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Counterproxy: Sonallah Ibrahim's *Warda* and the Revolution in Oman

In Muscat, the coastal capital of the Sultanate of Oman, the Sultan's Armed Forces Museum resides in a verdant valley in an otherwise parched and placid landscape. Inside, the exhibits proceed chronologically and vertically, with each level progressing in historical time and displaying a different chapter of Oman's military history. The first level begins with the spread of Islam in the seventh century, and the second floor treats the arrival of the Portuguese in the Arabian Peninsula during the early sixteenth century. "It never occurred to Ahmed bin Majid that Vasco da Gama was the spearhead of Portuguese imperialist expansion in the region," the display concludes. The tour culminates in a series of rooms dedicated to the suppression of the Dhofar Revolution (1963–76), an event that is represented as a triumph in the nation's history—and, in some sense, as the end of history in Oman.

In the museum's narrative, the Omani state—led by the young sultan Qaboos bin Saïd, who in 1970 deposed his father, Sultan Saïd bin Taimur, with British aid—achieves victory over an insurgency radicalized by an external ideology: communism, which was determined to enslave the country to foreign elements. On this logic, the Dhofar revolutionaries posed a threat just as inimical to the nation's Islamic identity and ancient heritage as the encroachments of Western colonialism. To vanquish this foreign threat was to remove the only major obstacle to national unity and petroleum-sponsored prosperity.

What began as a small-scale insurgency in a remote, neglected region of southern Oman blossomed into a revolution and international proxy war when in 1968 it adopted the mantle of the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Peninsula. As in many conflicts of the global Cold War, each side of the Dhofar Revolution received backing from larger powers exploiting an opportunity to advance their respective geopolitical goals. Supported by China and the Soviet Union, which sought to extend their influence in the Middle East, as well as by regional actors in the Arab world, the

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insurgency led by the Dhofar Liberation Front aimed to expel the British from the Gulf, promote anticolonial solidarity across the Arab world, and unify the Arab emirates into a socialist state.[1] In 1976, the sultan's military vanquished the Dhofar insurgents, a victory that remains for Western military intellectuals a rare example of successful counterinsurgency waged in the late twentieth century.

Yet if the Dhofar Revolution fits the profile of a proxy war in certain respects, the category of proxy war also reproduces a tendency in Cold War historiography to reduce anticolonial actors to the role of pawns. This approach leaves scant room for the revolutionary aspirations and collective dream worlds of historical agents who utilized the limited tools at their disposal to decolonize and transform their societies. To acknowledge this point and study its ramifications not only captures the agency and aspirations of the colonized but also illuminates how, in some instances, they succeeded in escalating conflicts for their own purposes and manipulating their patrons in unacknowledged ways.[2]

The discourse of proxy war and counterinsurgency may suppress the collective dream world of the Dhofar revolutionaries, but their political imagination is evocatively captured in Egyptian novelist Sonallah Ibrahim's brilliant novel *Warda*, published in Arabic in 2000 and translated masterfully into English by Hosam Aboul-Ela in 2021. Warda is the eponymous protagonist of Ibrahim's novel, a young Omani female militant who evolves into a leader in the Dhofar Revolution. The unique elements of this novel—its panoramic view of the global decolonization movement; its creation of the indefatigable Warda, a female revolutionary unexampled in Arabic fiction; its depiction of what is now known as a Gulf petrostate—are a timely complement to the discourse of counterinsurgency that dominates scholarly discussion of the Dhofar Revolution.

Warda, however, is not only a memorial of fading anticolonial dreams. Ibrahim's historical novel of Dhofar, I argue, narrates the rise of petroleum-fueled modernization in Oman and the Arabian Peninsula as a more effective mode of counterinsurgency over the long run than the military approach. Unlike counterinsurgency and national security discourse, Ibrahim's novel is all too aware of how the oil industry and its economic largesse subsumes and obsolesces military counterinsurgency as a mode of managing internal dissent.

I. Proxy War and Counterinsurgency

Geopolitically, the union of *proxy war* and *insurgency* produces a multiplication: rather than a one-on-one contest such as colonizer versus

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colonized, the counterinsurgency as proxy war spills out into an international arena with globally disparate actors and combatants. Yet this combination can also confound certain parameters and alliances that counterinsurgency attempts to fix in place.

Among the numerous proxy wars of the Cold War and decolonization era, the relatively obscure Dhofar Revolution stands out for one key reason: it is a rare example of counterinsurgent victory. To be sure, what counts as a "victory" from the point of view of the counterinsurgent is a complex and contested matter, and military intellectuals disagree about what constitutes winning and losing in general, and about the historical evidence that underwrites assessments of particular cases. Yet by most measures the Dhofar insurgency exemplifies a counterinsurgent victory in theory and praxis.

From this (counterinsurgent) point of view, victory is defined not only by the defeat of the insurgent force and the continued occupation of foreign territory but also by the ideological conscription of the population into the state's objectives. Few modern counterinsurgencies can be said to have achieved even one of these objectives. Indeed, most Western-led counterinsurgencies, from Algeria to Vietnam to Iraq, achieve the opposite: hostility from the occupied population, staggering violence and destruction, growth of the insurgency, international condemnation, ignominious retreat.[3] How did Oman and its British partners avoid this fate? What are the historical forces hidden from view in the proud display of Omani military triumph enshrined in the Sultan's Armed Forces Museum? What happened to the revolutionary spirit, nearly forgotten today, that swept the Arabian Peninsula in the 1960s?

The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics and International Relations defines proxy wars as "conflicts in which a third party intervenes indirectly in a preexisting war in order to influence the strategic outcome in favor of its preferred faction. Proxy wars are the product of a relationship between a benefactor who is a state or non-state actor external to the dynamic of the existing conflict (for example, a civil war) and the chosen proxies who are the conduit for the benefactor's weapons, training, and funding." The role of the benefactor is key in the Dhofar case, as the Omani sultan relied on longstanding relationships of protection with the British Empire, whose support—especially in the form of air power—was decisive to the Omani victory. "In short," this entry continues, "proxy wars are the replacement for states and non-state actors to further their own strategic goals yet at the same time avoid engaging in direct, costly, and bloody warfare." By assessing risks of military engagement, states and nonstate actors engage in proxy wars when they determine that direct intervention is too costly—politically, financially, or materially—and either avoidable or untenable. With the advent of nuclear weapons, the Cold War "ensured more acute selectivity in conflict

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engagement," prompting larger powers, increasingly, to execute proxy wars as a way to advance their interests.[4] Key examples of proxy wars in the Cold War include the US-backed Afghan *mujahedeen* in the Soviet Union in 1979 and the Soviet use of Cuban proxy forces during the Angola civil war. For a contemporary case, the *Oxford Dictionary* reference cites the Iranian sponsorship of Shia militias fighting the US military during the occupation of Iraq from 2003 to 2011.

This reference provides a useful normative definition in the political science field, but the single term *proxy* encompasses a richer terrain of meaning. Originating in the sixteenth century as a variant of the noun *procuracy*, the word occupies two distinct realms of signification: "senses relating to representation" and "senses relating to provision." In the former, proxy denotes "the agency of a person appointed to act in place of another; the action of a substitute or deputy; by the agency of another; by or through a substitute; not in person." Proxy war, then, is but one compound term emerging from a plethora of relations of representation and provision; other compounds include *proxy help*, *proxy marriage*, *proxy prayer*, *proxy vote*, *proxy fight*, *proxy server*, and so on.[5] These varied meanings raise the following question: in a proxy war, whose agency is capable of representation? The proxy war concept threatens to diminish or even obliterate insurgent agency, insofar as the actions and intentions of the insurgent are seen as subordinate to those of the more powerful designating authority. In the Cold War context, the Soviet Union and China stood as the delegators of proxies in the communist sphere, while the United States, Britain, and France played a similar role in the democratic capitalist order. Yet proxy wars often emerge because of insurgent initiative. Unless their economic interests are directly at stake, large powers desire nothing more than to remain uninvolved in a peripheral conflict but are compelled to intervene on the basis of extant ideological or political commitments.

This point notwithstanding, insofar as representation and agency are entwined in a proxy relationship, agency in any given situation seems necessarily to reside in the procurer. This point is worth underscoring in the context of Cold War studies and its representation of insurgent agency. In nineteenth-century colonial India, argues Ranajit Guha in his classic 1983 essay "The Prose of Counterinsurgency," no major insurgency occurred without serious deliberation among multiple actors. Because of the peril associated with organized rebellion, it was a course of last resort—and whether executed on a smaller or a larger scale, insurgency was the product of planning and collective action. Yet colonial historiography consistently portrayed "peasant insurgency" as a nearly instinctual affair, devoid of rational processes. That is why the British colonial archive, especially after the Sepoy Uprising of 1807, is replete with natural metaphors of insurgent action. In Guha's retelling, insurgencies "break out

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like thunder storms, heave like earthquakes, spread like wildfires, infect like epidemics. In other words, when the proverbial clod of earth turns, this is a matter to be explained in terms of natural history." Yet peasant insurgencies were anything but natural phenomena, even when their agents seemed most desperate. "Either way, insurgency is regarded as *external* to the peasant's consciousness and Cause is made to stand in as a phantom surrogate for Reason, the logic of that consciousness."[6] If Guha compensates for this problem by overinvesting insurgents with rational consciousness, his point remains central to any account of the theory and praxis of counterinsurgency. This structural element of the prose of counterinsurgency produces an aporia at the level of subaltern agency.[7]

This aporia marks Cold War historiography, which tends to emphasize the outsized role of the US and the Soviet Union in fomenting foreign intervention and proxy wars in the Third World.[8] Useful for illuminating the tentacular reach of the Cold War superpowers, and how their interventionism has shaped the postcolonial world, this overemphasis also obscures the revolutionary agency of Third World actors and relegates their historicity and insurgent activities to the field of counterinsurgency and national security studies. Thus the Dhofar Revolution and the wider anticolonial movement of the Arabian Peninsula remain locked in the counterinsurgency literature.[9] Dhofar matters in this literature insofar as the conflict was, in the field's argot, a COIN win (an acronym for "counterinsurgency") and therefore a useful case study for future military operations.[10] For this reason among others, historian Abdel Razzaq Takriti in his book *Monsoon Revolution: Republicans, Sultans, and Empires in Oman, 1965–1976* pursues the revisionist "project of re-writing the history of Arab revolutions and revolutionaries in a way that frees them from their current imprisonment in colonial accounts, counterinsurgency studies, official histories, and contemporary auto-critiques." Much of the story of Dhofar, according to Takriti, belongs "to the realm of the 'Bandung Spirit' and the tricontinental era, reflecting a shift in modern Arab political and intellectual history."[11] This revolutionary shift did not go entirely unnoticed by contemporaneous observers in the West, but it hardly ranks in Anglophone historiography as among the pivotal (or even peripheral) Cold War conflicts and decolonization movements.[12] In what follows, I turn to *Warda* for its recuperation of the Dhofar Revolution and the novel's distillation of political lessons in the present.

II. *Warda* and the Omani Petrostate

Warda imagines this seismic shift in Omani and Arab history through an opening conceit that establishes a complex mode of narration,

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switching between Egypt of the 1990s, Beirut in the early 1960s, and Oman from 1960 to the 90s. The novel features two distinct voices: Rushdy, the cynical, world-weary journalist and main narrator; and Warda (a nom de guerre that means “rose” in Arabic; her given name is Shahla), the idealistic protagonist whose diary retrospectively narrates the action in Dhofar. With its two narrative personas the novel captures a dizzying array of interconnected events, told from both a revolutionary and a jaded point of view.

At the outset of the novel, Rushdy is haunted in his dreams by Warda, whom he has secretly loved since their university days in Cairo. When he decides to visit Oman, Warda’s homeland, “her nocturnal visits ceased.”[13] Shortly after his arrival, a mysterious visitor delivers Warda’s diary to Rushdy, prompting him to retrace her steps in the revolution three decades earlier. When Rushdy arrives in Muscat in December 1992, he reunites with a cousin, Fathy, and his wife, Shafiqa. Through these Egyptian transplants to Oman, Ibrahim critiques the commercialism and enforced quiescence of Gulf society and gauges how the rise of oil prosperity in the Gulf impacts individual subjectivities. As these characters are all Egyptians of the same generation, their shared memory of the Abdel Nasser era—the apex of pan-Arab socialism and anticolonial internationalism—furnishes a shared, if fractured, political lens and frame of reference through which to assess Oman and the Gulf.

Ibrahim’s own perspective on this history is extraordinary. As a young left-wing intellectual, he was imprisoned for seven years under a round-up of suspected communists by Nasser’s regime. As Rushdy, Ibrahim’s fictional alter ego, recalls matter-of-factly: “Finally, at the midnight hour on the first day of the new year 1959, pretty much everyone—including me—was arrested and sent off to prison” (49). Nothing else is said of his imprisonment. Given his experience, it would seem that Ibrahim exercises extraordinary restraint—and consummate literary skill—when he registers, dispassionately, the meaning of Nasserism in Egypt and the Arab world at large.[14] But such distance is necessary to dramatize the revolutionary ferment in the Arab world that the defiant Egyptian leader embodied: “When Abdel Nasser nationalized the economy,” Rushdy recalls in a didactic but necessary reminder, “liberating it from foreign hegemony, building a productive public sector, closing off opportunities for comprador capitalists in league with the West, and committing to a comprehensive program of economic development based on national popular goals, there was no choice for any true patriot but to stand behind him” (37). The Nasserist ethos did not survive his death in 1970, at least at the level of the Egyptian state (other rising leaders, such as Moammar Gaddafi, sought to emulate him). But Nasser and Nasserism form the ideological and geopolitical backdrop of this novel and its panoramic vision of pan-Arab aspiration at midcentury.

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The defiant Nasserist ethos encountered a powerful counterforce in the onset of the oil industry in the Arabian Peninsula. Ibrahim's portrayal of Muscat in 1992 coincides with the publication in the same year of Amitav Ghosh's key essay "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel," a lengthy review of Saudi-Jordanian writer Abdulrahman Munif's landmark trilogy, *Cities of Salt*. Comparing the rise of the oil industry with the spice trade—both enterprises unique in their capacity to "generate far-flung political, military, and cultural encounters"—Ghosh notes that the former has thus far failed to produce a literature on par with the latter's. Though subsequent years have witnessed several petrofictions of the kind Ghosh has in mind, there is a reason, he observes, for its absence in the last decades of the twentieth century: neither the American and British oil entrepreneurs nor the Gulf inhabitants know very much "about the human experiences that surround the production of oil." "A great deal has been invested," Ghosh writes, "in ensuring the muteness of the Oil Encounter: on the American (or Western) side, through regimes of strict corporate secrecy; on the Arab side, by the physical and demographic separation of oil installations and their workers from the indigenous population."[15] Ghosh observes that Western media portray democratic tendencies in the Arabian peninsula as a consequence of the oil economy and its dissolution of "traditional" society, when in fact the exact "opposite is true: oil and the developments it has brought in its wake have been directly responsible for the suppression of whatever democratic aspirations and tendencies there were within the region."[16] *Warda* can be understood as an excavation of this suppressed democratic—indeed, radically anticapitalist—activism brewing in the Gulf that was successfully pacified by the distribution of oil-sponsored wealth and the covert management of international labor.

In the novel, monumental changes in infrastructure parallel palpable changes among the society's inhabitants. When Fathy, a devotee of Sultan Qaboos's modernizing vision, picks up Rushdy from the airport, Rushdy notices that his cousin, known as a reckless driver in Cairo, is careful, seatbelt-strapped, obedient to the laws in his adopted country of Oman. Secular back in Cairo, Shafiqa projects a devout demeanor in Muscat. The streets are well lit, scantly populated, full of speed bumps, clean and smooth, flanked by stylish storefronts and glittering hotels. Numerous streets are named after Sultan Qaboos. Is everything named after him? Rushdy asks. "Same as happens back home," Fathy answers. "Anyway, he has the right. This country was nothing before he took over" (4). Fathy may genuinely believe in the sultan's earned authority, but the novel undercuts such views by highlighting the state's pervasive surveillance and regimes of indoctrination that even discerning expats cannot resist.

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This atmosphere of reconnaissance might explain the absence of crime in Oman, but other factors are at work. There is little burglary in Oman, Rushdy learns, because Omanis want for nothing, and the guest workers from India, Pakistan, and the Philippines are deported at the "mere whiff of theft" (5). The precarious and exploitative character of migrant labor in Oman is a key theme in the novel. Rushdy glances "at an Indian in yellow overalls pushing a trash cart" and asks Fathy:

> "Why don't they bring in Arab workers? We have plenty of unemployed."
>
> "An Indian will sleep in the open, and if he gets laid off, he quietly goes out and looks for other work. The Arab, in contrast, loves to complain and stir things up."
>
> "How so?"
>
> "Well, he might demand his rights, for example." (10)

Rushdy soon learns that even Arab expats, if they run afoul of the familial networks underlying corporate hierarchies in Oman, are swiftly jettisoned back to their home countries.

As Ghosh understood, the situation described in this exchange reflects an effective strategy of social stratification designed to keep the oil industry "workers quiescent": "the powers-that-be in the oil sheikhdoms" "have held the Arab component of their work forces at a strictly regulated numerical level, while importing large numbers of migrants from several of the poorer countries of Asia." In the short run, Ghosh writes, the policy has proven "magically effective": "it has created a class of workers who, being separated from the indigenous population (and from each other) by barriers of culture and language, are politically passive in a way that a predominantly Arab work force could never be within the Arab-speaking [*sic*] world—a class that is all the more amenable to control for living perpetually under threat of deportation."[17] This mode of stratification functions to pacify migrants and indigenous populations alike while creating a veneer of social cohesion and equilibrium.

But for this formula to work, the government must subsidize the material needs of its native citizenry, who—in contrast to other Gulf countries—comprise a majority of the population. When Rushdy and Fathy stop to get gas at a British Petroleum station near the airport, Rushdy notices a neighborhood of single-story track homes with small yards, fences separating each house, air-conditioning units, and large water tanks. Fathy explains that these are "public housing units for less wealthy citizens who could choose between living there or receiving a 6,000-riyal grant to refurbish their older houses" (24). The proximity of British Petroleum to the housing complex indicates to readers the provenance of this government subsidy. Readers are not informed, however, of where the migrant class resides, which perhaps is the point; their visibility must not intrude on the chimera of universal prosperity.

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A spectral presence in the novel, migrants are ubiquitous in Oman but concealed in its topography.

Yet, for all of the wealth generated by the commercialization of oil in Oman, a subtle anxiety haunts its beneficiaries. "Are all the changes since oil began to be commercially exported in 1967 and since Qaboos bin Sa'id al-Bu Sa'id became Sultan real?" asks Mandana E. Limbert. "Or is it a dream? Will all the apparent wealth and infrastructural glamour disappear?" In the course of her ethnographic studies, Limbert "came to see that Oman's post-1970 era of political stability, oil wealth, prosperity, and modernity—no matter how tenuous, unevenly distributed, or experienced as successful or failed—was also often understood as *anomalous*."[18] In other words, this period was understood by Omanis then and now as an ephemeral temporality: a time between poverty and wealth, between instability and stability, that resembled a dream-state more than an economic and political reality.

III. *Warda*, Dhofar, and World Revolution

Dhofar was an asymmetrical war, and eventually the combined force of the British and sultanate armies overpowered their militarily weaker enemy. British historical memory celebrates its reinforcement of the sultan's air force, noting not only the strategic military advantage but also how air power enhanced the provision of food, communication, supplies, and medical care—the "Hearts and Minds" component of the counterinsurgency campaign.[19]

Yaarib, Warda's brother and fellow revolutionary (and possible murderer), portrays in detail aerial bombardments by the British:

> The British attacked people's houses and dive-bombed the entire area with their air force. Even sources of water were bombed. The people took refuge in caves. But the British sent in paratroopers, and they managed to occupy part of the hill country by coordinating with a double agent who had fought alongside them in Kenya before joining the freedom fighters. They managed to take several rebel leaders prisoner and put them in a dungeon under Al-Jalali fortress. They burned the crops of everyone else, destroyed their houses, and confiscated their property. (48)

The novel does not neglect on-the-ground operations and other tried-and-true methods of counterinsurgency. In her journal entry on January 5, 1967, Warda records that "Amnesty International has exposed the styles of torture used by the British authorities: removal of fingernails, breaking of bones, filling up internal organs with water, hanging upside down by the ankles." Warda then observes: "Three-fifths of Britain's total petroleum reserves come from the Arabian Gulf." For its part, the "Sultan's forces have carried out revenge campaigns involving the abuse of women and children. Their

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infantry burned down straw huts and blew up water wells. They resorted to taking family members hostage in order to force those accused of cooperating with the Front to surrender. We made the decision to respond boldly" (117). The novel's graphic depiction of asymmetrical warfare in Dhofar seems calibrated, in part, to undercut the normative notion that proxy war is less violent and inhumane than direct military intervention—a notion repeated in the previously cited *Oxford Dictionary* entry on proxy war.

In 1967, Warda records the devastating moment of Egypt's defeat in its war with Israel, which would have been recalled with sorrow and disappointment by most Arabs of that generation. "Newspapers describing the dark days made it to us. I studied the photo of Abdel Nasser's despondent face. What happened to that familiar image of him, exuberant and beaming, with his familiar smile and eyes sparkling with confidence?" (131). This juxtaposition of exuberance and despondency is a fitting image of frustrated dreams and a harbinger of things to come in Dhofar.

Egypt's dramatic war with Israel in 1967 overshadows the revolution in Oman—a revolution that, as Takriti observes, goes by any name other than *revolution.* Takriti observes that most Western analyses of the Dhofar Revolution refer to the event as a rebellion, an insurgency, or an uprising—not as a revolution. "Although it is one of the most dynamic words available," he writes, "'revolution' is often viewed from a static lens, describing a moment when a particular order is completely overthrown. In this understanding, the term suggests a beginning leading to an end, an act defined only by its climax. The focus is upon the criterion of success: a process that leads to the overthrow of an order is a revolution; processes that fail to do so are given lesser designations—'rebellion,' 'revolt,' 'uprising,' 'insurrection.'" But this conception of revolution reduces complex processes to their end result—designating them as either successes or failures—and therefore overlooks substantive revolutionary elements. Once one shifts focus from the final outcome to the process of revolutionary endeavor, Takriti continues, a different picture emerges. For over a decade, the revolutionaries in Dhofar controlled a large territory, independent of the British or sultan's authority, and created their own institutions and radically changed the social order. For the generation who inhabited Dhofar, there is no question that they experienced this time *as* a revolution touching every dimension of their lives. Takriti writes:

> So comprehensive were the transformations that took place that it would be both insufficient and inaccurate to describe this period in Dhufar solely as a revolutionary situation. Changes included: the creation of an entirely new civic space under a unified revolutionary authority; the abolition of slavery; the introduction—for the first time since the arrival of Islam—of new supratribal identities; the suppression of sheikhs; the rise of members from lower tribes and slave backgrounds into positions

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> of leadership; the arrival of reading, writing, and contemporary medicine; the introduction of new crops; the spread of modern ideologies; the Arabization and Omanization, from below, of Dhufari identity, language and culture; and, above all, the waging of a protracted armed struggle. Moreover, although the ancien regime of the Sultanate was never destroyed, a temporary transfer of power occurred in large sectors of the Dhufari highlands, territories that the revolutionaries called the liberated areas.[20]

As *Warda* makes clear, Dhofar was undoubtedly a revolution for all the reasons that Takriti invokes, but it was also connected to, and understood itself as part of, a global revolution.

Oscillating between 1960s revolutionary and 1990s petrostate Oman, *Warda* incorporates virtually every twist and turn of the decolonization era. Staying abreast of current political events via the occasional newspaper and especially the *Voice of the Arabs* radio broadcast from Cairo, Warda notes in her diary each development of interest pertaining to the colonized world and its oppressors: the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in the Congo; the vicissitudes of communist rivalry in Sudan; the violent war in Vietnam; the spread of Maoism; the ambivalent role of the Soviet Union in Third World affairs; the Palestinian liberation movement; socialist initiative in Venezuela; Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, and the Cuban Revolution; collectivization, Marxism, agrarianism, proletarian internationalism, comprador capitalism, tribalism, education and consciousness-raising, and much more. Warda's perennial challenge is to help her comrades to understand that their struggle is indeed parallel with and integral to the multitude of revolutionary movements sweeping the globe.

In preparation for the Dhofar Liberation Front's Second Congress, Warda composes a communiqué called "Thought Should Control the Rifle" that discusses the meaning of organized revolutionary violence. She distills the main points in her diary: "First, we distinguish between our movement and earlier tribal uprisings. Tribal violence is random, lacking a system or a goal. It produces not revolutionaries, but rebels: people who take up arms against the authorities but lack the thought that controls the arms. They have no revolutionary vision." Warda then adds, parenthetically, that neither does the majority view of the armed Palestinian struggle, "which gives the weapon almost magical powers in the process of building a revolutionary consciousness: 'Abu Ammar has declared the rifle the supreme leader of the revolution in Palestine'" (139). True revolutionary force, according to Warda, consists of revolutionary consciousness plus an organized system. But how, she asks, "can the transition from blind tribal loyalty to sound revolutionary allegiances come about? That goes back first of all to making sound connections between general Marxist principles and the particular situation of Dhofar, which is distinctive from that of either China or Vietnam, for example, in that

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it is less developed and it has not yet produced a large class of landlords or a comprador bourgeoisie, like the ones in the Gulf States" (139). For Ibrahim, such revolutionary ardor may belong to the not-too-distant past, but his novel resurrects this forgotten era in the service of a fierce critique of the indifferent Gulf comprador class and the opulence of their societies.

In her strenuous effort to teach and organize the Dhofaris under her command, Warda learns about her comrades and their history, language, and customs. Along the way, she also discovers that many of her comrades are of African descent. Indeed, the novel highlights how many of the illiterate revolutionaries-in-training were once enslaved or are descendants of enslaved East Africans—the Black Omanis who are the product of the Indian Ocean slave trade. Likewise, on his trip to Muscat, Rushdy rides with an Omani, Zayed, a former revolutionary who points out and explains the various monuments in the city. At the British embassy Zayed says: "In the past, slaves could come to this flagpole and touch it. Then they'd be granted total freedom and offered a certificate from the embassy to certify that they were free and that no one could claim them." Rushdy thinks, "I liked this idea. I imagined a similar flagpole in every Arab capital" (144). Puzzlingly, this passage associates the abolition of slavery in Oman with British involvement rather than the Dhofari revolutionaries who sought total equality and abolition. Even Rushdy fails to notice his companion's attribution of abolition to colonial discipline.

This embedded history of enslavement—and its abolition, which Takriti cites as one of the major achievements of the Dhofar Revolution—is a subtle but key theme in *Warda*. In the Arabic text as well as its English translation, *Warda* consistently refers to the Blackness and African origins of the Dhofar revolutionaries. But what does Blackness mean in this context? The answer to this question is complex; it does not mean what Blackness means in a transatlantic context. As young students walking the streets of Cairo, Warda (then Shahla) explains to Rushdy: "You haven't witnessed anything like the common scenes in our cities. Such as a man walking down the street with shackles on his ankles. Anyone with power could order the binding in metal chains, for several days or even months, of someone who displeased him. The poor person, who was usually a slave being punished by his master, would have to go about his normal workday as though being shackled were nothing" (45). Warda then tells an anecdote about a white girl who was sold into slavery and purchased by a Saudi ambassador as a gift for a prince in Sana. For Ibrahim, the point is the utterly quotidian character of slavery in prerevolutionary Arabia—and the rupture that the Dhofar Revolution introduced into Gulf society. But by noting the African features of every Afro-Omani character, the narrative establishes a clear color division that applies pressure to the state's homogenization of its native citizenry.

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Unlike Warda's, Rushdy's color consciousness calls attention to the history of enslavement and its afterlives in the region. When he is touring Muscat with Bilal, a shadowy character described only as "Khalaf's dark-skinned friend," Bilal explains the history of a port once visited by Marco Polo and then Ibn Battuta in the early fourteenth century. "The winds that blow in from the northeast this time of year carried ships filled with palm dates and frankincense to the coast of Africa," Bilal explains. "In April, when the winds turned around and came from the southwest, they returned loaded with African ivory, honey, and tortoise shell used to make dagger handles" (201). Listening to this history lesson, Rushdy thinks: "*Would it have brought some of his ancestors in shackles?*" (202). Rushdy's knowing question is the proverbial gunshot in a theater. Despite her sensitivity to all forms of inequality, Warda never quite connects the African people in her battalion, or their marginalization within Omani society, to the Indian Ocean slave trade. It is as though her commitment to complete equality prevents her from seeing Afro-Omanis as differentiated by historical enslavement, even as she militates for the abolition of slavery. Ibrahim uses the character of Rushdy, by contrast, to expose the contemporary state's effort to silence this past, and thus to erase ethnic difference in favor of an ahistorical narrative of Omani colorblindness and national unity—according to which any Omani can in principle grow rich, irrespective of skin color. In this way, Ibrahim juxtaposes the historical enslavement of East Africans with contemporary migrant labor. Whereas migrants are excluded from the benefits of Omani citizenship, Black Omanis in the post-Revolution era—despite the persistence of color prejudice—enjoy the significant benefits of citizenship. For this reason, Rushdy comments to himself on Bilal's slave ancestry, even if he cannot bring himself to vocalize this thought with his interlocutor.

IV. Conclusion: Who Is Warda? Oman at the End of History

The cover image of the Arabic version of *Warda* foregrounds a young woman, her gaze somewhat distant and contemplative against a burnt-orange sky, her arms holding a machine gun, probably a Kalashnikov. She sits atop an illustrated cityscape, presumably of Dhofar, her body out of proportion to the tiny buildings, streets, and palm trees she rests upon. She is larger than life. Inside the book, the publisher credits (in Arabic) the cover image as a photograph of a fighter in the Dhofar Liberation Front, taken on May 20, 1971.[21] The arresting verisimilitude of the photograph superimposed on an artistically rendered, miniaturized cityscape contrasts sharply with the cover of the new English translation. In this image, the female figure appears, rather inexplicably, to wear a headscarf, her visage further obscured

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by pixelation and a cluster of green rolling hills. Only her left eye is visible. There is an irony to these dual images for the same book: in the Arabic version, the revolutionary female body and face are on full display—a corporeal and political visuality that is imagined as taboo in Arabic culture—whereas the English version obscures the female body and face. Is this latter image a capitulation to Western stereotypes of Muslim femininity—a more comprehensible figure than a female Arab revolutionary? Or is this image symptomatic of another modality of representation—the veiled, inscrutable female terrorist who uses her native garb to conceal both weapons and her intentions? Or perhaps Warda is inscrutable on some deeper level. Perhaps, but such inscrutability seems to be at odds with the character of Warda herself, who is fully, almost implausibly, legible and consistent in her motivations—despite the fact that she vanishes mysteriously in the novel. As Hosam Aboul-Ela observes, for Warda, "both hearing news of a revolutionary movement thousands of miles away and falling in love with a fellow guerilla can move her profoundly in equal measure. Thus, she is unusually complete as a feeling human being, to a point that some readers will find her unimaginable."[22]

Though I concede that Western stereotypes may explain the contrast in imagery here, perhaps another possibility motivates the composition of the English-market edition. As a symbol of revolutionary dreams deferred, the mystery of Warda arguably has more to do with late twentieth-century struggles in contemporary Oman than with the inscrutability of the character herself. These struggles pit the remnants of the revolution against the comprador state class represented by the sultan and his acolytes:

> They've been making claims that this friend of yours, Warda, had called for negotiating with the authorities and giving up the armed struggle. You know she's a mythical figure around here. Her disappearance is still a mystery. No one knows exactly what happened. Personally, I believe her comrades executed her. There are some who think she's still alive and will reappear when the moment is right. She's like the Mahdi. So you see, that's why the search for the truth about her is essential for this ongoing struggle against the opportunists. (148)

The mysteriousness of Warda, then, signifies a struggle over the meaning of the past: did the revolution remain true to its aspirations, or did it ultimately give in? Did the revolution actually have something better to offer than the sultan's generous, petroleum-backed welfare state? What vestiges of the Dhofar Revolution remain useful in the twenty-first-century Gulf—in this ostensibly posthistorical moment?

At the outset of this essay, I suggested that the display on the Dhofar Revolution in the Sultan's Armed Forces Museum in Muscat is triumphant: it represents victory over the country's major ideological and military impediment to national unity and prosperity and in that sense represents the end of

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history in Oman. The end of history, of course, will look different in the Gulf than it will in Western societies, but both historical trajectories enshrine late capitalism as the telos of historical development and the horizon of political possibility. With his landmark novel, *Warda*—a revolutionary time capsule whose contents are recovered, unpacked, and infused into numerous temporalities—Ibrahim is not so certain: the future will have the final word.

Notes

1. Generally, I try to avoid the colonial construction "Middle East" in favor of geographical descriptors such as the Arabian Peninsula, the Maghreb, the Levant, Western Asia, and so on, but I employ the term here as it was used and understood in this historical context and by internal and external actors.
2. I develop this argument—about the capacity of Third World actors to exercise agency and to manipulate rival geopolitical blocs—in Vaughn Rasberry, *Race and the Totalitarian Century: Geopolitics in the Black Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA, 2016).
3. The literature on counterinsurgency by military intellectuals is replete with diagnoses and explanations of why counterinsurgency routinely fails, but the solution for these authors is seldom less war or a different strategy but rather better and more counterinsurgency. See, for example, Dennis de Tray, *Why Counterinsurgency Fails: The US in Iraq and Afghanistan* (Cham, Switzerland, 2019).
4. Andrew Mumford, "proxy war," in *The Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics and International Relations*, ed. Garrett W. Brown, Iain McLean, and Alistair McMillan, 4th ed. (Oxford, 2018).
5. *OED Online*, s.v. "proxy, adj."
6. Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Oxford, 1988), 46–47.
7. In *Epidemic Empire*, Anjuli Raza Kolb extends Guha's thesis into the post-9/11 era, even as she demonstrates, like Guha, that the rhetoric and metaphors of rebellion in counterinsurgent discourse reach back into the nineteenth century. Kolb writes: "Terrorism is a disease. An infection. An epidemic. A plague. We have heard these phrases thousands of times since the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001. . . . This favorite figure did not originate in the twenty-first century; it is a thoroughly colonial metaphor—one whose translation and circulation between times and places is isomorphic with the reach and endurance of the vast empires of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. . . . Both in the pre-Raj British empire and in the present—as well as many turbulent moments between—the dual figure of the Muslim insurgency and the terror epidemic function as philosophical paradigms of extremity that enable the consolidation of imperial power from the very highest levels of government to the most granular structures of feeling to which this power owes its social, cultural, and material longevity"; Anjuli Raza Kolb, *Epidemic Empire: Colonialism, Contagion, and Terror, 1817–2020* (Chicago, 2021), 2–3.
8. For a synthetic account of military interventions in the Third World by the United States and the Soviet Union, see Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, 2011). For an

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account focused on US foreign policy and its relation to desegregation and domestic race politics, see Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, MA, 2003).

9. There is, however, a burgeoning critical literature on counterinsurgency, distinct from that produced by military intellectuals, war veterans, and RAND Corporation scholars. See Bernard E. Harcourt, *The Counterrevolution: How Our Government Went to War Against Its Own Citizens* (New York, 2018); Laleh Khalili, *Time in the Shadows: Confinement in Counterinsurgencies* (Stanford, 2012); Patricia Owens, *Economy of Force: Counterinsurgency and the Historical Rise of the Social* (Cambridge, 2016); Dylan Rodríguez, "Weaponized Study in a Moment of (Counter)Insurgency: The Gathering Anti-'American' of American Studies," *American Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (June 2022): 199–212; and Stuart Schrader, *Badges Without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing* (Berkeley, 2019).
10. For Dhofar as a case study of a "COIN win," see Colin P. Clarke, Molly Dunigan, Beth Grill, and Christopher Paul, eds., *Paths to Victory: Detailed Insurgency Case Studies* (RAND Corporation, 2013); and Martin Myklebust and Tom Orderman, "Six Requirements for Success in Modern Counterinsurgency," *Small Wars Journal* (2013), https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/six-requirements-for-success-in-modern-counterinsurgency.
11. Abdel Razzaq Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution: Republicans, Sultans, and Empires in Oman, 1965–1976* (Oxford, 2013), 2–3.
12. "Following the Portuguese retreat from Africa and the defeat of US imperialism in Indochina," observes the *New Left Review* in 1975, Dhofar "is the only revolutionary war of any significant military dimensions taking place in the world today." In contrast to other such wars, the article continues, it has "been met by almost complete silence on the part of the imperialist press and the public attention devoted to it contrasts significantly with the immense strategic importance which the war for control of Oman now has"; *NLR* editors, "Introduction to 'British Troops in Oman,'" *New Left Review* 1, no. 92 (July/August 1975): 109. See also Fred Halliday, "Counter-Revolution in the Yemen," *New Left Review* 1, no. 63 (September/October 1970): 3–25.
13. Sonallah Ibrahim, *Warda: A Novel*, trans. Hosam Aboul-Ela (New Haven, 2021), 3. Further citations will be parenthetical in text.
14. For a surrealist take on this experience, see Sonallah Ibrahim's short novel *That Smell and Notes from Prison*, trans. Robyn Cresswell (New York, 2013).
15. Amitav Ghosh, "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel," *New Republic*, March 2, 1992, 29, 30.
16. Ibid., 34.
17. Ibid., 33.
18. Mandana E. Limbert, *In the Time of Oil: Piety, Memory & Social Life in an Omani Town* (Stanford, 2010), 3.
19. See, for example, the online exhibition of the Royal Air Force Museum: https://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/research/online-exhibitions/an-enduring-relationship-a-history/the-dhofar-war/.
20. Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution*, 5–6.
21. "الصورة الفوتوغرافية داخل الغلاف الاحدى مناضلات جبهة تحرير ظفار وقد التقطت يوم ٢٠ مايو ١٩٧١"
22. Hosam Aboul-Ela, "Translator's Introduction" to *Warda: A Novel*, by Sonallah Ibrahim (New Haven, 2021), viii.

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