



THANK YOU WIKO (AND NIKO)!
SAMAH SELIM

Born in Egypt in 1966, Samah Selim grew up and studied in the United States, where she received her Ph.D. in Modern Arabic Literature from Columbia University's Department of Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures in 1997. She taught at Princeton University for four years before moving to France, where she is currently an Associate Researcher at IREMAM, Aix-en-Provence. Her publications include *The Novel and the Rural Imaginary in Egypt, 1880–1985* (Routledge Press, 2004) and numerous articles on Egyptian modernism and popular fiction. She is also a practicing translator of Arabic literature into English. Her book-in-progress is on translation, popular fiction and the rise of the novel in early 20th-century Egypt. She was a Fellow of the Working Group Modernity and Islam in 2004/05 and is a founding member of the Berlin-based research program, "Europe in the Middle East – the Middle East in Europe". – Address: 6 Traverse du cimetière, 13014 Marseille.

Berlin and the Wissenschaftskolleg inaugurated a new era in my life. Two spaces that intersect and collide in the most fascinating and delightful ways! Berlin, with its spacious tree-lined avenues and its frayed, memory-strewn elegance, its restaurants and cafés, its bookshops, its Kneipen and cocktail bars, its punks, its prim little old ladies, its magnificent curling S-Bahn, its endless cultural centres, its politics, its East and West. And its winters – my God! – I can safely say that I'll never be tempted to venture any further north on the European continent than Wedding.

For me, the Wissenschaftskolleg was both a point of entry to and a kind of refuge from the dizzying experience that was Berlin. It was here that I discovered the specificities and

peculiarities of Western European academia, its institutional forms and personalities, its debates with itself and with the outside world. And it was here that I met the colleagues who were later to become dear friends and collaborators: Catherine David, whose work on contemporary Arab art intersected my own work on literature and cultural history in truly fruitful ways and whose sparkling, Parisian sense of humour kept me from ever taking myself too seriously; Augustin Emame with whom I had many heated and stimulating debates on the various “posts” that litter the humanities, and their relation to African history and art; Ashis Nandy who provoked me to think about the politics of Enlightenment inwards-out over a shared smoke; Barbara Stafford whose invariably delightful presence was a bristling challenge to any and all somnambulant intellectual and social faculties; Abdolkarim Soroush, Jean-Louis Fabiani and Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus, whose kindness, humour and erudite generosity helped me through some of the rough spots in my work and personal life.

Certainly, there were many important contacts and acquaintances to be made outside the Wissenschaftskolleg and in the broader German academic community. Through formal and informal events and connections at the Wiko, through the Berliner Seminar of AKMI (of which more below) and through my participation in German academic organizations like the DAVO, I was lucky enough to meet a number of prominent and engaging German scholars: Angelika Neuwirth and Irmela Hijiya-Kirschnereit of the Free University, Ottmar Ette of Potsdam University and Stephan Wild of the University of Bonn.

My year at the Wissenschaftskolleg was moreover characterized by a kind of double identity or affiliation. I came to the Wiko in 2005 straight from a postdoctoral year in its outstanding AKMI program (Arbeitskreis Moderne und Islam), and continued to work in and with the program throughout 2005/06 as co-director of its bi-weekly Berliner Seminar. As a 2004/05 AKMI Fellow, I had the opportunity to meet and work with some of the most interesting and engaging Wissenschaftskolleg Fellows that year – Sheherazade Hassan, Tom Mitchell and Ziba Mir-Hosseini (and to get a sneak preview of what I was in for at the daily lunches!). Not to mention the AKMI and Ways of Knowledge crews: the brilliant and indefatigable Georges Khalil, the ever-resourceful and ever-smiling Christine Hofmann and our resident champion runner Felicitas Hentschke. Equally wonderful was the unique mix of young scholars from all over Europe, North Africa and the Middle East (literally, from Sweden to Iran) with whom I was lucky enough to spend a year dining, drinking and debating – in the conference room of the Villa Jaffé, but also under the solicitous eyes of the merry Greek waiters at “Ach Niko Ach”, our preferred after-seminar restaurant (and for good reason – delicious food *and* free ouzo!).

It was also during this year that Georges Khalil hatched the idea for “Europe in the Middle East – the Middle East in Europe”, the five-year postdoctoral research program that would replace the expiring AKMI. Together with Friederike Pannewick, Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus, Shereen Abou El Naga and Kader Konuk, we were able to knit together a proposal for a Literature module (“Travelling Traditions: Comparative Perspectives on Middle Eastern Literatures”) that, together with modules in Urban History, Quran Studies and Islamic Discourse, produced an original and ambitious, interdisciplinary (and most importantly, successful) new research program on the Middle East and Europe. The program – inaugurated in 2006 and running till 2011 – brings ten young scholars from the Middle East, Europe and the US to Berlin each year. It is a joint endeavour of three institutions, the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, the Fritz Thyssen Foundation and the Wissenschaftskolleg. It is funded by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation and will sponsor all sorts of fabulous seminars, workshops and summer academies.

The first of these summer academies was organized around “Travelling Traditions”, the Literature module of “Europe in the Middle East – The Middle East in Europe” (EUME) and took place in Beirut in October 2006. The country had just emerged from the brutal devastation of the Israeli bombardment, the air and sea blockades had just been lifted and the airport was once again open for civilian traffic. Still, the situation on the ground was far from clear but nonetheless, we organizers (Georges Khalil, myself, Friederike Pannewick, Angelika Neuwirth and Maher Jarrar of the Anis Makdisi Program for Literary Studies at the American University of Beirut) as well as the overwhelming majority of the Academy’s selected participants decided to go ahead with the schedule as planned, and I for one, am very glad we did, because the Beirut Summer Academy was a truly exciting and fulfilling experience on a multiplicity of levels. Also on the EUME agenda for 2007: a June workshop on translation studies that will bring together eminent scholars in the field from Europe, the US, Asia and the Middle East and a major exhibition on contemporary Arab art in the wake of 9/11, curated by Catherine David and scheduled for December 2007/January 2008 at the Berlin House of World Cultures.

Terrific! An exception *bilan*, all told, and when I add to that the not inconsiderable printed matter read (courtesy of Frau Bottomley and her indefatigable staff), the seminar papers and book chapters written, and the exquisite St. Emilion shared with some of the world’s most distinguished scholars, I want to thank and thank again the Wissenschaftskolleg from top to bottom and from all my heart for making it actually possible.