




1-1-2003

Conference Report on Cosmopolitan Alexandria: A Symposium, Cornell University, October 20-21, 2002

Caroline T. Schroeder
Cornell University, cschroeder@pacific.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/cop-facarticles>

 Part of the [History of Religion Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Schroeder, C. T. (2003). Conference Report on Cosmopolitan Alexandria: A Symposium, Cornell University, October 20-21, 2002. *Edebiyat: the Journal of Middle Eastern Literatures*, 13(2), 269–272. DOI: [10.1080/0364650032000143292](https://doi.org/10.1080/0364650032000143292)
<https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/cop-facarticles/83>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Faculty Scholarship at Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in College of the Pacific Faculty Articles by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact mgibney@pacific.edu.

Conference report

Cosmopolitan alexandria: A symposium

Cornell University, 20-21 October 2002

By Caroline Schroeder

The potential risk of such an ambitious project, engaging the legacy of a richly textured city and its cosmopolitan reputation from the interdisciplinary points of view of an international group of scholars, is that the center might not hold. Participants' interests might diverge so widely that conversations across historical periods or academic fields fail to produce dialogue. Delightfully, however, the discourses of Alexandriana and cosmopolitanism proved to be fruitful *linguae francae*. The papers, which are planned for publication, were accompanied by a screening of Youssef Chahine's film *Alexandria Why?* (*Iskanderiyya lih*, 1979).

The symposium was framed by two papers that addressed the consequences of the port city's modern colonial heritage. Khaled Fahmy (New York University), in a presentation entitled "To Cavafy with Love and Squalor: Some Critical Notes on the History and Historiography of Modern Alexandria," opened the proceedings with a portrait of modern Alexandria that countered the pre-1956 "literary Alexandria" of so much interest to the West in the 19th and 20th centuries. He first dissected the city that was depicted by authors from D.H. Lawrence to Constantine Cavafy to André Aciman—a city whose polyglot culture, creative energies and international exchanges are celebratory qualities accessible only to an elite, exclusive, and predominantly European population. The vast Egyptian population was either obscured or relegated to a primitive existence, closely tied to the "earth and mud" of their native land. Absent from these cultural exchanges are authentic interactions with Arab Egyptians. Fahmy's alternative vision seeks, somewhat ironically, to introduce Egyptians back into the narrative of cosmopolitan Alexandria. Using archival documents from police records from the last half of the 19th century, the final section of the paper provided rich accounts of the ways in which poor and working people ate, drank, conducted business, and had sex with each other. The symposium ended with Robert Vitalis's critique of representations of Alexandria and Alexandrian identity. In "Alexandria Without Illusions," Vitalis questioned both elements of the symposium's title, asking how cosmopolitanism should be construed and whether we, the symposium participants, unintentionally continue to participate in a nostalgic but ultimately illusory image of Alexandria as the pinnacle of cosmopolitanism. Vitalis spoke of both the treachery of memory (not always a true witness) in reconstructing a city's past and raised the question, "Why Alexandria?" Why does it so captivate our intellect and our imagination?