyrouth! Beyrouth! Beyrouth!¹⁵⁰

[Blast it! / I don't want your choucroute / Nor your lovely pate en croute / I'm going back to Beirut – Beirut! It's better than Prunier / I'll eat Coubeba at Zahlé, / Eat Tabouli at Saidé— / Eat Baklava with café— / Beirut! Beirut! Beirut!]

What may seem to be an overreaction to exit not just Punier but France underscores the xenophobia and racism she has encountered as part of a broader phenomenon that may be interpreted as metonymic of anti-(Arab)immigrant discourse. If the song of the Alexandrian hostesses in *Il Canale* can be construed as a theme tune of Levantinism in full flower on the Polypolitan home turf, then the Levantina's is a swan song of that identity once transposed to the Western diaspora. Although the incident with the Levantina is presented almost as a dramatic device to further the comic plot about the hapless American tourists, de Zogheb visually fleshed it out. Of two illustrations he made for this operetta, the second (see fig. 6) shows the Maitre d'Hotel kneeling in front of Mme Lavabo: while these two figures occupy the foreground horizontally, the Levantina stands vertically in the background, drawn to an apparently smaller scale as if to underscore her diminishment, bejeweled arm waiving agitatedly. That she is framed in the doorway emphasizes her exclusion even as the strong mauve-blue color reserved mainly for Mme Lavabo, and her girth, anchor the Russian at the center of the composition.

Papers by de Zogheb seen so far that date from his sojourn in Paris, mainly letters, reflect homesickness and a degree of boredom, but there is no indication as to how he responded to the war in Algeria or what repercussions it may have had on him as an Arab living in Paris. Yet, apart from his immediate contact with "breaking news" from Algeria through his work at the Associated Press, he was already living in Paris in 1961 when, on 17 October, in response to

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 85.

increasingly repressive policing measures against Algerians, the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) organized peaceful demonstrations that were put down in “the bloodiest act of state repression of street protest in Western Europe in modern history.”¹⁵¹ How would he have been perceived in daily dealings in relation to the Algerians, as himself an Arab, and the Pieds-noirs, given his Francophone proficiency and recognizably Christian first name? Judging by *Le Vacanze*, these issues were not far from his mind – one can imagine him sighing, “La Levantina isterica, c’est moi.” Beyond his Camp affinity with an exaggerated femininity and the mutual “Levantine” identification, the Levantina’s hysteria can be read as symptomatic of what may have been his own panic about racism. Either way, one would err not to interrogate the representation of the Levantina vis-à-vis the plight of Arabs in France in 1962. It is telling that while the libretto touched on the racism towards Arabs in that place and time it could not do so except on behalf of an elite figure, so that ultimately class takes precedence over the residue of the colonial politics of race in the “acting out” of disenfranchisement. Although it is on the cue of the reference to the war in Algeria that the Levantina steps on stage and despite the dismissive designation of her as “oriental,” it is the charge of her misrecognition of class and rank that proves to be the last straw.

The Levantina in Paris in 1962 seems to mark the extent of brinkmanship de Zogheb was willing to undertake in pushing against the limitations of Polypolis as his libretti conceived of it. *Le Vacanze* is the point at which Alexandrian-Levantine Camp comes face-to-face with a political (colonial/postcolonial) reality, briefly acknowledges it, then glances away. If the libretti’s Camp, *qua* Camp, makes a persuasive case for queerness, the texts’ poetics are ultimately undermined by their depoliticized take on Levantinism. It was after *Le Vacanze* that de Zogheb wrote *Il Canale* with its highly nostalgic, if elfish, courting of a Khedivial-Ottoman world seeking admittance into the circles of the European Great Powers. That by then Polypolis had been undone is an index of the retroactiveness of the libretti’s labor, their retrograde inability to fashion a new imaginary in which their antihomophobic impetus would be paralleled by an ethnically and socially egalitarian one. To suggest that following this line of thought may lead to unraveling the fabric of de Zogheb’s extant operettas is to pose the question what lasting value this corpus has.

Writing about a virtually unpublished author comes with a set of risks,¹⁵² not the least of which is of adversely coloring the perception of the texts in question before they have had a chance to reach a general readership. Adducing the libretti’s long-standing manuscript form and the fact of extensive quotations made in the foregoing discussion is less germane than to ask: should they, in fact, be published? There, the answer would be emphatically in the affirmative, on several grounds. It has been suggested, by a loyal admirer of de Zogheb,¹⁵³ that his libretti are dependent on his own presence, an opinion corroborated by the many private allusions in his work and the charisma of the man himself. Certainly, de Zogheb was an all-rounder whose multiple talents – drawing, dramaturgy, dramatic performance and singing, social satire, pastiche and polyglot verbal play – were pooled into his libretti. Whether the libretti can actually be performed, with or without much adaptation (of, say, the lyrics set to new scores in place of

¹⁵¹ Jim House and Neil MacMaster, *Paris 1961: Algerians, State Terror, and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1. See also Kristin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 42-48; 53-57.

¹⁵² For the scholar, one of the risks is that texts that pull in a different direction from the drift of the argument might later come to light.

¹⁵³ Olry in interview with the author, Paris, 10 January, 2009.

tunes now forgotten), is an open question. But if the texts themselves were to be annotated to give background information, as by the editor of *Le Sorelle* and by de Zogheb himself in *La Vita*, what would they speak to?

In the much-vaunted globalized order of the world, with increasing transnationalism, trajectories of mobility in all their contrasting negotiations of allegiances become a compelling subject of study. The life and work of de Zogheb encapsulate one such trajectory that traces back to a history of Ottoman migration in the Eastern and Southern Mediterranean as it spans postcolonial displacement between the South and the North. Himself a figure of the dispossessed Mediterranean flâneur, de Zogheb's libretti speak of a certain cosmopolitanism that formed him even as they constitute cosmopolitan artifacts. To have demonstrated the complicities of that cosmopolitanism under the rubric of Levantinism is not to dismiss the libretti but rather to provide a framework for their appreciation. For, as Edward Said has put it, "we can better understand the persistence and the durability of saturating hegemonic systems like culture when we realize that their internal constraints upon writers and thinkers were *productive*, not unilaterally inhibiting."¹⁵⁴ To an extent, the libretti entered into a dynamic dialogue with the colonial culture that forged Levantinism rehabilitating a suspect hybridity and aestheticizing it as it may never have been before or since. To an extent: the limitations I have detected in de Zogheb's libretti, while they instantiate cosmopolitanism understood not as an all-embracing universality but as "a striving to transcend particularity that is itself partial,"¹⁵⁵ in Bruce Robbins' words, also call for a comparative approach. The most immediate constituency that would take an interest in the libretti is of scholars as well as a general readership interested in Alexandrian cosmopolitanism, with its entrenched paradigm that I have outlined above. Taking off from de Zogheb's texts, one could propose an approach that would brush against the grain the paradoxical Eurocentric provinciality of that discourse of cosmopolitanism by suggesting that the libretti be read against modern Alexandrian Arabic texts, with attention to non-elite contexts, as well as, further afield, Creole texts from the Caribbean. It is only when such projects are undertaken that "comparative cosmopolitanisms" can be sought.

¹⁵⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 14.

¹⁵⁵ Bruce Robbins, "Comparative Cosmopolitanisms," in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, ed. Bruce Robbins and Pheng Cheah (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 259. It is Robbins' appeal to "comparative cosmopolitanisms" that I invoke here. In addition to Alexandrian cosmopolitanism, there are several other frameworks that de Zogheb's corpus of libretti has much to say to: queer studies; Italian studies; musicology; and literary adaptation/author-based approaches (for *Byrone*, *Phaedra*, *Salome* and *La Vita*).

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