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Embodied Writing: Gender and Class in the Graffiti and Murals  
of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution

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A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

2018

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies

University of Washington

**Abstract**

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Much of the academic and popular literature on the graffiti and murals of the 2011 Egyptian revolution treats these works as illustrative documentation of the sociopolitical events of the revolution, neglecting to consider this visual culture as an active participant in shaping revolutionary discourse. Moreover, this documentation fails to contextualize these ephemeral works within their geographical location and date of origin. This dissertation asserts that these works of public participation are active sites of civic engagement, as graffiti and mural creators engage, negotiate, and claim public space with and against each other, the general public, and the state. Drawing on archival documentation of graffiti and murals, the project combines close iconographical readings with historical and contemporary contextualization of geographical location, while tracing the palimpsest layers of the revolutionary walls. In doing so, this examination of revolutionary visual culture underscores the ways in which access to public space is fashioned through gender, class, religious, and national identity.

This dissertation follows an arc that begins in Chapter One by historically situating the production of visual culture as a tool of both political activism and nation-building. I demonstrate that some of these contemporary works challenge hegemonic state narratives and

propose alternative national imaginaries, while at the same time perpetuating patriarchal nationalist ideologies that construct ideal Egyptian womanhood and manhood. Next, in Chapter Two, I turn to two frequently studied murals in order to argue that the choice of geographic site and their temporal context is paramount to our understanding of their meaning, as well as the role of urban visual culture in fashioning public space and access to the street. In Chapter Three, I consider what graffiti and murals reveal about sociopolitical tensions at the intersections of gender, religion, and class. Here I claim that graffiti and murals of the revolution challenge the regime by calling out its use of violence, yet at the same time, the visual iconography utilizes nation-state constructions of acceptable sexuality and gender roles. The final chapter, Chapter Four, focuses on so-called beautification projects where the state, the private sector, and private citizens each practice different levels of authoritarianism within the public space. Such projects, I conclude, transform the streets into sites of erasure in which the state enacts a politics of forgetting by covering up the visual culture of the revolution, thereby repressing the demands of the working-class under the guise of aesthetics.

Grounded in feminist studies, cultural studies, and geography, this interdisciplinary project is situated in dialogue with postcolonial studies, urban studies, and political science. Mobilizing visual culture of the Egyptian revolution of 2011 as a case study, this dissertation stakes out a broader argument about the necessity to interrogate the nation-state as a basis for collectivity if we are to truly dismantle the hegemonic national narratives that bind women, rural peoples, and the working-classes into the margins and, in turn, produce other emancipatory imaginaries.

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## Acknowledgements

Getting a PhD is an incredibly lonesome process and demands an unbelievable number of individuals and several institutions to make happen. This project has been made possible, in part, with the support of mentors, colleagues, and friends I mention below, as well as the many who came before them whose names I do not know. Their encouragement and trailblazing work in the field has enriched my process and work, and for that, I am eminently grateful.

First, I thank my advisor and committee chair, Dr. Sasha Su-Ling Welland, who fought for me to get into the program by not accepting hegemonic narratives about my identity and ensuring that I could tell my own story. Dr. Welland taught me how to be generous with my critique and mentorship. Her encouragement to investigate everyday experiences of Egyptians and write sensory descriptions inspired my theorization of graffiti and murals as active participants in the revolution, which is perhaps one of the most significant scholarly contributions of this project. My committee members have influenced my thinking and writing, as well as supported me during some rough and uncertain times in the field. Dr. Priti Ramamurthy—whose sense of humor, quick mind, and guidance made my scholarship speak more clearly around transnational feminism—brought lightness to this process. Dr. Paul Amar's inspired guidance on all things Egypt and his pushing my work to speak across disciplines made this project truly interdisciplinary. I thank Dr. Kim England, whose interest in my project in its early stages and expert contributions influenced its trajectory and secured it as a geography project. I am grateful for their encouragement and support, as well as that from other faculty members and staff in the Department of Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies, including Catherine Richardson for answering all of my questions so thoroughly and for taking such great care of the plants in the Graduate Lounge.

To do this interdisciplinary and international work, I was fortunate to receive funding from a number of University of Washington divisions. The Graduate Opportunities & Minority Achievement Program (GO-MAP) supported my first year. The Simpson Center for the Humanities awarded me the Digital Humanities Summer Fellowship, supported the Graduate Research Cluster on Writing Difference and Equity, and selected me as a Mellon Fellow for Reaching New Publics. My research was also funded by the University of Washington Graduate School's Presidential Dissertation Fellowship and the University of Washington Chester A. Fritz International Research Fellowship. The University of Washington College of Arts and Sciences awarded me the Elizabeth Kerr Macfarlane Endowed Scholarship in the Humanities. In addition, my family funded my fieldwork in Cairo.

Being on campus was made possible because of the following people: Neghisty Mabties and Laine Noah, thank you for sitting down with me in the hallway, checking in on me, and talking with me in Arabic. You made being in Padelford worthwhile. This work would not be possible without the support of the GWSS librarian Cass Hartnett who always had me in mind and made sure the library acquired materials relevant to my work. Librarians Verletta Kern, Theodore Gerontakos, and Maryam Fakouri guided me through the logistics and legalities of building a digital archive. I appreciate my department mates and friends Michelle Morado, Mediha Sorma, Yiyu Tian, and Yingyi Wang for always asking after me and making me laugh. The Women of Color Collective: Dr. Miriam Valdovinos, Dr. Monica De La Torre, Dr. Noralis Rodríguez Coss,\* and Dr. Adaurennaya Onyewuenyi,\* thank you for giving me a community of scholars with which to collaborate and think. And to my Writing Difference and Equity writing group: Dr. Adaurennaya Onyewuenyi, Dr. Jennifer McClearn,\* PhD Candidate Andrea Delgado, PhD Candidate Michael Aguirre, and PhD Candidate Anna Van Windekens, thank you

for reminding me of the importance of keeping all of myself whole and holding me accountable to that, which made bumping it out possible. I am grateful to Dr. Amy Peloff for her friendship, advice, and timely and painstaking help with editing, formatting, and citations. Greta Anderson-Finn meticulously copyedited the final document and connected me with Dr. Sarah Rogers who read and reread drafts critically and generously; your speedy support helped me keep it together. I also want to thank Dr. Manal Hamzeh who always responded to my panicked messages with gentleness and critical advice.

The lonesome days, grueling critique, and uncertainty of the PhD process are outweighed by the company of friends whose firm support and love kept me sane and always able to find pleasure in my work. To begin with, Christopher Shaw, Viradeth Xay-Ananh, and Roi Chang, you are the three individuals who put the fabulous in the “fabulous four.” Thank you for always cheering me on, bringing me food, making sure I interacted with humans periodically, and for your boundless generosity. Without you, this simply would not have been possible. Jill Mangaliman and Minkie, thank you for creating a home for me that was always warm and full. PhD Candidate Randi Evans, you were the first to celebrate with me when I got into graduate school, I am grateful for our friendship. W. H., thank you for your passion and companionship that brought me pleasure during difficult times. Dr. Adaurennaya Onyewuenyi, you have been a pillar of support since my first class on my first day of this project’s journey; your fierce advocacy energized me when I had little fight left. Dr. Shuxuan Zhou,\* thank you for your grounded advice and for all the dumplings. I am privileged to have you as a friend. Dr. Noralis Rodríguez Coss, thank you for being my friend throughout this whole project and for your encouragement to keep writing. Dr. Vanessa Quince\* and PhD Candidate Paige Sechrest,\* your timing is always impeccable, thank you for fighting with me. PhD Candidate Issa Abdulcadir,\*

our walks on campus have been one of my favorite activities at UW. Dr. Dali Abdalla Nimer and Dr. Siddharth Mathur, laughing with you while drinking in the sun is among my fondest memories of graduate school and Seattle. PhD Candidate Rhoan Garnett, thank you for indulging my long texts and replying with even longer ones. Thank you to the Potluck People, in particular Nicholas Hunt-Walker, for opening your space up to me and making me laugh until my jaws hurt. Thank you to Last Night's Mixtape for providing a soundtrack and community for the first three years of this project. To all of my friends, thank you for standing beside me and behind me. I continue to feel privileged to have you and in my life.

I arrived in Cairo having a couple of friends and a few connections. I left with a new family and friends for life. Dr. Yasmin Ahmed, thank you for being a friend, a fixer, and an advisor. Writer and filmmaker Nadia Kamel, I am indebted to your hospitality and lucky to have experienced my first Sham El-Nisseem celebration with you and your wonderful friends. Photographer Rana ElNimr, I will never forget our vacation in industrial Chinatown by the sea. Lina Attalah, Kinda Hassan, Maurice Louca, Natick Awayez, Widad Adas, Mostafa Saadany, Sandra Geovany, Mina Abdelmalek, Ashraf ElGabry, Souzan Mansour, and Hanaa Safwat, each of you individually and collectively created a home for me in Cairo. Thank you for giving me a break from work, for caring for me, connecting me with others for my research, and dancing with me. Most importantly, I deeply appreciate and hold close to me your stories about graffiti, art, life, and revolution. And the following graffiti and mural artists whose generosity with time and stories about their work, claims to the street, and narratives of revolutionary imaginaries gave this project its depth and richness: Amr Nazeer, El-Teneen, Ganzeer, Salma Eltobgy, Hany Rashed, Hend Kheera, Ammar Abo Bakr, Snooby, Mohamed Gaber, Alaa Awad, Sad Panda, Bahia Shahab, Shady Youseff, and Mira Shehadeh. Without you and the countless other

nameless graffiti artists and muralists, I would be working on I don't know what. And to the Grashif Collective: Nermin El-Sherif, Mahmoud Magde, Ahmad Gharbeia, Ashraf ElGabry, and Najwa Sabra, your excitement, insights, creativity, and expertise are what make Grashif a thrilling project and we will make it happen.

Last but not least, my family: Thank you for holding me up and helping me fulfill the dream. Without you, this endeavor would not have been imaginable. I owe this to you. My mother, Dr. Arwa Aamiry, your unwavering love and belief in my ability to persevere reminded me that I can do this when so much else was pointing in the other direction.<sup>2</sup> My father, Dr. Sami Khasawnih, your desire to be *abu el-dactora* made me write faster than I knew possible. My sister, Diala, whose love, compassion, excitement, insight, and ability to make me laugh through my tears were the ground I stood on throughout the years of this project, before and after. My brothers Abdullah and Hameed, your love for life and strong convictions are contagious. My aunts Dr. Anan Ameri, Dr. Suad Amiry, and Dr. Amal Khasawnih, your encouraging and gentle words, as well as financial support made this project a reality. Ola ElKhalidi and Razan Khatib, thank you for your friendship, financial support, for witnessing me be self-indulgent throughout the past six years, forgetting all things important, and loving me still. Lastly, I want to thank you Ola and Diala (the Rocca Family) for giving me the pleasure and privilege to care for Rocca; her company and cuddles helped manage my anxiety and her playfulness always made me laugh.

\* These individuals generously read and gave me feedback on dissertation chapters, job application materials, and article drafts.

## **Dedication**

To those who feel the fear and do it anyway.

To my grandmothers, Anisa Khasawnih and Siham Jabri, whose unrelenting and fearless focus on education got me here.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

6 April Youth Movement, a largely university students' youth movement supporting the 2008 textile factory workers' strikes in Al-Mahalla Al-Kubra, co-founder Asmaa Mahfouz posted a video-log on YouTube on 18 January calling on honorable Egyptians tired of living an undignified life to take to the streets and demand their basic human rights.<sup>2</sup> Responding to the call, Egyptians contacted each other to plan where to meet; Facebook pages such as "We are All Khalid Said"—a page that focused on Khalid Said's brutal death at the hands of police officers in Alexandria in 2010 after he was arrested at a cyber café—shared lists of protest and meeting locations, such as Al-Fath Mosque in Ramses and Midan El-Saha in Nasr City. Beginning on Tuesday, 25 January 2011, Police Day and a national holiday in Egypt, Egyptians went to the streets thinking only a handful of demonstrators would show up and be outnumbered by security forces who would use excessive force and arrest a few. Then the protestors would go home. But to Egyptians' surprise, hundreds showed up at each location, outnumbering the police. With such large numbers, protestors—men and women, Christians, Muslims, working-class and middle-class, young and old—felt confident to march from various locations toward Midan El-Tahrir in downtown Cairo, a historic site of political actions where President Gamal Abdel Nasser held rallies in the 1950s and thousands gathered in 2003 to protest the war on Iraq. As the protestors marched, the hundreds became thousands, and the thousands became millions, merging together from different parts of the city headed for Midan El-Tahrir. As they walked, they faced riot police who shot tear gas and live ammunition into the crowds. These confrontations were brutal

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<sup>1</sup> This dissertation follows the mechanical guidelines prescribed by the Chicago Manual of Style. Any deviations from these standards have been left to the discretion of the author, particularly in connection with orthography and transliteration.

<sup>2</sup> More on the Al-Mahalla Al-Kubra strikes in Chapter 1.

and lasted for days, with protestors hurling stones and state security agents using all means available to disperse them. On that day, Midan El-Tahrir became the protestors' camp site and for days to come, a contested battlefield between protestors and the state. On 28 January, now known as the "Friday of Anger," the Ministry of Interior withdrew police officers from the streets, the military was deployed (although promising not to fire at protestors), and President Mubarak made his first address to the nation claiming the protestors were threatening national security and promising to form a new government and revise the constitution in order to respond to legitimate demands of the protestors. On 2 February, after Mubarak's second speech promising not to run again for president, male supporters of the president on camel and horseback attacked the midan (Midan El-Tahrir) with batons, beating and stomping protestors.<sup>3</sup> The attack lasted through the next day and left eleven dead and more than 600 injured. Despite this violence, the occupation of the midan continued, and demonstrators set up a field hospital and a stage for performances and speeches. They sang and ate together and camped in tents. At 10PM on 10 February, President Mubarak made another speech addressing Egypt's youth— his sons and daughters— asking them to give him time to amend the constitution and delegate responsibilities to the right people. The next day, in just over thirty seconds, Vice President Omar Suleiman gave a speech pronouncing Mubarak's decision to stepdown as president, leaving state affairs in the hands of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF).

During their interim period, the SCAF dissolved the People's Assembly, which is the lower house of the two-tier Egyptian Parliament responsible for reviewing legislation and budgets, among other tasks, and suspended the constitution. They made protesting illegal and violently emptied Midan El-Tahrir. Demonstrations and occupations of the midan and clashes

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<sup>3</sup> See Note on Terminology on page 10.

continued. During this period, women's participation in protests was becoming increasingly dangerous because sexual harassment and rape became a widespread tactic by protestors and security services to instill fear in women and to argue that honorable men do not let women out on the street. In October, majority Coptic Christian protestors went to state television and the radio station (Maspiro) demanding response to the burning of St. George Church a few days before. Their protest was met with military tanks running them over. Between 19 and 21 November 2011, confrontations between protestors and security services in Mohamed Mahmoud Street and the surrounding areas resulted in the death of twenty protestors and the injury of 1,700 (Shenker 2011). The SCAF also arrested thousands of protestors and prosecuted them in military court.

On 30 June 2012, after the first presidential election since the fall of Mubarak, Mohamed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood and first civilian to be president since Egypt's independence in 1952, was voted in as president. On 9 July 2012, he reinstated the People's Assembly and on the 19<sup>th</sup>, he ordered the release of more than 500 prisoners detained by the SCAF. On 12 August, Morsi appointed Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi, head of the Military Intelligence, as Defense Minister. Two days later, he appointed military figures of the old regime, Mohamed Hussein Tantawi and Sami Hafez Anan, as advisors. Morsi also passed a law protecting journalists and supporting freedom of creativity. On 19 November 2012, on the day commemorating those fallen the year before at the hands of military security forces, renewed clashes between young protestors and security forces of the new government left behind dozens of martyrs. A few months later, on 22 November 2012, Morsi amended the constitution to make himself beyond the bounds of the law. These changes signaled that Morsi was trying to appease diverse groups of people through contradictory laws and legislation. This prompted protestors to

continue to take to the streets demanding an end to military trials for civilians, the release of revolutionaries who had been put in prison, and the removal of old regime figureheads from power. These protests were met with police violence, use of live ammunition, and tear gas.

On 30 June 2013, in a coup/counterrevolution, the military removed Morsi from the presidency. As a reaction to ousting Morsi, thousands of Muslim Brotherhood and President Morsi supporters camped in Miadeen Rabaa and El-Nada. On 14 August 2013, at 7:00AM, military bulldozers entered these camps with tear gas and live ammunition ending the sit-ins. As news of this spread, Muslim Brotherhood supporters all over Egypt attacked police stations and set numerous churches, Christian institutions, and homes on fire. At the end of it all, between 600 to 1000 people were killed, almost 4000 injured, and Minister of Defense and commander in-chief of the Egyptian Armed Forces Abdel Fattah El-Sisi became president; he remains in office today.

Through this rapidly volatile period, I sat glued to my computer and phone screens in my apartment in Seattle, Washington, clicking from one news and social media site to another, trying to make sense of what was happening in Egypt. Live reports were broadcast at all hours, and frantic journalists wrote articles, but it was the sprayed words and painted images on the walls that captivated me most. Following these rapidly altered or disappearing visual materials kept me captivated for years. I archived graffiti I saw online, then documented some myself during a number of visits to Cairo, and bought any print materials that alluded to them. Diverse in form, content, and message, these visual representations embodied the demands of those in the streets. While people continued to demonstrate in the streets, works on the walls were in constant flux and transforming rapidly. In addition to writing with any tool available, graffiti began to grow in size and details to include portraits of fallen martyrs, images of figure heads of the

Egyptian regime, and stencils of local and international icons whose cultural references were both known and unknown to me. Some works registered as haphazard, as if done while on the run, whereas others represented carefully crafted designs, considering architectural and environmental details and rising as tall as four meters high. Whereas some texts spoke in local Egyptian Arabic vernacular and mobilized locally grounded iconography, others incorporated global icons into an Egyptian context, and still more aimed to directly engage international audiences through the use of English and French languages.

Ephemeral visual culture productions that began on 25 January 2011 and continue through today in 2018 intimately engage the sociopolitical daily actions of the revolution. They became a primary way of communication as they replaced mobile and internet communication after the state implemented mass media censorship on 28 January 2011. As state-controlled media created specific narratives of the revolution as a plot to destroy the nation and posited revolutionaries as young people with too much time on their hands or foreign Hamas or Israeli infiltrators trying to interfere with Egyptian security, these visual works became vital sources of information that countered these narratives. Demonstrators, therefore, began relying on graffiti as a way to communicate with one other. As the revolution progressed, these works became sites for challenging, negotiating, and fashioning revolutionary expectations and imaginaries, and access to the street. They became venues for debate among protestors with different ideologies and priorities. They also constructed a visual history of the revolution.

Because graffiti and murals of the 2011 revolution are so ephemeral, they often are de-historicized and decontextualized. This is evidenced in my own research that began from a distance, where my only access to these works was photographic documentation on social media and blogs, as well as in print photobooks. These forms of documentation often left out the exact

location and date. Keeping in mind the speed at which events progressed, the number of major happenings that took place since 25 January 2011 until today, the diversity of individuals who participated in the revolution, and Cairo's sheer physical and population sizes, locations and dates are extremely important in order for us to comprehend the meanings of these acts of participation and negotiation. This decontextualization influences the ways that graffiti and murals have been characterized and analyzed, which in turn affects the ways we understand their role and contribution to the revolution, and the revolution itself. This project aims at relocating these works geographically and temporally in order to create a multidimensional appreciation of the complexities of these works that are influenced by historical and contemporary events. This process ensures that the revolution and these ephemeral works are not seen as sprouting out of nowhere, but rather, are grounded in rich and intricate histories of resistance and nation-building.

In this dissertation, I identify three main conventions which have been used to read these ephemeral revolutionary works. The first convention utilizes graffiti and murals as documentation of revolutionary happenings, without much focus on close readings of the works themselves. This is done by including graffiti as an accompaniment to a text that is not related to the visual element, rendering the visual component illustrative rather than central, which Ella Chmielewska, a cultural studies scholar and one of the first scholars of graffiti, maintains is part of written words' hegemony over images (2007, 148). This conventional trope is seen in both popular media sources and scholarly writings on the revolution, where an article may be about law changes and the accompanying image is that of graffiti of martyrs in Mohamed Mahmoud Street.

The second convention focuses on the works as "chronicles" of the revolution. For example, in her extensive and rich writings on graffiti in the revolution, Mona Abaza, professor

of sociology at the American University in Cairo focuses on graffiti and murals of Mohamed Mahmoud Street in downtown Cairo. In her essay, “Dramaturgy of a Street Corner,” Abaza (2013c) uses a particular mural to follow changes in government from the SCAF’s interim period until the election of President Morsi. Abaza, through drawing rich parallels between the mural and changes in government, argues that this mural is a site of revolutionary documentation and a barometer of revolutionary sentiments. I take up Abaza’s compelling descriptions and contribute an exploration of the relationship between the mural’s content, its geographic location, and its tenuous relationship with the prestigious and exclusive American University in Cairo. This added form of analysis of this mural would provide us with, for example, insight on women’s exclusion from representation on different scales, from governmental positions to visual representation in drawings on this wall.<sup>4</sup>

A third conventional reading of these works includes artists’ voices through the format of the interview or first-person reflection. However, this format does not contextualize the graffiti within a longer history of visual culture production in Egypt; it takes the artist’s words at face value and shies away from analyzing artists’ positionalities. For example, Soraya Morayef’s blog *Suzee in the City* (2018) offers the most detailed documentation of graffiti, including interviews with artists where they talk about their graffiti, work in general, and inspirations. But similar to other publications on the revolution, these interviews and reflections on the visual works remain very much in the present realities of the revolution. This dissertation builds on these articulations and argues that the iconography of the murals, particularly their mobilization of gendered and classed bodies, shares in a much longer history of visual imagery in Egypt. This iconography is

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<sup>4</sup> In 2008, the American University in Cairo left its downtown campus for a new campus in El-Tagammou’ ElKhamis, a suburb in the desert.

often complicated in that it simultaneously holds multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings.

These conventions, in addition to a lack of geographic location and exact dates of the works, produce particular tropes of the ephemeral works, their creators, and the revolution, and in turn, create dominant understandings of this work and its contributions to the 2011 revolution. These writings, through their displacement and temporal dislocation, craft a monolithic narrative of the vibrant and active visual culture of murals and graffiti, and stage their creators as unified in their anti-state sentiments.

This dissertation calls for a more geographically, temporally, and historically rooted reading of murals and graffiti, as well as an intersectional analysis of ephemeral visual culture as a way to better understand some of the reasons fault lines across class, gender, and religion took hold after the first eighteen days of the revolution. I make visible that the interlocking categories of class, gender, religiosity, and nationality are at the heart of processes of claiming, negotiating, and policing access to public space and understanding diverse forms of political participation. This project's methodology is critical because it reveals multidimensional narratives of graffiti and murals, artists, and the revolution. It also demonstrates that while these ephemeral visual works instigated a revolution against state violence and injustice, as well as explored possible new imaginaries, they simultaneously promoted normative ideologies of ideal "Egyptian-ness" that is shouldered by women, rural peoples, and working-class men. To do this work, I ground my analysis in graffiti's cultural, political, and historical contexts; support my readings by drawing on a diverse and rich body of scholarship on urban planning as a way of ordering access to public space and policing morality; consider the role of colonialism and nationalist

movements in fashioning icons of womanhood and manhood; and utilize intersectionality and positionality as tools of analysis.

Being situated in a feminist department in US based academy, intersectionality and positionality are two of the foundational feminist methodologies utilized in creating and analyzing scholarship. Intersectionality is a feminist methodology introduced by professor of law and critical race theory Kimberly Crenshaw (1991) who argued that one way to transcend difference is to take into account that daily lived experiences are shaped by a number of categories of identity, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality, to name a few. This analytic tool helps us nuance women's experiences not only based on their gender, but also based on their race, class, etc. Although this method of analysis grounds this project, I continue to have difficulty conceptualizing these categories of identity as they are constructed within a US context onto the Egyptian context. This is partly because "the focus on Islam has sidelined serious discussions of socioeconomic disparities" (Ghannam 164). Therefore, complicated analysis of Egyptian class structure and the ways in which it intertwines with other categories of identity such as gender and religion are often made invisible in analysis (Ghannam 164). For example, Samira Ibrahim and Aliaa ElMahdy both became the focus of local and international media in 2011 around sexual harassment and sexuality; Ibrahim is a veiled daughter of a middle-class member of the Muslim Brotherhood who is a public figure because of his repeated imprisonment during President Mubarak's reign. ElMahdy is also a middle-class atheist woman whose family has no history of public engagement. When these two women's activism became sites of celebration and scrutiny, the intersections of gender, sexuality, religiosity, and middle-class positionality played out very differently in ways that make these categories too ambiguous to take for granted. Another reason that I have found it difficult to theorize these categories of

identity is because I did not conduct interviews with artists where I could ask them about the ways they articulate their socioeconomic, religious, and gender identities and interrogate the ways they see these interacting and influencing one another. To fill this gap, I relied on materials found in public record that could help me examine these categories and make inferences to ground my analysis. Therefore, even though I frequently provide a list of these categories as markers in my analysis, I am aware that they do not quite respond to the complex realities of Egyptian society.

## **Notes on Terminology**

### Squares vs *Miadeen*

English language writings use the word “square” to refer to Tahrir Square and other spaces of congregation that were occupied by protestors during the revolution. In this project, I use the Arabic word *midan* (singular)/*miadeen* (plural) instead. First, these spaces are not squares, but rather circular. This geometric distinction gives a different affective relationship to the space, making it less rigid and more open. The word *midan* originates from the root *ma’d* (مداد): as a noun, a large open area of activity and encounter; as a verb, a thing that extends. In Arabic, verbs and nouns are conjugated from a common root and therefore carry shared yet complex meanings as they are expanded from the root. In addition, the Arabic word *midan* conjures up the notion of expanse and encounter. The *midan* is both a large open space, while being a space of encounter across social categories. It also connotes work and war: in that the word refers to a profession one has and a battle field. This has significance in the history of Cairene *miadeen*, including *Midan El-Tahrir*, where thousands of people cross to and from the various government buildings, most significantly *El-Mogamma’a*, and where Egyptians

demonstrate and clash with security services.<sup>5</sup> The English word, square, does not fulfill the needed meaning of the spaces they refer to within the 2011 Egyptian revolution, while the Arabic word *midan* does.

This reorientation away from the English word square toward the Egyptian Arabic word *midan* allows for a phenomenological and affective response to revolutionary happenings in and around Cairo's *miadeen*. Once we reorient the imagery from a square to a circle and from a closed bordered space to one that is open to a diversity of encounters, we can start to feel the energy of the thousands of people who gathered in these *miadeen*, and the tension that comes with divergent ideologies and priorities crossing and gathering in these *miadeen*. This, I argue, presents us with different phenomenological relationships to the walls surrounding these *miadeen* and graffiti and murals that lived on these walls.

### On Artist, Writer, and ...

Throughout this project, I refer to those engaging with the making of graffiti and murals as artists, writers, creators, and producers interchangeably. I do so because many of those individuals often do not identify as “artists,” i.e., those who are formally trained and operate within the conventional infrastructures for contemporary global art. The word “writer” is often employed to describe those who utilize text as their primary form of graffiti. But since more often than not, graffiti and murals have both letters and drawings, the distinction between writing and drawing is not particularly useful. I am also making an epistemological statement on “artistic” value. Therefore, I use artist, creator, writer, and producer interchangeably. This fluidity in terminology allows me to include in my analysis any and all works on walls regardless

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<sup>5</sup> El-Mogamma' is a mega-bureaucratic building that holds numerous government services such as birth and death certificates, driver's licenses, etc., as well as where foreigners renew their residency permits.

of the people who created them, especially since we often do not know who the creators are and do not know how they may identify themselves; in short, more fluid references allow for inclusion rather than exclusion.

### Street Art vs Graffiti and Murals

Many scholars use graffiti, murals, and street art interchangeably. Architect Konstantinos Avramidis and social researcher Myrto Tsilimpounidi (2017) define graffiti as illegal unsolicited word-writing that uses mainly spray cans and distinguish it from street art that is more often a solicited image that produces less “cryptic” messages and uses different medium such as spray cans, stencils, posters, etc. (2017, 2). In this project, I use graffiti and murals as terms that refer to ephemeral visual culture production produced on walls. I do not use street art because it is a much larger category that includes dance, music, and theatrical performances, and chants, in addition to graffiti and murals that take place on the street. Although Avramidis’ and Tsilimpounidi’s distinctions between graffiti and street art are more familiar and perhaps accurate in Western contexts, I argue that in moments of revolutionary movements, street art (as they describe it) throws open questions of legality and solicitation. This argument is supported by both sociologist Bill Rolston’s study of murals in Chile, Northern Ireland, and Palestine (Rolston 2009, 2010, 2011, 2014; Rolston and Berastegi 2016) and anthropologist Julie Peteet’s examination of murals in Palestine (1994, 1996) where they show that murals created during moments of political upheaval are more often than not illegal and unsolicited. They also show that murals are sometimes intentionally cryptic in order to carry messages for particular audiences.

Also, street art is a category used by scholars to distinguish art (street art) from vandalism (graffiti). Feminist scholars, through different disciplinary interventions, have interrogated this divide by unsettling hegemonic historical narratives that have created these boundaries and kept women, people of color, and other marginalized individuals and groups outside art historical narratives, thus subverting hierarchies found in hegemonic historical narratives. For example, in her book, *Women, Art, and Power* (1988), art historian Linda Nochlin challenges art historical narratives and reforms them. She demonstrates how art institutions were inaccessible to women and relegated their work to leisure rather than art. Art historian Cherise Smith, in her book *Enacting Others* (2011), challenges artist's autonomy as a precondition to high art by demonstrating that not all artists have the privilege of this autonomy. Rather, she demonstrates that Black and African American women artists are influenced by their class, gender, and racial identities, which in turn influences the impact of their work on different audiences. Visual culture scholar Jennifer González (2008) argues that works by artists of color are often seen as artifacts and folk art, but seldom as fine art. This is because they, as people and as art, are pre-constituted racialized subjects whose work was often looted by colonialists and studied as artifacts. This also follows anthropologist Doreen Lee's assertion that in post-reformasi Indonesia "shifting the discourse of art away from beauty and toward politics" makes most sense during times of political and social upheaval (2013). This shift allows us to disorient the focus from state-beautification projects and reorient it toward street art as a "democratic venue for enacting a personalized urban citizenship" (307).<sup>6</sup> Building on these feminist interventions and as an epistemological decision, I do not analyze the works for their aesthetic or beautiful qualities, or define them within the binary of art and not-art.

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<sup>6</sup> The reformasi period came after twenty-three years of General of the Army Muhammad Suharto's rule. This period lasted four years during which Indonesia had three presidents.

Therefore, within the context of the Egyptian revolution, I am less invested in aesthetics as understood in the discipline of art history or perpetuating middle-class understandings of what is beautiful and acceptable, as opposed to ugly and vandalism. In this project, I move away from making a judgement on what is art and what is not. Generally, I use graffiti for any work that is a smaller scale than murals that cover large portions of walls. Graffiti and murals both include the use of spray cans, pens, markers, stencils, paint, and paper. I also use ephemeral visual culture production to refer to both graffiti and murals. Visual culture is a critical concept in this project because it opens the space up for including diverse material forms of cultural production that I find on Cairene walls. This includes graffiti and murals, as well as posters, advertisements, wheatpaste paper, solicited and unsolicited works, as well as works for and against the state, and anything in between.

### **Graffiti and Murals in Political Activism**

Although graffiti continues to be studied as companion and reflection to revolutionary activity, only in the past decade has it been studied as a site of participation in revolutionary activism, nationalist movements, and solidarity building. Scholars such as architectural historian Panos Leventis (2017) analyze the role of graffiti in Nicosia, Cyprus as one that is constantly shifting due to political and economic collapse, and cultural fluctuation. Similarly, professor of architecture Stavros Stavrides examines graffiti during the December 2008 uprising in Athens, Greece and illustrates that it was unique in that it was not another means to “spread and disseminate” messages, but rather, was comprised of “stencil-acts, gestures that were both using and challenging the city” (2017, 166). Anthropologist Adam Chau (2008) elaborates on the idea of graffiti as an actor, not merely a communicator. He argues that the Chinese state’s writing of

the one-character word *chai* (demolish) on buildings does not only communicate with readers the fate of the building, but rather acts upon them as an audience who feels the power-impact of this writing (195-197). Chau situates the sign of demolishing within contexts of historical acts of “violent text acts,” such as execution orders or tattoos on criminals’ cheeks (206). Therefore, the use of ‘demolish’ as a character written on buildings, not only communicates the future of a building, it enacts an explicit message from institutions of power “not to be resisted” (206). Political scientist Hakkı Taş (2017) compares graffiti in the Egyptian and Turkish revolutions in 2011 and 2013 respectively. He articulates graffiti as not “merely a complementary narrative” to political conditions of the moment, but that graffiti as a “disruptive and constructive force” that “interjects” in these narratives. For example, Taş suggests that Mad Graffiti Weekend, which called on Egyptians to fill the walls with graffiti in May 2011, is a case of using graffiti as a tool to disrupt state narratives of the revolution. In particular, Mad Graffiti Weekend, countered state censorship that either did not report on state perpetuated violence or whitewashed graffiti off the walls (Taş 2017, 804). The event is seen as an intervention because it drew in hundreds of pedestrians and went viral on social media platforms. Therefore, it disrupted state narratives, interjected in daily life on the street, and constructed transnational networks of solidarity online.

These contributions inform the ways I read graffiti within the Egyptian context where I maintain that, similar to graffiti in Nicosia, Athens, and urban China, graffiti of the Egyptian revolution was not only a site documenting the revolution, but was an active participant in shaping the revolution by influencing public opinion, reflecting larger societal expectations of Egyptian men and women, and challenging state narratives. It was also a process that diverse individuals and groups, including the state and its various agents, engaged with. Also, my analysis contributes to these forms of scholarly readings by analyzing the graffiti through class,

gender, migration, nationality, and religiosity as intersecting categories of analysis that influence our understandings of coexisting meanings that graffiti holds within it.

To ground the claim for graffiti's multivocality, I draw on the work of anthropologist Julie Peteet (1994, 1996) whose work focuses on graffiti during the first Palestinian intifada (1987-93). Peteet argues that graffiti was used as a tool to speak to power, organize youth into political parties, and self-critique Palestinian politics and social conditions. Peteet's analysis focuses on the multiple ways revolutionary graffiti is read by different audiences; not only Palestinians versus Israeli soldiers, but also among Palestinians themselves who read the work differently based on their political affiliations. Peteet proposes that "both reading and writing graffiti are culturally and historically situated social practices" and that they "themselves are sites of conflicted readings" (1996, 140). This argument suggests that graffiti must be analyzed in a particular geography and time, as well as understood within its location social, cultural, and political contexts. In other words, graffiti has multiple meanings depending on where it is, who writes it, and who reads it. Peteet's analysis of graffiti in Palestine during the Intifada is useful to the Egyptian context because sometimes graffiti and murals are directed at a global audience, and sometimes at specific local Egyptian audiences. Also, the idea that understanding graffiti is reader-specific is important to my argument that ephemeral visual works of the revolution are multidimensional and they hold multiple— sometimes contradictory— meanings that become visible once analyzed through intersecting categories of identity and context.

Murals, more than graffiti, have been analyzed as sites of organizing, nation-building, and resistance. Sociologist Bill Rolston examines murals as a form of political culture during moments of political turmoil and proposes that these forms of visual culture production are sites of cultural identity formation, organizing and recruitment to participate in national struggles, and

sits of commemoration and memory. Rolston considers murals in the Basque Country (2016), Palestine (2016), Chile (2011), and Northern Ireland (2009, 2010, 2012) in his work and studies the relationship between these forms of visual production and political disorder in these locations. Most important about Rolston's work is his analysis of the different participants' collective energies in mural production, which provides multidimensional narratives of these murals across time. This is a unique way of analyzing visual culture during political unrest. For example, in Northern Ireland, murals were "intimately implicated in the war." When the armed conflict began in Northern Ireland, "republican murals supported the armed struggle of the Irish Republican Army against the [British] state, while loyalist murals glorified the campaign of the loyalist paramilitary groups to terrorise the nationalist population" (2009, 447). When the peace process began in the 1990s, both republicans and loyalists began to "transform" their own murals. This task proved difficult for loyalists whose murals had "offensive and military iconography" (447, 2010) and needed state intervention with a fund to re-image these murals to remove problematic materials (2010). Rolston's work reveals that murals are not only sites of anti-state and counter-hegemonic narratives, but are also used for perpetuating violent and hegemonic narratives and reimagining conflict over time. I also draw on Lee's (2013 and 2015) examination of Indonesian muralism, where she argues that during the military dictatorship in Indonesia and in the few years that followed, street artists used public art as sites of activism with sociopolitical messages in order to influence people's participation in political life (2015, 306). This not only made street art part of political life, but also normalized the presence of art as part of daily public vernacular (2015, 306-307). Lee demonstrates that after the fall of Suharto's authoritarian state, street artists' works were no longer addressing oppression, but rather, had become "agents of the state" who were invested in state infrastructures that support arts and

tourism; the state was no longer in opposition of these artists and their works, and instead, was moving toward them. This transformation in meaning is important to the Egyptian context where walls and visual works on them shift meanings depending on who creates the works and to which end. This is especially pertinent in the discussion of beautification and women's empowerment projects (discussed in Chapter 4), where these projects challenge our understandings of what constitutes revolutionary and politically engaged graffiti by creating works that require state approval through permits.

Building on the generative scholarship discussed above, this dissertation grounds its analysis within the Egyptian context and contributes to studies of murals and graffiti as agents in both nation-building and civic resistance to hegemonic state narrative. I use the scholarly methodologies of close-reading graffiti and murals created during moments of political unrest through contextualizing them in cultural, political, and social histories and urban transformations. I also contribute to this scholarship by constructing these readings through considering who is included and excluded from representation, and when and how. For example, I examine representations of women on the walls, I interrogate which women (urban, rural, veiled, middle-class, or working-class) are included in these representations and examine the ways their bodies are represented in terms of how much of their bodies are included and the scale of these representations. I then contextualize these observations within histories of the ways women's bodies have been articulated during political movements and politics of respectability. Another example is thinking through representations of rural people in murals and the ways they are often positioned as beacons of true Egyptian-ness. In other words, instead of assuming that artists are not influenced by their contemporary and historic lived and collective experiences, I analyze how these histories influence the ways artists engage with the revolution across

categories of identity. This intersectional analysis challenges dominant methods of reading graffiti and murals in two ways. The first is by arguing that reading graffiti and murals is not only geographically and temporally specific, but is also influenced by histories of colonialism, anticolonial and nationalist movements, and neoliberal middle-class aesthetics that influence their content and inform possible readings. The second contribution is that an intersectional reading of graffiti and murals illuminates the complex and multidimensionality of the works themselves, their creators, and the revolution. This presents a more nuanced and complicated reading of graffiti and their writers, not as a monolithic group, but one that is as complicated as Egyptian society. This in turn, helps us understand some of the violence that occurs against women, working-class men, and Christians throughout the revolution.

In providing different readings of visual culture, this project also challenges dominant narratives of the 2011 revolution. One dominant narrative of the revolution is that it happened without much prior warning, which has been challenged by numerous scholars in a diversity of disciplines (Seikaly 2017; Kyla 2013; Amar 2013b; Dabashi 2012; Amin 2012). In this project, I contribute to this literature by highlighting that the visual culture production of the revolution builds on recent histories of labor strikes that began in 2008 in a women and children sit-in in Midan Talaat Harb in Al-Mahalla Al-Kubra 130 kilometers north of Cairo that reached across state and private enterprises and continued through 2010. Visual culture of the revolution is also located in visual activism by Kefaya (the Egyptian Movement for Change), 6 April Youth Movement, and football fan (ultras) graffiti.<sup>7</sup> These three are entities played diverse and fundamental roles in the 2011 revolution (Gunning and Baron 2014; Lim 2012; Fahmi 2009). One such role is 6 April Youth Movement's co-founder Asmaa Mahfouz's instigator video-log

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<sup>7</sup> Kefaya in Arabic means "enough."

on 18 January encouraging Egyptians to join the revolution. Another dominant narrative these readings challenge is the ways women's participation was articulated throughout the revolution. This narrative begins with articulating the revolution as a unique opportunity for women's empowerment and access to political life, which then is followed by a predictable neoliberal Arab and Islamophobic narrative that Arab and Muslim women need saving from the savage Arab and Muslim man (Amar 2011; Abu El-Kosman 2012; Sa'dāwī 2013; Abouelnaga 2016). This narrative not only flattens out Egyptian women into a monolithic woman, but also constructs a singular narrative of Egyptian men as savage and backward, erasing all complexities that come at the intersections of class, religiosity, and nationality, as well as histories of colonialism and anticolonial struggles. This project demonstrates, through visual analysis, that Egyptian men and women's participation and interpretations of their roles in the revolution are much more complicated than this.

## **Graffiti and Geography**

### Graffiti, Murals, and Public Space

Political scientist Adrienne de Ruiter contends that graffiti is compelling to activists because it functions as a “medium of communication for the expression of alternative political perspectives and a contentious performance that seeks to make use of public space to articulate competing political views ... [while simultaneously having] the particular power of the aesthetic to change conceptions of reality” (2015, 583). In other words, graffiti is a public performative communication tool that allows for diverse and divergent conversations about contemporary concerns and possible futures. Ella Chmielewska, a cultural studies scholar and one of the first scholars to examine the relationship between graffiti and geography focuses on graffiti in

Montréal, Canada and Warsaw, Poland in “Graffiti and Place,” and central to her argument is that graffiti “is an important cultural site for negotiating identity” (2007, 148). She establishes that even though signature graffiti may look similar to each other regardless of location, close readings of these works in situ demonstrates that differences in surfaces, iconography, and political histories all appear in the signature itself. This in turn informs our understanding of histories and the political realities of these different local contexts. Following Chmielewska’s assertion of geography’s criticality to understanding murals as a form of civic participation, this dissertation asks: Why did graffiti and murals appear in certain locations in Cairo but not others; Why is some content frequently seen in particular locations, while almost absent in others; and Why were certain walls accessible to some artists but not others?

This dissertation suggests that revolutionary murals and graffiti are as much revolutionary performances as they are sites where tensions across categories of identity also play themselves out. As philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre has theorized, the street is an authentic arena of life where one can gauge social, political, and economic life, where spontaneity can always express itself, and where there is no place for institutions (Merrifield 2002, 202). Similarly, sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas suggests that public opinion is generated in the public sphere when “private persons come together to form a public” (1991, 398). Feminist geographers Doreen Massey (1994) and Linda McDowell (1997, 1999) have since interrogated Lefebvre’s articulation of the street by arguing that although the street is a public space where publics meet, conduct business, and hangout on the pavement, the publicness of space is never neutral, but rather always already masculine and accessible only to certain publics (McDowell 1999, 12). Peteet disagrees with Habermas’ liberal and singular public and proposes that heterogeneity of society creates polysemic publics who may share a common

entity, while still in tension with each other (1996, 147). Habermas' idea of public is further complicated by Peteet's argument that when graffiti is photographed it becomes fixed as a work and in its meaning, while circulating the image across time and place opens the work up to different publics with varying readings (Peteet 1996, 142). Feminist geographer Gill Valentine, influenced by McDowell and Massey, builds on Peteet's critique by asserting the necessity to engage with intersectional analysis of interactions that take place on the street in order to pay closer "attention to questions of power and social inequalities" (2007, 10). In the Cairene context, sociologist Mona Abaza (2013c) describes interactions between state agents as whitewashers and artists as incessant painters at the corner of Mohamed Mahmoud Street and Qasr El-Aini Street across from Midan El-Tahrir, while poor street dwellers sit at the make-shift street cafes sipping tea.<sup>8</sup> I take up Abaza's rich description of the corner (the murals, interaction between state agents, and artists, as well as the presence of the poor dwellers) as a method of description and use feminist geographers' argument that the street is a site of power and social inequities in my analysis of graffiti and murals of the revolution. I do so by reading these visual culture productions as sites where power and social inequalities are articulated.

Through these material forms of expression and engagement, I contend that public space is differently articulated and constructed in postcolonial contexts, also during moments of political unrest. This argument, in turn, demands that I not take for granted or assume—as Lefebvre and Habermas do and are challenged by feminist geographers—stable access to the street by any actors on the street, should they be the graffiti, street dwellers, protestors, state security forces, or artists. Power structures on the street are instead nuanced, as suggested by

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<sup>8</sup> Abaza describes this corner as a "sleeping area for street children and old homeless men and women," who use the metro station entrance as shelter (2013c).

feminist geographers, and are fashioned through histories of colonialism, nationalist movements, and authoritarianism.

Also for this project, I consider all walls facing the street, pavements, and streets themselves public, even if they are privately owned. This is an epistemological move that allows me to think through definitions of what is public versus private; why is a wall that faces a public street considered private when it constructs and creates borders that influence public space? Also, this gives me the opportunity to think through the ways graffiti and mural makers challenge the very definition and legitimacy of private ownership during a revolution, and consider which of these definitions change and continue to be legible across time and space.

These questions lead me to the articulations of place and space. Massey (1994) and McDowell (1997) define places as “by very definition, exclusive. They define themselves and their inhabitants as 'different from'” and space is defined as an abstract concept with limited meaning (McDowell, 2). These definitions suggest that spaces are locations of exclusionary and inclusionary politics, while spaces have more permeable borders that allow for greater fluidity of engagement and meaning. I ground my work in these definitions to demonstrate that a particular wall or street can transition from being a space to a place across time and space, and sometimes a particular location can be a space and a place simultaneously depending on whose perspective is at the center. For example, Mohamed Mahmoud Street in downtown Cairo and surrounding walls were, during the revolution, articulated as public spaces that diverse peoples had access to, giving them different meanings simultaneously. While this holds true often, this area, at particular moments, became a memorial place where portraits of martyrs were painted on the walls, placards commemorating martyrs were posted on the wall, and family members visited the wall and took photographs with their loved ones. In this case, a public space of demonstration,

confrontation between protestors and security services, education, commerce, and work became a public place of memorial. Questions around private ownership of walls are also part of the conversation around space and place. In particular, invoking private ownership of walls as a tool to control who has access to which walls and penalizing graffiti as vandalism of public property are two instances where understandings of place and space highlight shifts in politics of access and control of public expression. In this dissertation, I point out these shifts in order to demonstrate the fluidity of these definitions, as well as shifts in the politics of inclusion and exclusion that are made visible due to changes in location meanings. I do this especially in Chapter Four where a particular corner in downtown Cairo is simultaneously a place and a space, depending on who has access to it and how it is read by different audiences.

### Graffiti and Affect

As part of thinking through graffiti and geography, I suggest we consider affect and embodiment in order to make clearer geography's influences on readings of graffiti and murals. In his book, *Non-Representational Theory*, geographer Nigel Thrift defines affect as a form of intelligence and form of thinking, and an outcome and a motivation of interacting with subjects and spaces (2008, 175-187). The relationship between affect, bodies, action, and knowledge is central to numerous Black and women of color feminists who theorized feelings as source of action. In her collection of essays, *Sister Outsider* (1984), feminist writer and poet Audre Lorde argues for bridging unnamed feelings with actions in order to interrogate our social and political life. Feminist poet and writer Cherríe Moraga (1981) in her essay "La Güera" writes: "Without an emotional, heartfelt grappling with the source of our own oppression, without naming the enemy within ourselves and outside of us, no authentic, non-hierarchical connection among

oppressed groups can take place” (2002, 29). Lorde and Moraga not only give value to inner feelings of oppressed peoples, they argue that these internal responses are embodied reactions to external happenings and systemic oppressions. They also define affect as a form of knowledge and a standpoint on how power functions. Feminist cultural studies scholar Sara Ahmed’s work, similarly, considers the influences of sexuality, gender, race, and space on generating affective responses where emotions are not only personal, but also actors on the world (2004). In her later essay, “Killing Joy” from 2010, Ahmed stresses that the accumulation of emotions over time transforms to *affect*, thereby resulting in action to make change (580).

In this project, I think through Ahmed and Thrift and consider the relationship between space and affect at a particular moment of revolution and mass social unrest. I claim that not only is the relationship between affect and space articulated in a particular way at a given moment, it is also historically constructed through anticolonial and nationalist movements, as well as urban planning. These historical constructions continue to influence the affective ways different people and groups access certain spaces. I assert that affect is not only produced by people, but also objects. Graffiti and murals of the revolution each have their own affect which are produced in space and time and instigate action.

### On Orientation

In her book *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), Sara Ahmed illustrates how structures of experience and consciousness can be understood differently if we look at them from a different angle; through a new orientation. Thinking through Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) and Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (2006), Ahmed suggests:

Orientalism, in other words, would involve not just making imaginary distinctions between the West and the Orient, but would also shape how bodies cohere, by facing the same direction. Objects become objects only as an effect of the repetition of this tending “toward” them, which produces the subject that which the world is “around.” The orient is then “oriented;” it is reachable as an object given how the world takes shape “around” certain bodies (120).

Here Ahmed uses geography’s orientation to propose that disorientation and reorientation are helpful tools to “disturbing the order of things” (2006, 161) and proposing an opening, a possible space of resistance, to reorient and disorient understandings of bodies, spaces, and ideas.

Dis/re/orientation is a useful tool for this project because it grounds my attempts at disorienting monolithic readings of ephemeral visual culture and revolution and reorienting them toward polysemic multidimensional examinations that are situated in local geographies and colonial and nationalist histories, as well as at the intersection of interlocking categories of identity. This work is important in order to move away from normative singular narratives that all men are violent, all women are victims, and all graffiti and murals are anti-state and counter-hegemonic. Also, disorientation and reorientation in this project, are used as methods to disrupt the reliance on materials that have a long life, or their changes can be traced through archives, such as textual materials, and reorients our attention toward ephemeral visual materials, some of which are lost forever. Also, often our attention as scholars is oriented toward events that happen to people and written in documents. This project disorients, then reorients our attentions toward objects that often go unnoticed: walls, streets, and pavements as sites of interest and activity.

### **Nationalism, Bodies, and Politics of Respectability**

The relationship between women's bodies as symbols of nation and community has been theorized by a number of postcolonial and transnational feminist scholars across a number of disciplines. They illustrate how the hegemonic patriarchal symbolism of women's bodies as nation, as mothers, and as the nation's honor have impacted women's physical bodies, as well as their ability to access civil life. M. Jacqui Alexander puts forward the argument that respectability became significant as part of modern nationalism in the Caribbean through a colonial European middle-class understanding that the "body, sexual (mis)conduct, normality and abnormality" are reflections of "virility and manly bearing" (1994, 12). Alexander further states that as elite men in anticolonial nationalist movements became part of the state, they made it paramount that women "defend the nation by protecting their honour" through upholding "respectable femininity," while men's patriotic duty was in public service (1994, 13). Political scientist Partha Chatterjee (2010) demonstrates that nationalist movements in India experimented with modernity, tradition, and nation on women's and rural people's bodies. This resulted in relegating the public sphere to men and institutions of modern life, and the private sphere to women where they are kept away from and unchanged by Western modernity (2010, 126). Together, Alexander and Chatterjee contend that these expectations created a "new woman" who was defined within middle-class family aesthetics and subjected to a new form of patriarchy with the goal of sovereign nationhood (Chatterjee 2010, 127-132).

While Alexander and Chatterjee describe the effects of colonialism and nationalism on women's bodies in the Caribbean and in India, feminist scholars of Egypt have also investigated the tensions between modernity, nationalism, and Islam on elite women's bodies and the

fashioning of their private and public lives. In her article, “Woman in Islam,” professor of literature Marilyn Booth argues that emerging nationalist ideologies in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century led by elite men took up women’s proper forms of behavior as site of nationalism and reform (2001, 171). Whereas one camp insisted on women’s seclusion as a form of protection from British colonialism, the other asserted that women’s participation in public life was necessary for modernity. A compromise was reached by making women’s education a priority where it became understood that it was modern and respectable for women to be veiled and secluded if they were educated (Booth 2001, 191).<sup>9</sup> This created a connection between women’s sexuality and respectability as sites of national honor and reputation. This conflation not only controlled women’s bodies, but also fashioned “appropriate...elite nationalist masculinity” and women as “a protected category...[but] only some men were capable of protecting them” (Booth 2001, 192), thus constructing hegemonic masculinity representing middle-class men upholding elite modernity. Booth’s contribution is important for this project because it provides historical grounding for the ways women’s bodies were constructed during the revolution as both respectable and disreputable depending on their class and religiosity. It also helps us understand why women’s bodies were both sites of violence and patriarchal protection. This helps contextualize the ways men’s bodies and masculinities were policed across class and religious lines. Legible modern masculinity able to protect women’s honor became embodied in middle-class men who were Muslim, but not too conservative to prohibit women from accessing education.

Historians Margot Badran (1995), Beth Baron (2005), and Laura Bier (2011) excavated elite Egyptian women’s participation in nationalist and feminist movements since the late

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<sup>9</sup> Veiling at the time refers to the face cover, not to the headscarf.

nineteenth century. Beth Baron and Margot Badran illustrate that elite women who participated were not passive recipients of the ideology of mothers and daughters, but rather, had a role in fashioning themselves as “mothers of the nation,” by way of highlighting their patriarchal lineages to husbands and fathers in order to bring together individuals and groups across different sociopolitical classes, ethnicities, and religions. This patriarchal connection was strategic in that it gave women an opportunity to challenge conventional gender roles and marked the beginning of their participation in public life (Baron 2005, 111-113, 121). At the same time, it perpetuated familial patriarchal hierarchies of obedience and silence (Baron 2005, 135). As elite women fought for work outside the home as a form of modernity, they articulated rural women as “symbols of freedom” for both nation and women because they had unveiled access to the public sphere (Badran 1995, 92).<sup>10</sup> Bier demonstrates that “the beginning of the end of independent feminist politics in Egypt” began when the woman question was taken up by President Gamal Abdel Nasser’s state feminist project (Bier 2011, 2-7). During Nasser’s presidency, his socialist agenda and state feminist project promised women access to jobs, education, health, birth control pills, the right to vote and hold public office, among other modern rights for women (Bier 2011, 3).<sup>11</sup> This resulted in “the beginning of the end of independent feminist politics in Egypt...The state's championing of gender issues, however, coincided with the suppression of dissenting voices and alternative visions” (Bier 2011, 7-8). As a result, the incorporation of the feminist project into the state made it so that women's claims to rights “could be made only on the state as the sole agent of emancipation” (Bier 2011, 59). In the 1970s, with increased Islamophobia in the West and continued US intervention in the Arab

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<sup>10</sup> Here the veil refers to the veil that covers the face, not the head scarf.

<sup>11</sup> Egyptian women were granted the right to vote and hold public office in 1956.

world, Muslim Egyptian women became more active in the piety movement. This included embodied modifications of modesty and full body covering as “kind[s] of agency...[that] does not belong to the women themselves but is a product of the historical contingent discursive traditions in which they are located” (Mahmood 2005, 32). Therefore, veiling as an act performed on the body became a symbol of tradition, community, and belonging to a larger Muslim community, as well as resistance to Western influences. Mahmood argues that the body became a non-liberal form of subjectivization that was an expression of relationality rather than individual autonomy (Mahmood 2005).

These works provide us with a rich history of the ways elite women and peasant women’s bodies became sites of respectability in service of the nation and modernity. This body of scholarship thus offers a language through which to analyze women’s participation in the 2011 revolution and the ways their bodies were reflected on Cairene walls. They also ground an understanding of the role of middle-class women in the fashioning of their bodies as sites of honor and respectability, while forcing working-class men into the role of aggressor. This dissertation contributes to these conversations by arguing that ephemeral popular culture is also a site where these debates are taking place. These cultural works not only construct urban elite women’s and working-class men’s bodies, they also give us insight on the ways rural people are constructed as opposed to urban dwellers, where rural people are expected to uphold Egyptian values, yet at the same time removed from representation. Similar tensions are also constructed across acceptable religiosity, where, for example, veiled women’s narratives of sexual assault are more legible and cause greater uproar than those of unveiled and secular women’s stories. Therefore, I propose that graffiti and murals of the revolution are sites where urban and rural,

middle- and working-class, religious and secular women's and men's bodies and politics of respectability are both constructed and critiqued.

While I propose that graffiti is a medium in which women and men's bodies are central, I also argue that many Egyptians' bodies continue to be invisibilized in these visual representations. I contend that this invisibilization is a product of the construction of the nation-state that by default creates subalterns. It is also a product of revolutionary graffiti writers working through the ideologies of the nation and who seem it as their mission to represent the subaltern by helping them speak or speaking for them. Throughout this dissertation's chapters, the invisibilization of urban and rural working-class women and peasant men is clear, because much of the graffiti and murals I engage with seldom represent these groups of Egyptians. This erasure is what anthropologist Jessica Winegar articulates in her essay "The Privilege of Revolution" (2011). Winegar illustrates that representations of the revolution focused on urban public space as a "true locus of transformative politics...[where] fervently determined young people—mostly men with some women" constituted the iconic image of the revolution (69). This focus did not include accounts of events taking place in private spaces, namely the home, where women stayed to take care of children and the elderly, had to work because their income was dependent on hourly wages, and whose families would not let them leave the home. These women supported the revolution by providing this care, yet their contributions were seldom included in revolutionary narratives. This is also true of visual culture representations on city walls, where women and their [hidden] contributions to the revolution were rarely represented. There are of course some representations of working-class women's work, for example, Hanaa El Degham's mural of veiled older women carrying cooking gas canisters on their shoulders on the walls of the American University in Cairo in Mohamed Mahmoud Street. This work responds

to increasing prices of basic needs and reinforces the working-class status of these women, as wealthier individuals have someone carry the canister into their homes rather than carrying them in themselves.

Another form of invisibilization in visual culture is the representative size of working-class men on city walls. Despite the fact that most martyrs are working-class men, representations of them on city walls tend to be smaller in size than those of men who are either middle-class or have greater social capital. Similarly, rural people are often represented carriers of unchanging true Egyptian-ness, which is an undue burden on rural people that results in fixing them as static and in service of the nation. These representations highlight the power differentials between graffiti writers and marginalized people, where the former feel the need to speak for the latter. These representations create and recreate politics of inclusion and exclusion from city streets.

## **Methodology**

The methodology for this project includes field and archival research. The fieldwork is based on participant observations, cultural immersion, field notes, and personal diary. These notes and observations are a result of time spent in Cairo in winter 2013, twelve months from 1 September 2015 until 30 August 2016, and again in summer 2017. They focus on affective and phenomenological responses of my interlocutors and myself as expressed in conversations and in navigating daily life. For example, during the first four months of my fieldwork in 2015-2016, the installation of 5,000 surveillance cameras in downtown Cairo at traffic lights, intersections, building entrances, and street cafes was rapidly progressing. This changed where my interlocutors felt comfortable going, which in turn influenced where we met and what we talked

about. Such notes became part of the ways I theorize and articulate loss of the streets, disorientation and reorientation of meanings and practices of the revolution.

The archival research is divided into two scales: macro and micro. The macro-scale includes Arabic and English official state reports and news, national and international governmental and non-governmental organizations' annual and special reports on Egypt (including the European Union, United Nations, and Human Rights Watch), and local and international newspapers and news media (for example, the Arabic language online newspaper *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, its English version, *Egypt Independent*, and *Al-Jazeera* in Arabic and English).

The micro-scale includes local independent news outlets (such as investigative news site *Mada Masr* in both Arabic and English, and *Egyptian Streets* in English, which includes news reports and gossip updates), local non-governmental and not-for-profit organizational reports on Egypt (for example, *Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights*) and independent writings in both Arabic and English, including blogs (such as the English language *Suzee in the City*, which is a blog dedicated to graffiti and murals of the revolution). This scale also includes novels (including *The City Always Wins* (2017) in English by Omar Robert Hamilton that focuses on the Egyptian revolution; Ahmed Nagi's *استخدام الحياة*, *The Use of Life* (2014), which is in Arabic and is a dystopic science fiction tale of life in Cairo after the revolution), and personal non-fiction writings such as biographies, including Ahdaf Soueif's *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* (2014) in English. It also includes independent documentaries, including, for example, the Arabic language film *Mamnou* (forbidden) by Amal Ramsis that examines reasons behind all the things that are forbidden from working-class women's access to the street, to the state closing the border with

Gaza, as well as interviews found on YouTube, Vimeo, and DVDs (such as the online Arabic language documentary series *Women and Memory*).

I then read these two scales together to find points of intersection, divergence, and silence on issues around resistance, fear, and citizenship. Taken together, these two forms of research allow for: first, centering affective responses to happenings on the street and in halls of government that are often lost without documentation; and second, creating an opportunity to make relationships between these ephemeral responses and short- and long-term social and political changes.

As an ethical decision based on unpredictable shifts within the Egyptian context, all evidence— whether generated from my fieldwork or archival research— upon which I base the arguments in my dissertation and other publication are all drawn from the public record. Relying on this record is a decision necessitated by conditions of uncertainty and unpredictable shifts in access to the street and increased militarization in Egypt. My methodological design responds to this demand by steering away from identifying individuals and linking them—directly or indirectly—to their works, unless they have been identified and linked to their work in materials found in the public record. This also means I did not conduct formal or informal interviews with them. This methodological decision means that I relied on information I found in the public record to establish positionalities of graffiti creators because I did not ask them what class, religious, or gender identification they identify with. To fill this gap, I read the images for what they could tell me about these positionalities and I relied on materials I found in the public record. This, in addition to limits in the archives and security concerns (see below), this project focuses mostly on materials that have been documented and sometimes highly studied by other scholars. This results in my coming across as a scholar who chronicles a particular class of

graffiti creators. Although this was not my intention, the limitations illustrated below speak to why I opted to work with certain materials over others.

### **Limitations and Considerations**

Because of the incessant erasure and whitewashing of ephemeral visual culture production of the revolution, what we have left of them are photographs in books documenting graffiti and murals of the revolution, online on Facebook, Twitter, websites, and blogs, or in personal archives. In this project, I included images from all of these sources, including my own archive. I have given credit to photographers and artists whenever possible. A frustrating limitation of these archives, mine included, is the lack of information about the works they document. At best, the images have a general location: Zamalek or Mohamed Mahmoud Street, and a year the photograph was taken. The lack of specific location and exact or near exact date of the work made it difficult to be certain of what conditions and happenings influenced the work and process of creating it. Therefore, for this project I focused on works that I had as much information about as possible and tried to provide all the information and context to make my arguments and for others to use in the future.

In addition to the limitation of information on date and location of graffiti and murals, the ephemerality of this kind of work and its disappearance either under layers of paint or in rubble of demolition, means that in order to get a full history of this work, we will need to excavate it from underneath a palimpsest of years' worth of images that are found in countless archives. Short of doing that colossal task, we rely on available documentation. This often means that many scholars visit and revisit the same images of works that are highly documented and deemed interesting enough to include in publicly available archives. This results in creating the

impression that these are the only worthy works of revolutionary art. I have tried in this written project to include highly studied works, as well as ones that have not been theorized before. I do this with the hope to disorient narratives that make particular works by certain artists representative of the revolution and orient our attentions to geographic peripheries and unknown writers.

Another limitation is fear. While I was in Cairo in 2015-2016, levels of fear from state retaliation and violence expressed by my interlocutors and that I felt, made my movement and theirs limited and cautious. Starting November 2015, numerous arts and cultural organizations where I frequented, met with artists, and conducted research, were raided by police who arrested staff and shut spaces down. During that time, in preparation for the anniversary of Mohamed Mahmoud Street clashes and anniversary of the 25 January Revolution, activists, artists, scholars, and feminists were arrested in their homes or on the street, at the airport leaving or returning to Egypt, and their organizations' assets, as well as their own, were frozen. On 25 January 2016, Giulio Regini, an Italian graduate student conducting research in Cairo, like myself, went missing; his body was found a few days later tortured and dumped on a desert road between Cairo and Alexandria. It was made clear that the state police killed him for his research on Egyptian labor (Esterman 2016; Mada Masr 2016). After his body was found, I had to send a weekly security update to my committee letting them know my security status and my assessment of the situation. These conditions resulted in my staying home more often than I had anticipated and wanted to. I avoided attending certain meetings or going to places that were important for my work but presented possible security threats.

Additionally, a consideration to keep in mind is my own positionality as a non-Egyptian Arab who did not participate in the revolution or graffiti production in Cairo. I am influenced by

my own lived experiences, which constructs my relationships with institutions such as the state, police, and organized religions. I am also situated in the US academy, which has its own notions and expectations of me as a person and scholar, as well as the collective Arab world, Islam, and democratic participation. Therefore, my readings are influenced by where I stand. For example, I often grappled with and pushed back against expectations to write about women, Islam, and sexual harassment as primary concerns because I am resisting the expectation to become an Arab scholar whose work must respond to western Islamophobia by either focusing on gendered violence or Egyptian women's empowerment. Having said that, these are important topics to examine and there are a number of better suited scholars who have and are writing about these issues (Sa'dāwī 2015; Abu-Lughod 2013; Alsultany 2012; Abdulhadi et al 2011). This tension is evidenced in the uncomfortable tension this project has with delving into Islam and religion as much as perhaps is necessary. For this project, I have made the utmost effort to prioritize local sources while learning as much as I could from as many resources I could find about graffiti, murals, and the revolution. I ground my readings in Egyptian history and contemporary realities. I also do not take these works for granted, nor do I assume or want to present *the* correct reading of them. Rather, I argue that these ephemeral works have multiple readings, which is why they are a unique source of information. I aim to engage with these works while humbled by their ingenuity, fragility, and role in the 2011 revolution and the world.

### **Dissertation Summary**

This dissertation focuses on graffiti and murals of the 2011 Egyptian revolution. The first chapter, "Visualizing the Nation," argues that visual culture production has been part of building Egyptian nationalist identity since anticolonial and nationalist struggles dating to the late 1800s.

In particular, I focus on the ways in which the bodies of women and rural people (both men and women) were utilized as symbols of the nation in visual cultural production. I also analyze the use of neo-pharaonic art as site of history that seeks to connect all Egyptians across class, gender, religion, or geography. This chapter provides contextualization and historicization for the contemporary imagery during the revolution of 2011. In Chapter 2, “Geography Matters,” I claim that the choice of location for murals and graffiti is critical to understanding the politics of access to the streets and walls at the intersections of class and gender. By accounting for geography, I aim to produce multidimensional narratives of artists and the revolution that are otherwise presented as one-dimensional. I do so by closely reading particular moments and the visual trajectory of two frequently studied murals, *Egyptian Identity* in downtown Cairo, and *Tank vs. Bicycle* in Zamalek that, in past studies, have been examined without much attention to their location. Therefore, in this chapter, I offer geographically situated readings that I hope demonstrate the importance of relocating ephemeral works within their geographies. In Chapter 3, “Bodies in Representation,” I contend that women and men's embodied activism is understood differently by analyzing the ways in which these activists are represented on Cairene walls. I maintain that the differences in representations are based on constructions of ideal womanhood and manhood that are, in turn, influenced by the class, gender, and religiosity of these activists. I do this through considering the ways select activists' bodies are erased, overwritten, and made mythical on city walls. This analysis complicates current articulations that all graffiti and mural artists and works they produce create counter-hegemonic narratives. While this is true to a great extent, these creators and their works still reflect normative gender, class, and religious performances, which in turn represent another form of hegemony. Chapter 4, “Visual Authoritarianism,” follows urban renewal and beautification projects, such as building

renovations and redesigning public spaces in downtown Cairo, to suggest that these projects are sites of public morality and aesthetic disciplining of the street. These projects are undertaken by Cairo's municipality, private sectors institutions, and independent citizens, and therefore, are part of an emergent politic of authoritarian control and purification of public spaces.

Through feminist intersectional analysis of gender, class, religiosity, and nationality, together the four chapters produce complex narratives of graffiti and murals of the 2011 Egyptian revolution that are positioned within a contemporary context of an Arab megacity during a period of political unrest and nation-building. They contextualize this ephemeral visual culture production in colonial, postcolonial, and nationalist histories that have shaped acceptable Egyptian womanhood and manhood. They also relocate these works of political participation into their particular urban geographies, which are constructed through complicated forms of urban development, beautification projects, and state and social policing. The goal of this project is to present polysemic narratives of these ephemeral works, and in turn, the revolution itself.

## Chapter I: Visualizing the Nation



Figure 1.1: *Be with the Revolution*  
Original artist Mohamed Gaber, artist of this specific stencil is unknown, Spray paint, stencil on wall.  
Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt.  
(Photograph credit: Hossam el-Hamalawy 2012).

On 6 April 2008 women and their children held a sit-in in Midan Talaat Harb in Al-Mahalla Al-Kubra protesting the high price of food (Beinin 2011, 192). This was only the start of nationwide worker actions that grew from the state weaving factories to include tax auditors, teachers, and privately-owned business.<sup>1</sup> By the end of 2008, 1056 actions were held by 541,423 workers (Beinin 2011, 191).<sup>2</sup> Another result of this labor action was the creation of a new youth movement, 6 April Youth Movement, which was formed in 2007 as a result of the strikes. Members of 6 April Youth were college educated with diverse levels of political engagement (Lim 2012). As part of their activities in solidarity with the workers in Al-Mahalla, 6 April Youth distributed pamphlets and talked to others about the significance of the labor movement. One of the movement's member names is Mohamed Gaber, graphic designer and artist, who

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<sup>1</sup> Field notes

<sup>2</sup> These actions include strikes, sit-ins, and other collective actions. Workers included almost every industry, K-12 teachers, public services, civil servants, doctors, university professors, and were in both state enterprises and the private sector.

created and sprayed the stencil above, once in 2008 or 2009. His goals were to energize those who see the stencil to participate and support the labor movement activities, which he thought were revolutionary in their own right. His second goal was to reintroduce the word ثورة (*thawra*) (revolution) to everyday vernacular. He explained that during the period of President Gamal Abdel Nasser, *thawra* was a frequently used word that not only referred to the 1952 revolution, but to the socialist economic revolution, to nationalizing natural resources, and to artistic and cultural movements. Although these usages made the word mundane or perhaps reduced its effect on Egyptians, it was still a familiar word, used, uttered, articulated, and traded often that its concept was still in Egyptian consciousness. This changed during the reign of both President Anwar El-Sadat and Hosni Mubarak. Gaber contends that *thawra* was a forgotten word, unfamiliar, and unimaginable. Yet, he saw a *thawra* in the labor movements that began in 2006.

Gaber, who often participated in demonstrations as early as 2003 against the war on Iraq, was on the streets on Tuesday 25 January 2011 and most subsequent days and months. As he marched, demonstrated, and dodged bullets, he began seeing his stencil, *Be with the Revolution*, on walls of downtown and elsewhere in Cairo and even on t-shirts being sold by street vendors downtown. His stencil that was once planted in 2008 was sprouting everywhere (Masrawy 2017)!

## **Introduction**

Nationalist and anticolonial movements in Egypt have utilized cultural production as a means of constructing Egyptian national identity since the late 1800s so as to bind Egyptians together against British and French colonialists and in order to argue for an Egyptian modern nation deserving independence. In this chapter, I demonstrate that graffiti and murals of the 2011

Egyptian revolution are not unique to the revolution, but rather have roots in older visual traditions and repurpose tropes created by nationalist elite as early as the late 1800s in order to bring Egyptians together against the colonial state.

Cultural production played a significant role in creating and fashioning Egyptian identity and has been part of anticolonial and nationalist struggles since British and French occupation. The relationship between cultural production and nationalism is not a simple one, rather, there were diverse schools of thought on the proper use of cultural production as a tool for constructing Egyptian national identity that were played out on women and rural people's bodies, as well as rearticulating pharaonic and Islamic art as two sources of visibility that could bind large numbers of Egyptians together.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section traces examples of visual culture production that have been utilized in Egyptian nationalist movements and unpacks how this production has been utilized to create gendered and classed ideal Egyptian womanhood and manhood. I then follow these examples with illustrations of graffiti and murals from the Egyptian revolution in 2011 that utilize similar tropes, but this time to create an Egyptian identity in service of the revolution, rather than the nascent state. The second section argues that graffiti and murals of the revolution did not suddenly appear in Egyptian visual vernacular at the moment of revolution, but rather have been part of Egyptian daily life since pharaonic times. The continuation, as well as ruptures in this continuous production, are important to note because they inform us of moments when official and popular narrative found it useful and necessary to use public visual representations as tools of communication, dissent, and fashioning national identity. Also, following these histories can help us disrupt hegemonic narratives that center certain visual culture production activities at particular historic junctures, while marginalizing

others. The focus on graffiti and murals of the 2011 revolution as a unique happening that suddenly appeared is one such narrative that creates a singular history of the role of these ephemeral works, while erasing other accounts that ground, historicize, and contextualize these contemporary works. Such decontextualized narratives result in the erasure of local genealogies of ephemeral visual culture while giving credit to Western understandings of graffiti as sources of inspiration.

I do this to argue that the use of visual culture as a tool to construct national identity are debates that continue to influence graffiti and murals of the 2011 Egyptian revolution in style and content. This is important in order to contextualize the 2011 ephemeral visual cultural productions within Egyptian history in order to illustrate that they are not an entirely new phenomenon to Egyptian life. Rather these visual works are a continuation of processes of using cultural production as tool for political engagement and nation-building during postcolonial and nationalist struggles that have been used as tools of communications by both the state and private citizens in different ways.

### **Nationalism, Cultural Production, and National Identity: A History**

As part of the nationalist project, modernity was one of the corner stones for an independent state. In their scholarship, political theorist Partha Chatterjee (2010) and feminist political economist Kumari Jayawardena (1986) argue that to engage in nationalism and nationalist movements one must engage with discourses of modernity. They contend that nationalist movements take up western models of governmental institutions that are created to manage and benefit middle-class citizens in order to fashion their own modernity. In the Egyptian context, this process created a bind for elite nationalists who needed to find ways to be

modern while at the same time authentic to the other local traditions: pharaonic, Muslim, and Arab. This dilemma played itself out at different levels of society, most relevant of which is the ways this pull influenced the creation of cultural and arts institutions that were used to construct an Egyptian identity that responded to this tension. This identity formation focused on women's and rural peoples' bodies, as well as neo-pharaonic and Islamic tropes as a way to gain legibility and legitimacy.

### Women's and Rural Bodies as Ideal National Bodies

Scholars of nationalist and postcolonial movements have unpacked the ways women's bodies were articulated as part of the national modernization project. They demonstrated that women's access to public life was part of modernization, yet women were constructed as carriers of the spirit of the nation, a role that demanded they stay unchanged (Chatterjee 2010, 127). This resulted in the construction of the *new* woman who was managed in her everyday life within middle-class family aesthetics while subjected to a new form of patriarchy that "conferred upon women the honour of a new social responsibility...that bound them to a new, and yet entirely legitimate, subordination" (Chatterjee 2010, 127, 132).

In Egypt, women faced similar constructions as other women across different anticolonial and nationalist struggles. Elite Egyptian women fashioned themselves as wives, mothers, and daughters in order to access the public sphere (Baron 2005). They encouraged the image of "mothers of the nation" in order to bring together Egyptians from across different social categories together into the nationalist movement. Although these images may have been beneficial to elite urban women who have been secluded from public life (such as working outside the home wearing a veil, and seeking higher education) because of their class privilege,

this construction perpetuated obedience to familial patriarchal hierarchies (Baron 2005). It also promoted a modern bourgeois family with its ideal of conjugal love and scientific child-rearing,” which opened “women’s world to the same surveillance and individualized subjection to the state as was imposed on the rest of the population, and to organize the family into a house of discipline for producing a new Egyptian mentality” (Abu-Lughod 1998, 256), while at the same time excluded working-class Egyptians and other family structures as unmodern. Additionally, in their quest for further access to public life, elite women argued for the removal of the face veil. In order to do this, they argued that the veil was unmodern and also unnecessary to prove their Egyptian-ness and commitment to Islam. To support their position, they utilized rural women’s unveiled access to public life as a point of reference and argued that these women were Egyptian and Muslim (Badran 1995).<sup>3</sup> Therefore, elite Egyptian women articulated rural women as “symbols of freedom,” thus fashioning themselves as “simultaneous belonging to the Muslim nation (*umma*) and as citizens of a secular nation-state (*watan*)” (Badran 10).

The fashioning of women as “mothers of the nation” may have had a productive impact on elite Egyptian women’s lives allowing them to access public life and remove the veil. This construction had different effects on working-class women, professional women, and peasant women who had access to public life and did not veil. One result was constructing these women’s activities “in terms of production and social reproduction” in ways that “became separated from production, forcing them into an economic system of segregation to which they did not traditionally belong” (Mariscotti 64). This resulted in limiting lower-class women’s access to work that may have given them greater “ability to attain economic equality with men” (Mariscotti 64). Another result of this is a shift in the ways non-elite women had to conceptualize

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<sup>3</sup> Most Muslim rural women at the time wore a headscarf when they left their homes, but not a face veil.

themselves and their home lives as separate. Historian Cathlyn Mariscotti (2008) argues that lower-class women “did not necessarily consider themselves strictly wives and mothers or possessors of a feminine culture that transcended class, race, and both regional and ethnic boundaries” (67). But in order to perform their new roles as wives and mothers, and understand that they are sites of culture, lower-class women had to be convinced of these roles. This convincing came in the form of “application of domesticity” through education of skills such as sewing and better housekeeping that elite women saw as “a progressive step” to help lower-class women “gain a better sense of themselves” (66-68).

In her book, *The Hidden Face of Eve* (2015), feminist and physician Nawal Sa‘dāwī argues that issues of working outside the home and removing the veil were struggles of elite and middle-class women, but not those of working-class urban and peasant women whose economic need to earn an income or help work the fields made it impossible for them not to work outside the home, mix with men, and be unveiled (354-355). Sa‘dāwī demonstrates that the work of elite feminist Egyptian women did not take into account the needs of working-class women because they were so far removed from the working-classes (357). This disconnect resulted not only in a feminist agenda that did not speak to working-class women, it also meant that even though these women, unlike elite women, participated side-by-side next to men in the 1919 revolution and were martyred in large numbers, they went mostly unrecognized (358). Sa‘dāwī’s description of the ways working-class and peasant women were treated and constructed in the early Egyptian feminist is useful for this project because it demonstrates that working-class and peasant women did not benefit from being represented as “symbols of freedom,” rather they were used as tools in service of middle-class nationalist movements to further an agenda of modernity and quest for

public life. This tension plays out in the ways women were visually constructed as symbols of the nation (discussed below).

Mariscotti argues in her book, *Gender and Class in the Egyptian Women's Movement, 1925-1939* (2008), that much of the scholarship written on the Egyptian women's movement in anticolonial and nationalist movements focuses on narratives that are positivist and neo-orientalist (1-2). She contends that these narratives focus on upper-class women as most needing liberation because they were secluded and veiled, while lower-class women (urban and rural) were not (3). This analysis, Mariscotti argues, is problematic because it centers Western feminist dichotomy of private/public as the only way to understanding women's movements and their success, while ignoring or perceiving illegible activism within Egypt that does not fit this binary (2-5). It also results in the use of gender as a tool to analyze elite women's lives, while non-elite women's lives get analyzed through ethnicity and religion (9). All of this results in the limited availability of materials on the working-class women's movement in Egypt. Mariscotti's arguments are significant in thinking through Egyptian women's participation and ways their bodies have been articulated in the 2011 revolution because similar limitations are found in documenting urban and rural working-class women's participation.

### Formal Visual Representations of the Nation

The negotiations outlined above were reflected in the formation of art institutions in Egypt that were sites of constructing national Egyptian identity. Patrick Kane, scholar of modern Egyptian art, argues that cultural production in Egypt since the early 1900s constitutes a site of struggle over political power and the construction of a modern nation (Kane 2010 and Ramadan 2013). An example of this is the establishment of the School of Fine Art in Cairo in 1908 under

the patronage of Prince Yusef Kamal as part of “engaging with modernity” and as part of the *nahda* project of “cultural awakening or renaissance” (Radwan 1-2). The focus of the school was to teach students Western artistic forms of figurative and representational art. Once they mastered these forms, they were encouraged to produce “authentically Egyptian art, inspired by their unchanged surroundings” (Ramadan 106). Art historian Dina Ramadan (2013) demonstrates that the School of Fine Art was a significant tool to demonstrate that the “presence and appreciation of ‘the fine arts’ is a marker of a ‘civilized nation’” (89). It is also a site where Egyptian national identity was constructed by encouraging students to search for “national art” in rural Egypt and pharaonic art. This resulted in fashioning the rural Egyptian landscape and people as unchanged and pure, and representations of pharaonic art as a “‘complete’ and ‘powerful’ articulation of Egyptian identity (106-107).<sup>4</sup>



Figure 1.2: *Egypt's Awakening*  
Mahmoud Mukhtar, granite, 1928 (Ramsis 1978, 2008).

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<sup>4</sup> The School of Fine Art was an independent institution from British control. This is important to note because education was contested during British colonialism, where the British attempted to control who could attain an education and to what degree. The independent nature of this institution is both a “promoter and protector of national(ist) interest” (Ramadan 2013, 82).

An example of this training is Egyptian sculptor Mahmoud Moukhtar's *Egypt's Awakening* (1928). The sculpture was the first public art monument done by an Egyptian artist at that time and installed at Midan Bab al-Hadid outside the Cairo Central Railway Station (Radwan 2014, 5). The sculpture includes a sphinx and an Egyptian peasant woman. Radwan describes this work:

...sphinx stands up on his forepaws, literally evoking the action of awakening...The idealized figure of the Egyptian fallaha stands proudly beside the sphinx. Her elegant drapery and headdress ornamented with a scarab, symbol of resurrection, bestow upon her the allure of a queen or goddess. She places one hand maternally on the headdress of the sphinx, while she unveils her face with the other, as to signify the end of a period of blindness (6).

The unveiling is not only a reference to figurative removal of what blocks the ability to see, but also a tribute to Egyptian feminists Huda Shaarawi and Sayza Nabrawi who, upon their return from the Ninth Congress of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance in Rome, removed their veils (face cover) at the Cairo Central Railway Station where the sculpture was also unveiled (Radwan 2014, 7 and Kane 2010, 50). Huda Sha'rawi was founder of the Egyptian Feminist Union on 6 March 1923 and its accompanying monthly French-language publication *L'Egyptienne* that Sayza Nabrawi was responsible for publishing. As part of the union's activities, Sha'rawi established a school for ceramics in a working-class neighborhood in Cairo with the goal to "elevate the status of 'minor' art to that of 'major' arts in Egypt" (Radwan 2014, 8). Representations of peasants appeared as "generic type, nameless and iconized," their lives

were represented as enjoyable and devoid of tension with landowners (Radwan 2014, 14; Kane 2010, 51-52, Badran 1995, 68). These 1930s images celebrated the *fallah*'s (farmer's) "impermeability to socio-political transformations," thus he was understood as "changelessness" (Radwan 2014, 13). Therefore, the *fallah* (male farmer) and rural life became representations of "homogeneous and authentic [Egyptian] culture" and "guardian of an 'Egyptian spirit.'" These representations showed the fallah in loincloth as men of ancient Egypt and the *fallaha* (female farmer) was veiled, a custom more modern and contemporary than ancient (Radwan 2014, 14; Baron 2005, 67-68). The act of veiling rural women in these representations was not how rural women actually were. As described earlier, urban women looked at rural women as free from veiling yet able to go outside. Thus, these images were produced from an elite male imagination, perhaps even orientalist imagination of rural women. These representations are similar to how urban women were represented as the keepers of culture and symbols of the nation, as described above. The neo-pharaonic style also played on Egyptian sentiments that pharaonic history is important because it is a common history for all of them; i.e. it provides them with an Egyptian identity that is "non-denominational" (Ikram 2011, 150).

### Popular Representations of the Nation

In her essay, "Popular Culture and Nationalism in Egypt," Dalia Mostafa demonstrates that the use of popular culture is another site where "the Egyptian nation is configured, remade and critiqued" (2012, 263). Mostafa's essay examines popular music as explored in documentary films and argues that the popular can be both subversive to "hegemonic discourses, or...complicit with hegemonic and accepted official narratives of the nation," be "a meeting point between the old and the new," as well as "an arena of conflict between various

interpretations of authenticity and modernity” (271). Mostafa uses songs by popular Egyptian musicians Sayyed Darwish (1892-1923), singer Sheikh Imam (1918-1995), and poet Ahmad Fouad Najm (1929-2013), whose words and music were instrumental in mobilizing Egyptians, especially urban working-class and rural peasants, numerous times starting with the 1919 revolution through to the 2011 revolution (271-272). Mostafa argues that these songs “remind the Egyptians of their collective power and ability to achieve victory” (273).

These forms of formal and popular cultural productions, which are often difficult to distinguish from each other, are different in the ways they deploy Egyptian heritage. The former exploits individuals that are constructed outside of middle-class modernity in order to construct narratives that benefit urban elite in their quest for nationalist modernity that is legible to western constructs of modernity, yet is Egyptian enough to garner popular support. The latter utilizes Egyptian heritage that is constructed from subversive cultural materials in ways that mobilize working-class and rural people against the state. Here, I extend Radwan’s arguments on the use of popular music to graffiti and murals of the Egyptian revolution where I demonstrate that these forms of visual productions reply on both formal and popular Egyptian tropes in creating an Egyptian identity that calls on diverse Egyptians to participate in the revolution. These visual works are, however, complicated because while they are often calling on Egyptians to demonstrate against the state and hegemonic narratives that divide Egyptians across rural and urban, and Christian versus Muslim lines, they continue to perpetuate particulate nationalist tropes that utilize women’s and rural people’s bodies for the benefit of the revolution.



Figure 1.3: *Egyptian Heritage and Revolution* (detail)  
 Artist Unknown, Alexandria, Egypt.  
 (Photograph credit: Sherief Abdel Hameed) (Abdel Hameed 2012, 199).

For example, the mural above, *Egyptian Heritage and Revolution* by unknown artists on the corniche in Alexandria, demonstrates a group of men warriors in loincloths ready for a fight, beside them are the pyramids, and in the distance are a number of modern buildings, including churches and mosques. There are two handwritten names: Mohamed Abdel Rasoul and the second name I cannot read. This mural is part of a larger mural that includes a number of Alexandria's landmarks, a beautiful lady mermaid, revolutionary statements, and Arab state flags.



Figure 1.4: *I Call Out*  
Unknown artist, paint on wall. Nasr City, Cairo, Egypt.  
(Photograph credit: Mia Gröndahl) (Gröndahl 2012, 105).

In this mural, in Nasr City, a woman dressed as the Egyptian flag with her hair braided is releasing white pigeons each carrying the name of one female and four male martyrs.<sup>5</sup> The text on the bottom translates as follows: “I call out until my last breath” and as the dedication in blue reads at the top of the mural, “the mural is a gift to the martyrs of the revolution.” This is an example of how women were deployed as figures to unite a heterogeneous nation-state and were representations of the nation by referring and representing Egypt as women and mothers.

Elements of Islamic art appeared as part of these works through calligraphy, Quranic verses, and repetitive geometric shapes (arabesque). Decorative elements such as calligraphy and arabesque appeared in printed versions of the Quran and other historical manuscripts and on buildings such as mosques and official government buildings. These elements indicated the stature of written texts and architectural structures. In addition to ornamental components, often references to mosques (through minarets) and iconic religious buildings (such as al-Ka‘bah) would be included.

<sup>5</sup> Nasr City is an older suburb east of downtown Cairo that borders Al-Azhar University and mosque. Nasr City was proposed as Egypt’s new capital city in the mid-1950s after the 1952 revolution with housing for the elite as a way to showcase the might of the new state (El-Shahed 2015). Nasr City now, rather than being an independent city from Cairo, is an extension of the city.

These are but a couple of examples of common themes of graffiti and murals of the 2011 revolution. They share representations of pharaonic, rural, and Islamic iconography that since the 1900s have been utilized to assemble shared Egyptian heritage that brings Egyptians together. These representations often fashion women's bodies in one of three ways. The first is as mythical creatures beautiful and mysterious. The second is as symbols of the Egyptian nation wrapped in or adorned with Egyptian flags. The third is as rural fallaha women marked by their dress, veil, and house labor. The men are depicted as bodies in action as warriors, soldiers, or farmers working the land. Their bodies are strong, their skin dark from the sun, and they are often wearing pharaonic style clothing. Often there is a singular female figure in a mural, whereas often there is a large number of male figures. These visual representations are repeated often and in different historic and contemporary contexts so that they become normative and hegemonic; they are as we expect men and women to be and behave. They are true Egyptians. Examining the histories of these representations and contextualizing them within nationalist and anticolonialist struggles is important to understanding where these representations come from, why they persist, and in turn how to read them within the context of the 2011 Egyptian revolution.

### **Visual Traditions: Inspirations to 2011 Graffiti and Murals**

Many of the writings on graffiti and murals of the Egyptian revolution represent them as suddenly appearing with the revolution. Although there is no denying that the proliferation of these forms of ephemeral visual culture became more visible since the revolution started, these forms did not just appear, but rather, have a long history within the Egyptian context.

## Murals



Figure 1.5: *Egyptian family of the New Kingdom*  
Theban tomb fragment, Theban Necropolis, Egypt.  
(Photograph credit: British Museum) (Lesko 1996, plate page 8).

Muralism has been part of Egyptian life since the time of the pharaohs, who etched and painted scrolls, monuments, tombs, pots and pans, and walls. This rich visual cultural production depicted life from diverse perspectives, documented wars and triumphs, mourning and birth, as well as natural wealth of the area. One such example is figure 1.5 that shows work life in the marshes that was painted on a tomb. In it we see different generations at work, a diversity of domesticated and wild animals, and vegetation. Similar paintings are found on much of pharaonic artifacts and findings that Egyptians see at the Egyptian Museum and study in their school books.

Jessica Winegar argues that cultural production played a central role in the formation of modern and contemporary Egypt after the 1952 revolution (2006, 52). She demonstrates how Gamal Abdel Nasser's presidency saw a resurgence of state support for the arts as part of the state's modernization project. During that time, being an artist was a prestigious occupation because it meant one had gone to college, was moving up in class ranks from working-class to

middle-class—even if only in aesthetics—and began having a “key role in building culture” in Egypt (52-57). This was also the time that the Egyptian state bought a building in the Venice Biennale for the Egyptian pavilion in order to carve a place for Egyptian artists in global world markets and history. The state established a number of state cultural institutions, such as the Supreme Council for the Development of Arts and Literature in 1956 (142-143). During President Anwar Sadat's open market policy and Hosni Mubarak's neoliberal policies, art activities continued to expand in order to emphasize Egypt's “international progress, flexibility, and democratic openness” (142). The expansion took diverse forms: state sponsored awards, competitions, and exhibitions; organizing workshops and art festivals; building exhibition spaces and cultural venues; publishing books; and making it possible for foreign expatriates and diplomats to buy Egyptian art (151-156). Part of these efforts were murals that were commissioned for national festivities, state buildings, and public spaces.



Figure 1.6: *At Mount Arafat*  
 Ali Eid Yasean, Silwa Bahari, Egypt.  
 (Photograph credit: Ann Parker) (Parker and Neal 1995, 67).

Murals were also painted as part of a rural tradition of hajj paintings. Hajj murals are common in rural Egypt and celebrate those who have gone to the once-in-a-life-time pilgrimage

to Mecca. This trip is expensive and physically taxing. In their book *Hajj Paintings*, Ann Parker and Avon Neal (2009) trace hajj paintings across rural Egypt and follow visual representations of the hajj process. They describe the paintings as naïve and belonging to the Islamic *umma* (nation) (2009, xiii). The terminology of naïve is a reference to a European art aesthetic that refers to a form of art done by an untrained artist. A more accurate understanding of the style of these works comes from thinking through perspectives as articulated in pharaonic art. In their edited volume, *Egyptian Art*, Leonie Donovan and Kim McCorquodale suggest that “Egyptian art is almost a mental image” where the artist “did not attempt to represent what he saw but what he knew” (2000, i). They continue to argue that what Western eyes see as “inability” or “childish,” is an intentional expression of multiple dimensions (i). In figure 1.6, the artist Ali Eid Yasean shows us two geographies simultaneously: Mount Arafat in Mecca and the hajj (a male person who performed the hajj) returning from the pilgrimage and received by a friend. This mural, and others like it, aim at contributing to Egyptian national identity a shared sense of what constitutes an Egyptian, as well as connecting those to pan-Arab and pan-Islamic nationalism.



Figure 1.7: *Wedding*  
Eid El-Riqaq, Salwa Bahri, Aswan, Egypt.  
(Photograph credit: Ayman Hassan) (Hassan 2007, 123).

Artists who paint hajj paintings are also commissioned to paint for other themes such as weddings, saints' days and commercial advertisement. In figure 1.7, we see women dancing and

playing music around a woman in a white dress and above her it reads: “Congratulations on your wedding” (Hassan 2007, 123). Figure 1.8 is a painting by hajj painter Mahmoud Al Araby advertising a sandwich shop in Isna, Egypt (Parker and Neal 2009, 138). Photographer and writer Ayman Hassan (2007) describes these murals in his essay “Murals of Silwa Bahri.” Silwa Bahri is fifty kilometers north of Aswan and is famous for its murals, including hajj paintings. Hassan demonstrates that these paintings often include elements of the local environment and documenting local happenings. For example, the hajj paintings often include components of the local natural environment such as trees and animals, while other murals document community activities such as horseriding and playing musical instruments (124-125). Painters show their skills by incorporating details such as henna on a bride’s hands and architectural details of buildings, as well as the influence of pharaonic art that highlights the eyes by outlining them with black eyeliner and does not adhere to conceptions of perspective and multidimensionality (125).



Figure 1.8: *Sandwich*  
Mahmoud Al Araby, Isna, Egypt.  
(Photograph credit: Ann Parker) (Parker and Neal 1995, 138).

These murals are accessible in style, content, and iconography because they use images of daily life, common references found in local Egyptian vernacular. Ayman Hassan argues that these murals represent the mixing of cultures and heritage experienced by artists on a daily basis and ensure the passing of popular cultural heritage from one generation to another (125-127). This helps contextualize the presence of murals in urban and rural geographies, and helps us understand why murals were popular during the 2011 revolution as way to communicate with diverse audiences and revolutionary ideologies through a familiar form of visual expression.

### Spray and FreeHand Writing

Similar to murals having a long history in Egyptian culture, graffiti and freehand writing do as well, albeit not as long. These forms of writing were used as forms of policing and dissent. In this section, I present a number of examples of this form of writing as way of illustrating how it was used prior to the 2011 revolution.



Figure 1.9: *Do Not Dream*  
Unknown artist, spray paint on wall. Alexandria, Egypt.  
(Photograph credit: Rana Jabou) (Hamdy and Karl 2014, 12).

In *Do Not Dream* (figure 1.9), a line from Egyptian poet Amal Donkol's poem *Spartacus' Last Words* written in 1962 is sprayed in blue and black. It reads: "Do not dream

[written in blue] of a happy world, after every dead Caesar [emperor] comes a new Caesar [emperor].”<sup>6</sup> The use of two different colors suggests that two different people wrote this. The other’s repurposing of the first “do not dream” writing makes a clear political statement on rule secession. This graffiti is an example not only of freehand writing before the revolution, taken by photographer Rana Jabou in 2010, but an example of Mostafa’s argument of the use of subversive popular culture of a different historic moment to speak to a different political context in order to critique it without being too direct. In another example, freehand spray conversation on the corniche in Alexandria where many lovers go out on dates for wonderful views and privacy among crowds focuses on the morality of this form of courting. The conversation is held between a conservative Muslim who is arguing that the way to marriage, as an acceptable form of relationship between a man and a woman, is through having faith in God, rather than spending illicit time together on the corniche as an immoral site for a relationship. The response to this statement is from a person who responds by arguing that it is best to not police the ways people choose to live their lives, rather to let them make their own decisions and in return, the first person could also be let to live as they please. This example of graffiti illustrates another common use where different people anonymously engage in a public conversation on acceptable moral performances.

Freehand writing and stencil graffiti are also popular forms of low cost advertisement. This is evident, for example, on the wall of the tailor’s shop in Al-Hadara El-Gidida in Alexandria (figure 1.10). The graffiti includes the tailor’s phone numbers, working hours of 3PM-10PM, and the sale of Jolie sowing machine; two employment opportunities for women with a

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<sup>6</sup> Amal Donkol (1940-1983) was an Egyptian poet born in Al-Qala’ village in Qena in Upper Egypt. He was famous for nationalist and pan-Arab poetry. His poems were often sung and included in graffiti of the 2011 revolution. More about his poems as part of Egyptian national identity and graffiti in Chapter Two.

different phone number to call; and on the left of the wall in large print an advertisement for a land for sale or rent; and the land is 45 meters on a main street. These forms of freehand and stencil graffiti are popular across Cairo and can be seen in alleyways and main streets, and across diverse communities and neighborhoods.



Figure 1.10: *Tailor's Shop*  
Paint on wall. Al-Hadara El-Gidida, Alexandria, Egypt.  
(Photograph credit: Salwa Rashad) (El-Siba' ai 2008, 188).

Because this form of writing is a quick and effective form of communication, and accessible to a larger number of people, it showed up everywhere at the start of the revolution: on walls, tanks, and pavements. The messages written were simple and easily legible to audiences. All of these characteristics made it a frequent tool to claim revolutionary demands and critique political and social status quo while on the run from heavily policed streets. As the revolution continued and conditions changed, larger and more detailed works began appearing on the walls.



Figure 1.11: *Protesting Until You Leave*  
Unknown writer, marker on tank.  
Cairo, Egypt.

(Photograph credit: Christian Minke) (Hamdy and Karl 2014, 26).



Figure 1.12: *Thief*

Unknown writers, spray paint on marble monument of Abdel Moneim Riad.  
Cairo, Egypt.

(Photograph credit: Christian Minke) (Hamdy and Karl 2014, 30).

Figures 1.11 and 1.12 are examples of graffiti of the 2011 revolution and are similar to freehand graffiti such as that in figure 1.9 that was created before the revolution. Therefore, without a context, one would not necessarily know which period these works belonged to. This is

significant for two reasons. The first is that it is an argument for the importance of detailed information on ephemeral visual culture production (an argument made throughout this project's chapters) and to the point of this chapter, it makes an argument that these forms of public expression have been part of daily Egyptian vernacular and used for different means.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I contextualize graffiti and murals of the 25 January 2011 revolution within historic and contemporary Egyptian visual culture production, in particular that which is used to construct Egyptian identity during times of political unrest. To do this, I focus on specific historic moments of anticolonial and nationalist movements where visual culture was a site of constructing a national identity. This process serves the argument that historical debates on Egyptian identity and citizenship (a topic further investigated in later chapters) is one that began as early as the anticolonial nationalist struggles against British colonialism. This also shows that constructions of women's bodies as symbols of the nation and rural peoples as custodians of unchanging Egyptian-ness are tropes that have been long constructed before the 2011 revolution, where instead of being in service to the state, they benefit the revolution.

This chapter also demonstrates that graffiti and murals did not appear suddenly when the revolution began. These forms of public visual engagement, rather, are part of Egyptian history and daily vernacular that are employed for different reasons depending on context. Murals have been part of Egyptian life since pharaonic times where wall paintings depicted the daily lives and rituals of diverse segments of society. They have been used both by the state and private citizens to articulate their power, as well as their belonging to Egyptian and Islamic nations. Graffiti has been used in everyday vernacular in advertisement, as a way of anonymous public debate, and as

a tool of public dissent. Therefore, the appearance of these forms of visual cultural productions is, although unique in proliferation, not unprecedented in form.

Finally, this chapter aims at setting the stage for the following chapters where conversations about geography, representations of bodies, and authoritarianism will be delved into further.

## Chapter 2: Geography Matters

### Introduction



Figure 2.1: *This is Unacceptable*  
 Unknown artist, November 2015, spray paint, 6.5 ft x 1.6 ft (2 m x 0.50 m).  
 Qasr El-Nil Street, Cairo, Egypt.  
 (Copyright by artist, photograph credit: alma khasawnih, 2015)

On 11 November 2015, an artist went to Qasr El-Nil Street alone during the very early morning hours with three spray cans of dark green, dark red, and hot pink and two stencils; one with the text, “This is Unacceptable” and the second with parentheses similar to those found when quoting the Quran (figure 2.1).<sup>1</sup> The writing is accentuated with diacritical marks to ensure it is read correctly in local Egyptian vernacular. The stencil is a direct response to a speech delivered by President El-Sisi just a day before where he scolded Egyptians and the media for saying that he does not care about them (Motarjam Videos 2015). In his speech, El-Sisi presented himself as the patriarch who is invested in the safety and security of his children, the

<sup>1</sup> Translation is my own from Arabic.

Egyptian people. During the speech, El-Sisi said *maysahish keda*, or, “this is unacceptable,” over and over again when addressing media reports against him during floods in Alexandria. The stencil is a tongue-in-cheek response to the president's speech that pokes fun of President El-Sisi and gestures to the idea El-Sisi believes and want others to take his words to be doctrine. The choice of location of *This is Unacceptable* is important because just underneath the layer of white paint lies the mural, *Egyptian Identity*, in which the new graffiti alludes that its erasure is unacceptable. The stencil was erased less than two days after it was created.

Geography of graffiti and murals as site-specific works is critical to understanding these works. Paradoxically, because graffiti and murals of the Egyptian revolution are ephemeral and documentation of them often lacks geographic specificity, they often get decontextualized when they are reproduced in scholarship, texts, and media. This chapter examines two highly documented and written about murals: *Tank vs. Bicycle* and *Egyptian Identity*, and examines them within their geographic contexts to demonstrate that geography influences who has access to certain walls and the content of the mural. I also demonstrate that this access is not without class and gender tensions that were there before and during the 2011 revolution and continue to exist.

In both popular and scholarly writings, graffiti and murals of the revolution are articulated as tools for claiming space and freedom of expression. Yet the lack of examination of what spaces are being claimed and by whom makes narratives of the role of these ephemeral visual culture productions, and in turn the revolution, one dimensional. Doctor of literature and cultural studies Georgiana Nicoarea’s scholarly works document historical connections between Egyptian popular and political history and the content of graffiti and murals. She describes language and colors to make her arguments that graffiti and murals of the Egyptian revolution

are inspired by Egyptian popular culture of songs and poetry; this inspiration grounds the 2011 revolution in histories of anticolonial, nationalist, and labor resistance movements. Although this work is important and provides meaningful readings of graffiti and murals, the dislocation of graffiti and murals from their specific geography assumes that these works would be understood similarly and have shared meanings regardless where they are found. This assumption creates a homogeneous Egyptian identity that understands poems and icons in one particular way. These are only a few examples of the gaps in the literature that is about the 2011 revolution ephemeral visual culture production.

Another trend is looking at specific sites, such as the vicinity of the American University in Cairo and its portion on Mohamed Mahmoud Street, without much analysis of class and gender dynamics of these locations and whose works are being closely analyzed. In her numerous essays on graffiti and the revolution, sociologist Mona Abaza focuses her work on the American University in Cairo's Mohamed Mahmoud Street wall. In her essays, Abaza refers to the graffiti and murals of Mohamed Mahmoud Street as a memorial site and a space of visual narrative of the revolution. She follows, closely, the ways these walls change, get white-washed, then painted again. She describes the life around this area: street children and homeless individuals seeking refuge at night at the doors of the Tahrir Metro Station and poor people setting up make-shift street coffee houses to watch happenings across the way in the midan (Abaza 2013a). She also describes the significance of the street to the female school children who are protesting the military barricades that make it very difficult to get to their school from Mohamed Mahmoud Street in the morning (2012a) and the effect of these barricade walls on urban life (2012b). But what Abaza does not engage with is the effect of the centrality of Mohamed Mahmoud Street—in relation to Midan El-Tahrir, Ministry of Interior, and Abdeen

Palace—on the content of the work, who is represented in these works, and who has access to these walls. In other words, Abaza does not connect the geography of Mohamed Mahmoud Street to class and gender of those represented in the graffiti and murals and those painting the work. In not doing so, Abaza's essays provide us with a narrative where the AUC walls are accessible to all artists equally and that the AUC wall is understood in the same ways as other walls on Mohamed Mahmoud Street or elsewhere in Cairo. But the difference in the content of ephemeral visual culture on the AUC wall and other walls around it suggests something is different. For example, muralist Ammar Abo Bakr is dubbed “father of Mohamed Mahmoud Street” because often the AUC wall featured portraits that were envisioned and painted by him with the assistance of volunteers. This suggests that the wall is not accessible to everyone.

In the essay “Visualizing Revolution” (2012) in *Jadaliyya*, professor of rhetoric Ebony Coletu describes a conversation about “epic murals” between three graffiti and mural artists, Hanaa El Degham, Ammar Abo Bakr, and Alaa Awad, whose large-scale works appear on Mohamed Mahmoud Street. The conversation focused on the conservation of graffiti and murals, the relationship between these works and the publics that engage with them, and preservation. The essay presents a rich debate between the artists on preservation of their work by applying varnish to brighten the colors and protect the work from the elements and being painted over. Awad argued that his pharaonic inspired works should be varnished to get the best color effect possible, especially because the paint was cheap. Abo Bakr argues against protecting the work because it was meant to be painted over and transformed with the environment around it. El Degham said her mural of lower-working class women carrying gas canisters—which critiques the scarcity of basic needs when the state is preparing for an election—is a gift to the people and they should decide what to do with it. Yet the essay does not examine these positions through the

gender or class of the artists, or their cities of origin; Abo Bakr and Awad are two male formally mural trained artists from Luxor and Aswan in the south who arrived in Cairo in November 2011 and El Degham is a formally trained female artist from a middle-class family from Cairo and lives between Egypt and Germany. Is El Degham's position that her work is a gift influenced by her being a woman and living between Germany and Egypt? Is Awad's focus on preserving his work influenced by his status as a visiting artist who lives in Luxor and his desire to leave a longer-lasting impression as he transits through Cairo? Or Abo Bakr's adamant position not to protect his murals influenced by his decision to stay in Cairo and thus feeling secure that he will continue to have access to this wall? These conversations and questions evoke literary feminist theorist Gayatri Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (2008), where she argues that the subaltern ways of expressing themselves are rarely heard by institutions and people in power. In Coletu's essay, the artists articulate themselves as belonging to a space and community; i.e. speaking for both space and people, but without creating the possibility for the subaltern to speak. This tension and power differential are seldom analyzed in writings on revolutionary graffiti because there is an assumption that graffiti creators, especially those whose works become part of the global discourse, have similar stakes to others participating in the revolution. This assumption is revealed as inaccurate once the positionalities, class, gender, and access to alternatives (such as travel abroad and invitation to panel discussions) are interrogated.

The dislocation and lack of analysis of who is creating the works continues even when this information is available. For example, we know much more about *Tank vs. Bicycle* and *Egyptian Identity* murals' location, their timeline, and those who participated in creating them, but writings about them are no exception to the trend of dislocation. In her essay "Monumentalizing the Ephemeral," art historian Jennifer Pruitt (2017) writes about graffiti artist

Ganzeer's role in revolutionary artistic practice. Her analysis examines Ganzeer's reliance on "globally understood visual language" and how his "slippage between a local and global context" transforms his work from graffiti: ephemeral and spontaneous, to art: monumental and enduring (2). Although her analysis is engaging, Pruitt does not unpack the ways she describes Ganzeer's work. For example, Ganzeer's class and gender make possible the slippage between graffiti and art, as well as reading his work as "globally understood." Ganzeer's class positionality affords him access to global visual language through access to the internet, and language skills to create wide networks that support his travel internationally to exhibit his work and engage with artists in other locations. His gender gives him greater access to historical and contemporary privileges afforded to male artists to be read as an artist and innovator; a privilege seldom afforded to women artists whose works are more often relegated to folklore and ornamentation. Pruitt does not offer an explanation of what she means by "globally understood" visual language or what about Ganzeer's work makes it global. One possible way to explain this is to argue that Ganzeer's work fits Western aesthetic traditions that adhere to certain rules of scale and perspective, as well as catchy graphic design and advertisement elements that use bold colors and fonts. These visual conventions perhaps made Ganzeer's work legible to Western audiences who then could engage with the revolution in ways that other visual productions do not afford. Lastly, although Pruitt makes a clear point that the differences between graffiti is ephemeral and art is enduring and monumental, she does not elaborate on the ways Ganzeer's work challenges this binary by being simultaneously ephemeral, enduring, and monumental.

In his essay, "Assembling a Revolution," (2014) professor of English John Lennon examines the relationship between youth that lead the revolution through analyzing graffiti, including *Tank vs. Bicycle*. Lennon argues that graffiti "produces for the viewer a new

relationship with the city...that takes place spatially within the city is also globally informed” (224). This is an important argument that I build on in this chapter, yet Lennon’s essay does not tease out which neighborhoods in Cairo particular graffiti appears, and this results in creating a monolithic narrative of Cairo that assumes it is the same regardless of actual location. This in turn flattens a megacity of twenty million inhabitants whose neighborhoods have different histories of development, class, and religious formations. Lennon treats all youth as the same without much consideration of the difference in class, gender, religion, or where in the city they live and paint.

These scholarly works present us with important historical and contemporary understandings and documentation of this form of visual, as well as examine relationships between this ephemeral visual culture production to the revolution; yet they have two main gaps. The first gap is that they abstract these ephemeral works from their geography, which in turn suggests that these works have the same relevance, legibility, and meaning regardless of their location and audience. The second gap is that these writings often leave gender and class of those writing and location of work dynamics unexamined. In this chapter, I explore a process of examining graffiti and murals while taking into account their geographic location and those who created them, as well as their content. I argue that their geography, and the gender and class of those who made them influence their content. To do so, I follow the lives of two murals. The first is *Tank vs. Bicycle* in the pedestrian underpass of the 6 October Bridge in Zamalek (an island in the Nile) that was created by Ganzeer and assembled with the help of a large number of friends in May 2011 and continued to morph until June 2013.<sup>2</sup> This mural centers a confrontation between a life-size military tank and a boy on a bicycle with a large bread basket on his head.

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<sup>2</sup> 6 October Bridge is named after the 6 October 1973 reclaiming of Sinai Peninsula after its Israeli occupation in 1967.

The second mural is *Egyptian Identity*, which was organized by Ammar Abo Bakr and Ganzeer in June 2013 on Qasr El-Nil Street in downtown Cairo. The mural's focal point is a young rural woman decorated in pharaonic iconic adornments and calligraphy. The mural continued to be an active site of conversation until it was whitewashed in November 2015.

I have chosen these two murals to examine primarily because of their locations and the information we have about them. Both sites are located outside the revolution's epicenter at Midan El-Tahrir and the hub for revolutionary visual culture production at Mohamed Mahmoud Street. Also, unlike many other murals and graffiti where authors, dates, and locations are mostly unknown, we have exact locations of these works and have more accurate data on when they were created and photographed, as well as who created them. This information allows for more specific examination of the relationship between geography and content of the works, as well as insight as to who has access to specific geographies, why, and how. These reasons, thus, allow me to make a strong argument that the social and political geography of particular locations influences the access of certain authors over others, and, in turn, the content of the work. This is important because it demonstrates the effect of class and gender on access to the street in general, and during moments of political and social unrest in particular. The next two sections engage with the specific ways class and gender influence access to the street in two specific locations during the revolution.

### ***Tank vs. Bicycle and Zamalek***

Zamalek, an island in the Nile, was once home to the Khedivial Botanical Gardens with acacias and jacarandas, Khedivia Gezira palace to the northeast, and Christian religious foundations in the late 1800s (Hamamsy 2011, 70; Moore 2014, 91). In early 1900s, Zamalek

began to develop as a British “self-contained” elite professional middle-class neighborhood (Raymond 2000, 321). This included buildings in Gothic and European style with French windows and the Gezira Sporting Club that was built for British army officers (Hamamsy 2011, 70). Zamalek became more accessible to the rest of Cairo and elite Egyptians after the Boulaq Bridge was built in 1912, which connected Zamalek to Boulaq Aboul Ela (where the Egyptian Museum is now; the bridge was demolished in 1998), and a tramway was built that connected downtown to Embaba and Giza through Zamalek. This also increased commercial activity and foot and car traffic (Moore 2014, 91-93). Zamalek was described as a fashionable neighborhood with a high percentage of educated inhabitants, separated from lower-strata neighborhoods by railroads (Raymond 2000, 364).

The exclusivity of Zamalek is mirrored in the Gezira Sporting Club, which had membership that was once limited to British nationals, then opened up to the Egyptian elite in the late 1930s. The club’s membership now is mostly by inheritance with membership fees around 650,000 Egyptian pounds, which equals approximately 37,000 US dollars (Karim 2015). The elite characteristics of Zamalek make it today home to a large number of foreigners, diplomats, foreign embassies, and elite Egyptians. Also, it is one of Cairo’s neighborhoods with high-end hipster restaurants and bars, art and music schools, and elite art galleries. It is also where a number of state and private cultural and arts institutions are located, including the Egyptian Opera House, Helwan University Faculty of Fine Arts, Faculty of Musical Education, Plastic Artists' Syndicate, Safar Khan Art Gallery, and El Sawy Cultural Wheel. These cultural institutions make available diverse cultural production that is part of the nationalist agenda designed for “elevating public taste and enlightening society” (Helwan University, Faculty of Fine Art 2018) (more on the role of arts and cultural institutions in Egyptian national formation

can be found in Chapter 1). In addition, the presence of cultural institutions gives an opportunity for those who frequent Zamalek to see different forms of art work. For example, the Faculty of Fine Art is said to be one of the first places to offer its walls for students to practice graffiti, and as a result of the popularity of that wall, the Mohmoud Mokhtar Cultural Center in Zamalek held a graffiti festival over a two-week period from 21 September through 7 October 2007 (Fahim 2007). The festival organizer, painter and director of the center, Tamer Assem wanted to support the rise and evolution of graffiti in Cairo and globally, as well as legitimize graffiti. The festival's works, which included portraits, figures intertwined with each other, and cartoonish figures painted on wooden slabs affixed against the center's walls, were seen as a "violation to public taste" and "admired [for] its inexplicable monstrous beauty" (Fahim 2007). The festival made legitimate and legible graffiti deserving of a cultural space and the sponsorship of a state institution (Nicoarea 2014c, 182).

In addition to cultural institutions, signs of Zamalek's elite and globalized identity is found in the development of consumer culture. Zamalek houses the first mall in Cairo: El Yamama Center that was built in 1989 across the street from the Faculty of Musical Education (Abaza 2006, 199). It also is where the first wave of upscale cafés were established in the 1990s (De Koning 2006, 221). Even Lay's® Classic Potato Chips changed their marketing depending on the neighborhood, and now sell Lay's brand, as opposed to the local Chipsy brand, in upper-class areas such as Zamalek (Peterson 2011, 50). Arts and cultural educational institutions and galleries, malls, and cafés offer upper middle class, especially women, spaces to enjoy each other's company, as well as that of the opposite gender, without suspicion and restrictions (De Koning 2006, 222). These locations are seen as "civilized" and "classy," therefore safe for upper-middle and upper-class women to frequent without their families, to

meet in mixed-gender friend groups, while still being respectable and honorable (De Koning 2006, 229-230).

With the elite status of Zamalek comes particular forms of policing of public spaces in ways that have shaped the neighborhood; for example, the removal of homeless individuals from the public space under the 15 May Bridge (a space where homeless individuals dwelled), thereby transforming it into a privately-owned cultural space (El Sawy Cultural Wheel) (CNN 2009). Another example of policing public space in Zamalek is the signaling of what is acceptable art and cultural production. For example, the wall of the Faculty of Fine Art that was covered with 2011 revolutionary graffiti was painted over in summer 2012 and transformed into a mosaic collage for seniors as their final projects. The mosaics focused on Pablo Picasso's cubism and architect Hassan Fathy's work in Egypt's rural areas. So rather than graffiti, mosaics were deemed as an appropriate form of art (Metwaly 2012).

The characteristics of Zamalek as a location for elite Egyptians, diplomats, and foreigners kept the island, for the most part, a quiet place that middle and upper-middle classes demonstrators escaped to when violence became too much downtown just across the river. This also made it such that there was limited confrontation between demonstrators and security forces, which in turn made it possible for graffiti artists to create graffiti and murals with content and size that were not possible in downtown Cairo where war was raging and security was at its peak.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Larger murals became a feature of downtown Cairo in Fall of 2011, but not before.



Figure 2.2: *Tank vs. Bicycle*

Ganzeer and friends, 21 May 2011-June 2012, paint, spray, 66.6 ft x 19.7 ft  
(20 m x 6 m). 6 October Bridge underpass, Zamalek, Cairo, Egypt.  
(Copyright by artists, photograph credit: Mehri Khalil) (Hagan-Egyir 2014).

*Tank vs. Bicycle* is one of the first large-scale visual conversations since the beginning of the revolution. It is located in the underpass of the 6 October Bridge that connects Zamalek to the eastern part of downtown, most notably Midan Abdel Monem Riad, where the Egyptian Museum state radio and television station Maspero is located. On 21 May 2011, artist Ganzeer (meaning “chain” in Arabic) and twenty volunteers came together to assemble a white and black life-size tank with a soldier at the top manning the machine gun. The weapon aims directly at a young man on a bicycle with a flat wooden platform on his head piled with bread. In the background, previous graffiti can be seen: hearts and love are written in red; advertisement for a men's bodybuilding gym; and phone numbers for weight loss, massage, ear-waxing, and natural therapy services are in blue, red, and black. These layers indicate that the location of this wall is accessible to diverse passersby: lovers, owners of body-building gyms, and self-grooming service providers trying to catch the attention of lower-middle class commuters who will spot their ads. Also, the wall is concealed enough to linger and write upon. The writing also

demonstrates that graffiti (stencil and freehand) are part of daily Egyptian visual vernacular from before the revolution and have been used for self-expression and for advertisement.

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces was handed state affairs on 11 February 2011. Its first action was to dissolve parliament and suspend the constitution two days after they took control of the state (Al Jazeera 2011a). They emptied Midan El-Tahrir of all tents and protestors on 14 February 2011, while factory labor unions continued their national strike that began on 9 February 2011 and called for an increase in wages and for Mubarak to step down (TIMEP 2011a; Al Jazeera 2011b). During this time, emergency laws put in place by Mubarak were still in full effect, a number of figureheads of the fallen regime still continued to hold positions of influence, and those arrested for demonstrating against Mubarak were still in prison (TIMEP 2011b). On 21 February 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood announced the formation of their Freedom and Justice Party. The formation of a political party meant that the Muslim Brotherhood could officially participate in political life, which they have not been able to do since President Gamal Abdel Nasser deemed their activities as anti-state in 1954 after an attempt on his life. The SCAF also arrested women on 9 March and subjected them to virginity tests (more on this in Chapter Three). And on May 17, the SCAF granted amnesty to Mubarak and his family (*Egypt Independent* 2011; *Daily News Egypt* 2011).

These events sparked a call by Ganzeer for Mad Graffiti Weekend from 20-21 May 2011. The call was to graffiti every wall throughout the city (Pruitt 2017, 10). On 20 May 2011, with stencils, Ganzeer and friends went to the passageway under the 6 October Bridge and worked on *Tank vs. Bicycle*. When done, the scene was striking: a singular boy incredibly balancing himself on a bicycle with one hand on the handlebars, the other holding onto a large and heavy bread platform on his head facing a soldier with his gun and the tank's turret aiming at him. The bread

delivery man is a common scene in Cairo and at the time this work was being made, tanks had also become a common scene in downtown. John Lennon (2014) argued that *Tank vs. Bicycle* demonstrated the reality of a city occupied and a youth, whose revolution brought down Mubarak, in danger of being destroyed by the military. Even though the power differential is undeniable, the work is not one of surrender, but rather, one of resistance. The bread delivery man is carrying bread, which is a staple of the Egyptian diet, and in Egyptian vernacular is life, or, 'esh (عيش). 'Esh was the first demand of the three demands of the revolution: عيش، حرية، عدالة (life, freedom, social justice). The man, thus, represents the millions of young people and children in Egypt who must work to feed their families, is the deliverer of life, and like the revolution, is fragile and masterful.

The 2011 revolution was not the first time Egyptians call for 'esh (bread, life). In 1977, during President Anwar Sadat's open-door economic policy, subsidies on bread, cooking oil, and other basic needs were lifted. This prompted Egyptians across the country to riot for two days calling for their breakfast and bringing the country to a standstill (Seikaly 2017). Demonstrations against increases of bread prices continued to occur and in 2008 (Frerichs 2016), prices of subsidies increased to a point where demonstrators clashed with security services, killing fifteen and arresting hundreds (Ahmed 2013). Therefore, the bread in Ganzeer's mural references food scarcity in Egypt, corruption around wheat imports and exports, and Egyptians' experiences with hunger and poverty, even though the country is the largest wheat producer in the world (Food and Agriculture Organization for the United Nations 2017). Ganzeer's bicycle delivery man, therefore, represents Egyptian working-class youth standing up to Goliath (as represented by the state and military) while simultaneously bringing to the forefront Egyptians' active

demonstrations and demands for equity that began decades before the 2011 revolution (Beinin 2011).

*Tank vs. Bicycle* is in black and white making it look like a photograph's negative. Put together with the sheer size of the work gives the impression that this reality of the military against the people is unreal, the opposite of what should be. This photographic effect brings to mind another image of the man with plastic grocery bags standing alone in front of a line to tanks in Tiananmen Square in 1989 (Witty 2009). Both men doing seemingly daily chores standing against the might of the military. This iconographic similarity is the first transnational connection this mural has with other happenings, people, and places.

This work could not have been located outside of Zamalek. The work's direct anti-military message would have resulted in the immediate arrest of Ganzeer and his crew, as well as the work being whitewashed shortly after. But Zamalek's isolation from the revolution and lack of direct battles between protestors and security services offered Ganzeer the opportunity to create this work, and his friends a unique location for their art work. It also afforded Ganzeer the opportunity to have a large number of people helping with the project, and spend many uninterrupted hours finishing the work without fear of being reported or arrested. This is not true for other locations. Ganzeer himself experienced this when five days after *Tank vs. Bicycle*, on 26 May 2011, he was detained by a police officer while he was sticking *Mask of Freedom* on a wall downtown Cairo. The poster shows a man wearing a leather mask (reminiscent of BDSM masks) that covered the eyes and has a mouth gage. The text in the poster reads: "New...The freedom mask. Greetings from the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to the beloved people. Now available in the market for an unlimited time." Ganzeer was released a few hours later after a massive global online campaign demanding he be set free.

In addition, the location of *Tank vs. Bicycle* outside the center of graffiti and mural production in downtown Cairo allowed for it to go undisturbed for months. The only addition that was made a few hours after Ganzeer finished his work was the image of artist, Sad Panda, who stands slouched over watching, helplessly, the confrontation between the man on the bicycle and the tank. Sad Panda is the alter ego given to this artist in school because of “his size and his melancholic demeanor” (Morayef 2011). Sad Panda is an artist who lives in Masaken Sheraton in Heliopolis, an affluent neighborhood of Cairo. Sad Panda sometimes accompanies his alter ego with statements about how sad and depressing life is. Erin Biel (2011) writes in her article for *Yale Globalist* that Sad Panda’s work “rarely encompasses anything political.” Sad Panda does not want to “force [his] message down people’s throats...When Picasso painted the Spanish civil war, he made Guernica, and he painted it from his perspective. The way he saw it, not the way the war was” (Morayef 2011). Sad Panda is sad because “[w]hat is there in this life that can possibly make me happy with all of the wars, the oil prices, global warming?” (Biel 2011). In this case, Sad Panda stands witness to the military violence against the Egyptian people.

Ganzeer is a middle-class graphic designer, visual artist, comic book enthusiast and artist, who is fluent in Arabic and English, with a bachelor’s degree in business, and whose works have been exhibited in numerous venues inside and outside of Egypt before the revolution (Pruitt 2017, 4). Therefore, Ganzeer’s positionality provides context to why he has chosen the underpass of 6 October Bridge as the location, form, and content of his work. Because of his class privilege and his work as an artist, Ganzeer is comfortable in Zamalek. Also, because of his experience with graphic design and business, Ganzeer understands the significance of placing *Tank vs. Bicycle* at the underpass of 6 October Bridge as traffic leaves the quiet island where isolation from the revolution is possible, to downtown where the scene of the tank versus the people is a

lived experience. Ganzeer is confronting the Egyptian elite and foreign diplomats with a reality that they are distanced from because of their class and/or nationality. Additionally, the work conforms to expectations of formal art training; i.e. perspective and scale. All of this, not only the “slippage between local and global contexts” as Pruitt argues, makes Ganzeer’s *Tank vs. Bicycle* work “monumental” (Pruitt 2017, 2). The designation of *Tank vs. Bicycle* by art historian Jennifer Pruitt as art and not just graffiti is not because the work is enduring, or that it utilizes global (read Western) language of visual culture, but because Ganzeer’s class and gender privilege, as well as the location of the mural in an elite island in the Nile amongst numerous contemporary art galleries and art educational institutions allow for it to be read as art.

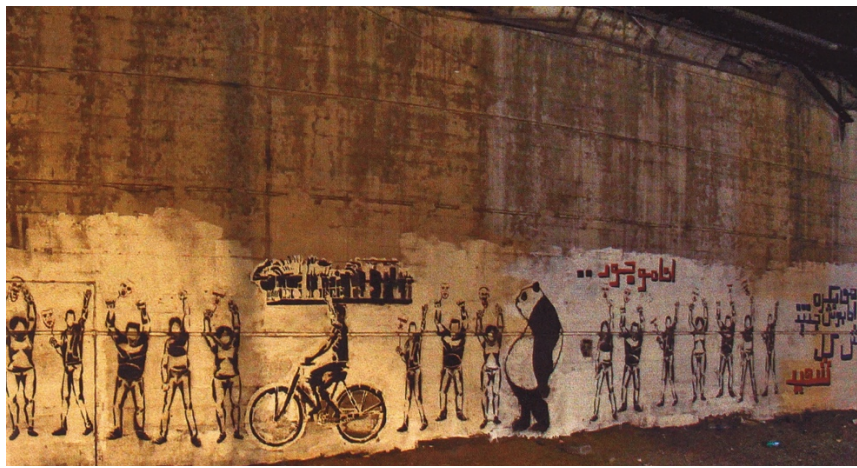


Figure 2.3: *Tank vs. Bicycle* (detail)

Multiple artists, January 2012, paint, spray, 66.6 ft x 19.7 ft (20 m x 6 m).  
6 October Bridge underpass, Zamalek, Cairo, Egypt.

(Copyright by artists, photograph credit: Mosa'ab Elshamy) (Hamdy and Karl 2014, 128-129).

The first additions to *Tank vs. Bicycle* were made in early January 2012 by unknown artists who added demonstrators, men and women, holding masks of martyrs surrounding the bread boy (Figure 2.3). They also added protestors being crushed under the wheels of the tank. Their blood, in red spray, runs on the ground and covers the wheels. To the right of the protestors the text: “From tomorrow...I am with a new face and the face of a martyr” and above them: “I exist...” is added. An anonymous artist stenciled Pinocchio on the television screen, referring to

state official media outlets as liars. These additions are a response to the events of 9 October 2011 (Black Saturday) when hundreds of Christians joined by Muslims marched from Shubra, a historically Coptic Christian neighborhood, to the national television and radio station Maspero to protest the burning of St. George Church in September 2011 and the state's lack of response to the burning. As demonstrators approached the building, they were met with a large number of police and army officers in full riot gear and tanks. Violence erupted and the tanks ran over demonstrators crushing them. At least twenty-seven demonstrators were killed. With the new protestors, the bread boy and Sad Panda are no longer alone, and are joined by countless others, men and women with veils and without, who stand for themselves and all those killed at Maspero. The added text emphasizes that the revolution continues, protestors will return tomorrow to protest, and those killed continue to exist. The demonstrators added were made with detailed stencils of men and women sprayed in black and white in the same style and size as the tank and the man on the bicycle. Therefore, they look as if they are a continuation of *Tank vs. Bicycle*.



Figure 2.4: *Army and Egyptians Are One Hand*

Multiple artists, January 2012, paint, spray, 66.6 ft x 19.7 ft (20 m x 6 m).

6 October Bridge underpass, Zamalek, Cairo, Egypt.

(Copyright by artists, photograph credit: Maggie Osama) (Hamdy and Karl 2014, 128-29).

Shortly after the additions made in January 2012, Badr Battalion, a group supporting the military who in a YouTube video described themselves as "distinguished Egyptian youth who

are against the spies and traitors that burn Egypt" (Batrawy 2012), changed the wall after calling the wall and its authors "agents and traitors to spread their violent ideologies against the police, the army and Egyptian traditions" and claiming the "military is a red line" not to be crossed in a video posted on YouTube (Morayef 2012a; Batrawy 2012). The video is no longer available.

With thick white paint, they covered the bodies and blood under the tank, the boy on bicycle and his bread, Sad Panda, and selectively covered the bodies of demonstrators, paying extra attention to cover the bodies of the women. They especially covered all of the unveiled women and the bodies of veiled women, keeping only their heads. They switched the martyr faces held up by protestors into Egyptian flags. In black they cover the image of Pinocchio from the television. New texts in black and red are added: "The army and people are one hand" and "Egypt for Egyptians." This work is signed: Badr (1) on the tank. These additions and alterations shift the meaning of the work from an anti-military commentary to a nationalist rally in support of the military. "The army and people are one hand" was a chant that was heard across Midan El-Tahrir when the military first came onto the scene on 28 January 2011 promising they would not shoot at demonstrators.

Although I could not find materials about the members of Badr Battalion, close readings of their edits of *Tank vs. Bicycle* provide us with some insights on their positionality. In Egypt, understanding the role of the military as "the protector of the people" is one that is deeply nationalist (Amar 2012, 185; Morayef 2012a). Therefore, the changes that bring together Egyptian flags and praise of the military, as well as erasing any critique of the military and state: erasure of Pinocchio from the television screen and the bodies under the tank, suggest that Badr (1) members are nationalists. Also, the erasure of all women's bodies, keeping only veiled

women's heads suggests that they are conservative and probably Muslims adhering to politics of respectability that the proper way for a woman to be in public is if she is veiled.

In her article for the *Egypt Independent*, "Army Loyalists and Activists Battle on the Walls of Cairo" (2012b), Soraya Morayef describes the group as having a worrying level of ignorance and that they are unaware of the irony of making graffiti to denounce graffiti. She also includes a reply from Ganzeer on these additions, in which he says that the "group is obviously soaked in ignorance and blind nationalism...clearly they've been brainwashed by our horrible school textbooks and official media" (Morayef 2012b). Then he adds: "It's also obvious that these kids have no sense of aesthetics whatsoever" (Morayef 2012b). These comments are indicative of an assumed class differential between Ganzeer, Morayef, the anonymous artists who made the additions in January 2012, Sad Panda on the one hand, and Badr Battalion on the other. This is articulated in describing the group as ignorant, lacking aesthetics (read lacking middle-class globally inspired aesthetic), and assuming that members of Badr Battalion went to public schools and have no access, as the others do, to global media. These comments are significant here because they indicate who should have access to this wall, whose opinion is deemed learned versus ignorant, and whose visual expression is seen as aesthetically acceptable. Aesthetics becomes a point of contention and policing among graffiti and mural artists as the revolution continues. Lack of aesthetics becomes a sign of ignorance and need for artistic education. This signification was not present in the first few months of the revolution when more diverse individuals from all walks of life engaged in marking walls, tanks, and monuments, and developed later as claims to city walls becomes the purview of a select few and more contested as part of policing and authoritarianism. Also, describing Badr Battalion (1) as ignorant and not as sophisticated as others who painted the wall is important to note because it brings to the

forefront tensions over power as represented in who has access to the street and who can speak for the people. Ganzeer's *Tank vs. Bicycle* claims to speak for working-class people and youth who struggle against state corruption, increased prices of basic goods, and face the wrath of the state during demonstrations. Yet, when some of those people begin to speak, their voices are unheard. Although one could argue that members of Badr Battalion are not part of the people that *Tank vs. Bicycle* speaks for, because they support the dominant narrative, it is difficult to ignore the tension represented in the mural of who gets to speak for whom and who is included and excluded from being represented as working-class.

*Tank vs. Bicycle* went through another change on 23 January 2013, before Bahia Shehab and Nazeer get to the wall in early March. In this iteration, the wall was painted white again, leaving the tank and the body of Field Marshal Mohamed Tantawi (painted in a previous iteration) while splashing his face with black paint covering his identity.



Figure 2.5: *Tank vs. Bicycle*, 2012  
 Multiple artists, paint, spray, 66.6 ft x 19.7 ft (20 m x 6 m).  
 6 October Bridge underpass, Zamalek, Cairo, Egypt.  
 (Copyright by artists, photograph credit: Bahia Shehab) (Shehab 2015).

Nazeer, a graphic designer and commercial ad designer, added his iconic road sign: “Tahrir: Your address is here,” with an arrow pointing in both directions being run-over by the tank. Bahia Shehab created a sea of her *A Thousand Times No* stencils of “no to military rule,”

“no to a new pharaoh,” “no to stealing the revolution,” “no to military rule,” “no to tear gas,” “no to thinking the people are stupid,” “no to stripping the people” and her reminders that “some people were martyred so you could live” and “some people lost their sight so you could see” cover the wall, the tank, and Tantawi's body. Bahia Shehab is an upper-middle class Egyptian Lebanese artist and entrepreneur who teaches at the American University in Cairo and at the time of this work, was getting her doctorate in Islamic Art History. Her *A Thousand Times No* is a project that she created for the exhibition *Tradition of Future* at the Haus Der Kunst in Munich and produced by the Khatt Foundation in Amsterdam. The invitation to participate came with a condition that she needed to use Arabic calligraphy in her work. In response to this conditional invitation, Shehab wanted to say “no and a thousand times no”; a local vernacular used to emphasize absolute refusal. But of refusing to participate, Shehab opted to take her refusal to the exhibit and researched a thousand and one noes found across the world during Islamic patronage, put her research findings in a book with information about each “no” and made a plexiglass curtain of them. In her artist statement Shehab writes:

When you want to deny all of the stereotypes that are imposed on you and that try to define your role in the world. When you want to reject almost every aspect of your reality. When you want to decline every political reality you live under. When you want to dismiss all of the options available to you. When you want to negate all the accusations that go hand in hand with your identity. When you want to refuse to be an imitator or follower of the West, yet you also refuse the regressive interpretation of your heritage. ‘A thousand Nos’ are not enough (Shehab 2010).

Shehab's participation in the revolution started in November 2011 after she saw images of martyrs being piled up on the pavement in Mohamed Mahmoud Street. It is then that she repurposed the noes to refuse the violence she was witnessing. The stencils crossed several boundaries: local and international because of the use of noes that came from Africa, Asia, and Europe; through the use of historically contextualized noes written in Arabic typeface in diverse contexts and reutilizing them for a contemporary moment, Shehab also blends the contemporary with the historical; and finally she blends popular and fine art together through the use of materials created for a museum exhibition to make stencils and graffiti.

Shehab's additions are the first that are attributed to a woman artist on *Tank vs. Bicycle*. Her class and gender play privileging roles in this instance because she feels comfortable going, late at night, to Zamalek from her home in a gated community in 6 of October, a new suburb of Cairo, to stencil the wall. Nazeer's class as an educated and employed graphic designer gives him comfortable access to Zamalek.

This iteration was the last of the works on *Tank vs. Bicycle*. These additions were the last of publicly engaged conversations that focused on the military interim period from 11 February 2011 until June 2012. The conversations were carried out between diverse individuals whose intersectional positionalities were examined through the artistic forms, styles, and aesthetics of their contributions to the wall. The close readings and analysis of artists involved in this wall examines the relationship between artists' engagements with local and global iconographies, middle-class aesthetics that make their work read as art that is suitable for Zamalek's elite and nationally diverse audiences. This appropriateness is made more evident when contrasted with critiques of Badr Battalion that mark them as working-class and blindly nationalist because of their aesthetic choices in how and what they add and erase.

*Tank vs. Bicycle* was whitewashed by the local “neighborhood watch” group, Zamalek Guardians (“Resistant Art” 2013; Hamdy and Karl 2014). According to their English-only website, the Zamalek Guardians are a group of Zamalek residents who founded the group on 25 January 2011 “to protect our families, neighbors and friends from the released criminals from the jails of Egypt during the 25<sup>th</sup> protests” (Zamalek Guardians 2018). Their mission, among other things, is to “protect [their] families, neighbors and friends; ensure a decent and a democratic life style; beautify [their] area and [their] behaviours; and join hands to fight corruption, pollution, illiteracy, crime and anything that would threaten our peaceful life.” They also provide a list of numbers to call if in trouble: Central Army, Military Police, and Emergency. The group’s choice of language for the website, their desire to protect their peaceful life by calling state security services to the rescue, and policing as beautification of space and behaviors are all indications of the group’s class privilege and commitment to exclusive inclusion.

### ***Egyptian Identity at Qasr El-Nil Street***



Figure 2.6: *Egyptian Identity*, June-July 2013  
 Multiple artists, paint, spray, metal, found objects, and wood, 82 ft x 13 ft (25 m x 4 m).  
 Qasr El-Nil Street, Cairo, Egypt.  
 (Copyright by artists, photograph credit: Abdelrhman Zin Eldin, July 2013).

Across the river from Zamalek's 6 October Bridge and a year after *Tank vs. Bicycle* was whitewashed by a group of concerned citizens, the mural *Egyptian Identity* was created. This mural stood at the far western end of Qasr Il-Nil Street and blended together traditional pharaonic and Islamic elements with contemporary abstract art in order to articulate politically subtle and culturally legible celebrations and anxieties over the making of Egyptian identity.

In its first iteration the mural's focal point is a portrait of a young *fallaha* woman with *kohl* outlining her eyes, flowers in her braided hair, and her neck adorned with a Nefertiti-inspired necklace. The portrait is painted by Luxor muralist and teacher at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Ammar Abu-Bakr. Beside the rural woman is a poem composed by writer and journalist Ahmed Aboul-Hassan and written in calligraphy by Sameh Ismael. The poem reads (from right to left): “When I first opened my eyes, and before my mother knew me, they applied *kohl* (eyeliner) to my eyes reaching my temples so I can look like your statues.”<sup>4</sup> The poem refers to a rural tradition where *kohl* is applied on the eyes of newborn babies to connect them to their pharaonic history and keep away envy. The background is a blue sky with white clouds. The young woman is surrounded by metal sculptures, hybrid figures human and non-human, with legs and wings. The sculptures, made by Cairene sculpture artist and fine arts lecturer Alaa Abdel Hamid who travels the world in artist residencies, are constructed from metal from discarded car parts, wire, and paint. These sculptures were first used in Abdel Hamid's first solo exhibition, *The Solution is the Solution*, in 2011.<sup>5</sup> The title of the exhibition is a play on the Muslim Brotherhood's famous slogan “Islam is the Solution” (Boskovitch 2013). The sculptures seem to be in motion; some are hovering just above the mural, while others are climbing up the

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<sup>4</sup> Translation is my own from Arabic.

<sup>5</sup> Translation is my own from Arabic.

wall. There are also four of Abdel Hamid's gypsum eagles—as seen on the Egyptian flag—hung upside down at the center of the mural. To the far left from the rural woman are three picture frames, two of them with images of a field of wheat, and the third containing a photograph of a wooden chair in a grassy meadow. The frames are contributions by German-Iraqi artists Noura Nassel and Jan Nikolai. The wheat is a commentary on food scarcity in Egypt despite it being the largest importer of wheat in the world (Food and Agriculture Organization for the United Nations 2017). The text below the photographs reads: “the naked truth.”<sup>6</sup>

*Egyptian Identity* is walking distance from Maspiro (the state television and radio building); 6 October Bridge that connects downtown Cairo to Zamalek; the overbearing state bureaucratic building of El-Mogamma', Midan El-Tahrir, Mohamed Mahmoud Street, the National Democratic Party headquarters, the Egyptian Museum, and the Arab League building. Yet, Qasr Il-Nil Street, where the mural is located, is a far less famous site of the Egyptian revolution. It has seen fewer battles and bloodshed. It is rarely mentioned in narratives about the first eighteen days of the revolution or the months after. But mural and graffiti artists know it well and have—since the revolution erupted—marked it often. Because of its location on the periphery of revolutionary visual culture production in downtown Cairo, the Qasr El-Nil mural was witness to more activity from June 2013 to November 2015 than Mohamed Mahmoud Street and other more highly surveilled locations that saw an increase in policing shortly after the military takeover in June 2013. This made it possible for artists to revisit this wall, mark it, and engage with it in ways that were impossible in other sites. Taken together, the location and content of *Egyptian Identity* provide us with documentation of the Egyptian revolution, as well as insight to those who frequented this area during these two years of rapid transition.

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<sup>6</sup> Translation is my own from Arabic.

Qasr Il-Nil Street is part of Cairo's transformation that began in the latter part of the 1860s and focused on the commercial district; it is now known as downtown Cairo. These changes began when Kediye Isam'el, ruler of Egypt and Sudan from 1863 to 1879, returned from a visit to Paris and decided to plan Cairo after "a European-style city...that would proclaim Egypt's parity to European powers" (Reynolds 2012, 25). These developments were to take place west of the old city, by the Nile, and would create a new center: the Ismailiya. The boundaries of this new area are what is now Midan Ramsis to the north, Old Cairo to the south, Midan Al-Ataba and Abdeen Palace to the east, and the Nile River to the west (Meital 2007, 859). The development included parks, large boulevards, hotels, apartment buildings, and squares. One such midan was Midan Al-Ismailia, now known as Midan El-Tahrir. Just south of the midan, the British headquarters, barracks, and garden were built. As part of the developments, Qasr Il-Nil Street was one of the main arteries and became the business hub of the city. Here, large European style buildings were erected, financial services were established, and elite Egyptians and Europeans frequented French and British bookstores, cafés, clothing stores, and bars (Raymond 335). This area became a hub of activity that brought people together from across classes for work and leisure (Raymond 2000, 334-336; Meital 2007, 861).

Until today, Qasr Il-Nil Street continues to be a central part of downtown Cairo as location for leisure, business, and dissent. *Egyptian Identity* is at the south-western end of Qasr Il-Nil Street that crosses downtown Cairo diagonally. The end closest to Midan Talaat Harb has the world famous Groppi Café (closed since the revolution began), Le Grillon restaurant that is open late, and dingy Zigzag bar and dance club. Closer to the mural was the home of Merit Publishing, which acted as a shelter and organizing space during the revolution until it moved to another part of downtown in 2015. And in 2017, the international Steigenberger Hotel chain

opened its doors for business at the corner of Qasr Il-Nil Street and Merit Basha Street, right across from the Egyptian Museum.

The artists who made this work were making a collective message about “Egyptian identity, the loss of culture, social division, beauty, and art” (Boskovitch 2013). The artists participating in this work illuminated the abundance of commercial billboards in the city, the inaccessibility of art to economically marginalized peoples, and the destruction of art at the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood who treated antiquity sculptures as opposition to their beliefs (Boskovitch 2013). Georgina Nicoarea argues that the inclusion of historical iconography and poetry in local vernacular, as well as contemporary issues, is a way for Cairene artists to create a “trans-historical affiliation” that shapes their identities and demonstrates the complexities of their political engagement (2014a, 100). The mural’s form and celebration of Egypt’s histories and traditions —by including pharaonic and Islamic art traditions together— enabled the artists speak to aesthetic values and familiar visual representations to many Egyptians. The contributions of the two non-Egyptian artists, Noura Nassel and German Jan Nikolai, focus on the poverty and food crisis in Egypt. This focus, I suggest, is one that is influenced by commonly traded narratives that describe Egypt and Cairo as ticking time bombs, defined by poverty and chaos (Mitchell 2002, 1988; Sims 2010). These representations, even in this collaborative mural, contrast with the more nuanced representations by Egyptian artists who subtly and effectively make an argument for the importance of conserving cultural heritage as it is grounds for contemporary cultural practices.

*Egyptian Identity* was painted during President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood’s presidency. These days have become the last days of Morsi’s presidency. At the time, Morsi was facing criticism from many Egyptians who were becoming increasingly

impatient with his ineffectiveness and lack of response to revolutionary demands. The military tribunals for civilians were still ongoing, figureheads of the old regime were still free, and some continued to hold positions of influence. These and other issues made it clear that President Morsi was lacking the skills needed to shift things around to affect change. Simultaneously, access to public space was being increasingly policed by the military and vigilantes of the Muslim Brotherhood who felt that they had legitimate power over civilians. In order to mediate these conditions, mural and graffiti artists opted for subtle messages that required a level of savviness and time to understand. By centering the mural around an unveiled rural girl and connecting her to pharaonic statues, Abo Bakr and Abu ElHassan make an argument for the legitimacy of pharaonic statues that the Muslim Brotherhood was trying to ban and destroy as unethical. In doing so, they remind viewers that the statues are part of Egypt's glorious past, as well as its current traditions. This iconography is also familiar to Egyptians because of the political symbolism of the unveiled peasant women as symbol of freedom from veiling and seclusions.

In order to avoid the dangers of engaging with street art that has become punishable by anti-demonstration and anti-assembly laws, *Egyptian Identity* mural artists got permission, albeit verbal and not legal binding, from the parking garage attendants through Merit Publishing's owner Hashem, whose publishing office had been on this street for the past fifteen years. They also worked around the clock and finished the mural within four days. In order to accomplish this, they brought together a large number of volunteers to help prepare the wall, mix colors and paint, and assemble the various pieces. They also assigned street watchers to keep a lookout for any police.

Even though the mural's messages are subtle, it reflects a sense of anxiety caused by the confused present and unknown future, while simultaneously giving hope of alternative futurities. The content of the mural speaks to the artists' forms of refusal to submit to crisis conditions that demand they either remain static or destroy their beautiful histories. The anxiety was caused because the artists' fear that increased Islamic conservatism in Egypt would lead to the destruction of historical pharaonic heritage under the guise of Islamic decency and public morality. They dealt with this anxiety by reminding the Egyptian public, through legible and familiar imagery and iconography, that their contemporary traditions are part and parcel of their ancient history, thus the destruction of one means destruction of the other. Despite this anxiety, the mural is celebratory and hopeful. The poem celebrates a rural tradition of ornamenting newborn babies' eyes to connect them to their rich pharaonic past where statues' eyes were highlighted by outlining them with black paint. At the same time, the poem has a hint of reproach toward this tradition that keeps children bound to their past, as static statues, rather than propelling them forward into different futures. The hybrid-creatures have a robotic aura and they seem to be running up the wall as if trying to get over it to the other side. These figures are shown as frozen-in-motion bodies and their appearance of weightlessness can also be seen as forms of resistance to staying put.

The frame with the serene lone wooden chair in a grassy field appears to be like a window to something beyond the wall; as if the side of the painted mural is the indoors and the chair is what we see when looking outside. The locked door hidden behind layers of paint instigates a desire to unlock it, to see what lies behind as if it were a door to a secret garden. The window frame and the door create an imaginary of worlds beyond this one with the potential to be green and calm.

The artists are also aware of the location of the mural. It directly speaks to the Egyptian Museum just down the street, which is full of statues with adorned eyes and necks, and the Egyptian Theater where live performances since the 1940s have been taking place. The focus on the use of local Egyptian vernacular in the poem written in calligraphy speaks a familiar language to those who work around, walk through, and drive down this street. Even the most abstract elements of the mural —the metal statues— are made of discarded car parts and are relevant to working-class and lower-middle class people who work in garages or fix their cars; it is important to note that the Townhouse Gallery that works on projects with these workmen is just a few streets away from Qasr El-Nil street.



Figure 2.7: *Egyptian Identity*, August-November 2013  
 Multiple artists, paint, spray, metal, found objects, and wood, 82 ft x 13 ft (25 m x 4 m).  
 Qasr El-Nil Street, Cairo, Egypt.  
 (Copyright by artists, photograph credit: alma khasawnih, 2013).

This above iteration was how I saw *Egyptian Identity* the first time on a cold day in December 2013. I remember the street was empty, yet excessively full of street vendors on Talaat Harb Street just north of the mural. The mural looked different than what I had imagined it would from pictures I saw of it online. The mural looked sharp, unyielding, and mournful.

On 30 June 2013, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) took over the running of Egyptian state affairs again by overthrowing President Mohamed Morsi. As a result, thousands of Muslim Brotherhood supporters took to the streets and occupied squares in

demonstration of this coup/takeover. On August 14, 2013, at 7:00AM, military bulldozers entered the Rabaa and Nahda Square camps in Cairo where thousands of Muslim Brotherhood supporters have been camped since 30 June. With tear gas and live ammunition, the SCAF ended the sit-ins. As news of this spread, Muslim Brotherhood supporters all over Egypt attacked police stations and set numerous churches, Christian institutions, and homes on fire. At the end of it all, between six hundred to one thousand people were killed, almost four thousand individuals injured, and military general Abdel Fattah El-Sisi became president.

Shortly after the massacre in Rabaa in August and until November 2013, Egyptian artists went back to the *Egyptian Identity* mural with the colors yellow and black for works that express their anxiety and sadness. A black line, drawn by Nazeer and El Zeft, zigzagged through the mural as if creating a wormhole throughout its various elements. This thick line resembles an underground escape route and a mourning band that is usually tied around the upper arm when a group of people are mourning a collective loss, thus suggesting that Egypt is in grieving those killed in Rabaa. El Zeft, a pseudonym of a Cairene artist, was not involved in art or activism before the revolution, met Nazeer while the latter was stenciling so work in downtown. Their collaboration began then and so did El Zeft's revolutionary art practice.

Citizen Maw is a hybrid human-cat, drawn by Ganzeer. The human-cat is wearing a cuffed button-up shirt and a loose tie with a men's headdress of Upper Egypt. Maw is smoking a cigarette, an act all too common among Egyptians, a red slash runs through its eye, and bandages cover wounds on the side of its mouth and arm. These injuries suggest a recent fight. Citizen Maw's is a resilient Egyptian still fighting even though wounded (Pruitt 2017, 17).

Another addition, drawn by Med Hamd Nasr Sodane, is a *ba*, that is, a bird-human hybrid. In ancient Egyptian pharaonic beliefs, the *ba* is what makes each individual unique and is

one of five parts of the human soul: *ren*, *ka*, *sheut*, *ib*, and *ba*. The *ba* is surrounded by *ankh* (the key of life) and its neck is adorned with an *ankh* necklace. The key of life is both a symbol of physical and eternal life and is often seen carried by gods and goddesses in tombs. Amro Okacha added a viper that is ready to devour the serene image of the chair in a grassy meadow. The snake in Egyptian mythology represents both the beginning and the end, good and evil, and protector of all. Yet here, the viper is swallowing whole one of the few calm references in the mural. It looks evil and unyielding. If we understand the picture of the chair as a sign of a beautiful imaginary, then the viper is bringing that imaginary to an end, perhaps to be reborn at a later date.

Ammar Abo Bakr added an angel wearing a gas mask kneeling in front of the young girl, thus likening her to a goddess. The angel is similar to those found in Christian churches, thus signaling Coptic Christians. The gas mask makes a gesture to unbreathable air, a fire. This is a reference to the violence perpetrated against Copts across Egypt. The kneeling angel is asking Egypt, symbolized by the girl, for help or forgiveness. To the left of the angel and the rural girl, Hanaa El Degham painted a man wrapped in burial shroud, reminiscent of mummies and Muslim burial customs where the dead are wrapped in white cloth before being set into the ground. The representation of Muslim burial rituals is a commemoration to the hundreds of Muslim Brotherhood supporters who were murdered in Rabaa and ElNahda. Also, the connection between ancient Egyptian mummification and Muslim burial rituals signals that those killed will return in the afterlife.

All additions in the second iteration use black and yellow, which are bold colors that make seeing and understanding the images quick to those driving or walking down the street without the need to slow down. The new elements engage with the works that came before them

through additions and alterations without completely erasing or overwriting what was there before. The previous elements continue to be seen and legible, although their meanings changed. These additions are bright, confrontational, and coordinated. They challenge narratives presented in the first iteration of the mural that were mostly referencing Egyptian and pharaonic traditions and beauty. Meanwhile, the second iteration demonstrates a more direct political message using easily accessible icons and traditions from ancient and contemporary Egypt.

The second iteration of *Egyptian Identity* presents a dystopic reality where death is common-place, life and death are interchangeable, and identities are confused and hard to decipher. Yet in its dystopia, the coordinated and collaborative additions illustrate that the artist-activists are united in their position against military sanctioned violence and are aware of the military and the Muslim Brotherhood's tactics that focus on dividing Muslims and Christians.



Figure 2.8: *Egyptian Identity*, January 2014-September 2015  
 Multiple artists, paint, spray, metal, found objects, and wood, 82 ft x 13 ft (25 m x 4 m).  
 Qasr El-Nil Street, Cairo, Egypt.  
 (Copyright by artists, photograph credit: alma khasawnih, 2013).

The second time I saw the *Egyptian Identity* mural was when I returned to Cairo for my year of field work in September 2015. This time, I found it frantic, confused, and overwhelmed; similar to how I found the artists themselves.

Nazeer returned to the mural and filled the black zigzagging line with stencils of multiple icons of the Egyptian revolution. Such icons are: the state television building Maspero;<sup>7</sup> cross and crescent put together to signal Christian and Muslim unity; machine guns; camels and tanks referencing the Battle of the Camels that took place in February 2011; raised fists; ladders; Facebook and Twitter logos to recall the use of social media during the revolution; the KFC logo (this restaurant gave demonstrators food without charge while they camped in Midan El-Tahrir); logo for Creative Commons; A.C.A.B: All Cops Are Bastards; bicycles; awareness ribbons; a justice scale; the first aid sign; the number 74 within olive branches in memory of the seventy-four Ahli football club fans that were murdered by police in Port Said in February 2012; a throne; the word *no*; the number 18 for the eighteen days it took to remove President Mubarak from office; and a bra reminding people of the Girl In the Blue Bra who was beaten by riot police in December 2011. The black zigzag continues to emerge as a memorial band that carries reminders of the losses and wins experienced, acts of resistance, as well as sources of oppression during the revolution.

The graffiti collective Mona Lisa Brigades added an edited version of their logo at the farright end of the wall.<sup>8</sup> Their typical logo is Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* holding a spray can in a yellow caution sign. In this version, the Mona Lisa has morphed into a woman who has more typical Egyptian features, her head is covered with a red veil, the lower part of her face is covered by a sheer scarf, she has an eyepatch on her right eye, and in her left hand she is holding

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<sup>7</sup> Maspero is the State Television station building. During the first eighteen days of the revolution, the news coming out of Maspero first denied anything was happening in downtown Cairo, then represented those in Tahrir Square as hooligans, infiltrators, and spies. It is also site of clashes that took place on 11 October 2011, when a number of Christian Copts were shot by live ammunition and run over by tanks during a peaceful demonstration against the burning of St. George Church a few days before. Therefore, this building represents the state, corrupt media, and state sanctioned violence.

<sup>8</sup> At its most active, the Mona Lisa Brigades had close to thirty members of women and men from all over Cairo. They were formed in early 2011 and continue to exist today with a much smaller crew.

a canister of insect repellent instead of a spray paint canister. By changing their logo from a side signature to a work in itself, the Mona Lisa Brigades are reclaiming their own activism and calling on Egyptians to resist in more direct ways. The Mona Lisa has an eyepatch on her eye commemorating demonstrators who lost their eyes due to direct shots by snipers during clashes with the SCAF and riot police in November 2011.

The rural girl is now wearing a gas mask, added by Ammar Abo Bakr, as she joins the dystopic reality indicated earlier by the angel in the mask. El Zeft added a head of a security officer in a riot helmet peeking from behind the wall as representation of the military creeping back onto the streets (Mowafi 2015). This is El Zeft's *The return of the bastard*. This piece illustrates how the police are now creeping back onto the streets after being rarely seen around the city over the last few months.<sup>9</sup> To the right of the police officer is a stencil of Charlie Chaplin with the text “Thinking of the metaphysical is a waste of time!!!”<sup>10</sup> Chaplin and the text have replaced the fields of wheat that were originally in the frame. The second frame now features an outline of human figures standing close to each other in a line. Chaplin's portrait and the text accompanying it gesture to the absurdity of life at the moment this was added. The text suggests that thinking of grand ideas, such as a revolution, is a waste of time. But the exclamation marks at the end suggest that such a statement is in itself absurd.

The ridiculousness of the situation continues as the space between Citizen Maw and the rural girl is filled with rats running through a rat maze. This maze and the rats point to the

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<sup>9</sup> The police force in Cairo is run by the Ministry of Interior. Before and during the revolution, the police (in turn the Ministry) were seen as perpetrators of violence against demonstrators. Their role was understood very differently than that of the military, which was seen as a force protecting the demonstrators during the first eighteen days of the revolution. The roles changed when the military (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces) took over state affairs on 11 February 2011. The police retreated and left the military to inflict violence on the Egyptian people. By 2013, the police were reentering the everyday scene again.

<sup>10</sup> Translation is my own from Arabic.

mundane sense of daily life where one is expected to run around accomplishing very little, while being unable to get out. There are also three figures in white, black, and yellow suits threatening to shoot a man whose body is a heavy block of concrete. One of the figures has a police/military heavy-duty boot for a head that represents the military, another a monkey's head, while the third sports a human head with a beard and a Mickey Mouse mark on his forehead representing the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>11</sup> The military and Brotherhood figures are pointing guns at the man who is unable to defend himself or run away because of his weighed down body. This addition articulates that the artist-activists are aware that the military and the Muslim Brotherhood are in alliance. In other words, neither the military nor the Brotherhood should be trusted to have the best interest of the Egyptian people. Rather, both institutions are ready to execute whomever stands in their way. *El Zeft* reflects upon the main crisis during which this iteration of the *Egyptian Identity* mural was being painted plainly and succinctly:

Now I came out of the blender, only to enter a grinder—one of military rule and religious rule. They're fighting each other for power and I'm supposed to side with one of them, because otherwise I'm weak and a traitor of the revolution. Somehow, the revolution has become the pet subject of precisely those two factions, who do it the most harm. No—fuck both of them (*El Zeft* 2014, 252).

The additions in the second and third iterations of *Egyptian Identity* are familiar and widely identifiable by local passersby who could relate to and identify with Nefertiti's necklace,

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<sup>11</sup> The forehead mark is an indication of devotion that is made by putting a stone on the ground that hits the forehead every time one brings down their head to the ground as part of the Muslim prayer. This act bruises the forehead and repetitive bruising leaves a permanent mark.

burial shrouds, gas mask, as well as the revolutionary iconography that is scattered throughout the zigzagging black line. Most additions are discrete and visible units that could be made legible quickly as one drove past the mural.

The peripheral location on Qasr El-Nil Street allowed artists to create, over a two-year period, an *Egyptian Identity* that captured, illustrated, and unpacked diverse tensions and confusions, hopes and dreams, as well as utopias and dystopias that make them Egyptian at this particular moment and historically. The artists engaged with events and life experiences as they were unfolding before their eyes from June 2013 through November 2015. They did so while making connections to histories, pasts, and futures to come. In a way, they were simultaneous connections between the past, present, and future of what makes them Egyptians. This identity is shaped by the location of the mural, as it connects the Egyptian Museum that holds pharaonic history and shaped Egyptians' identities with a contemporary history of the 2011 revolution that also shapes their identities, although it continues to be unclear how it will do so.

On 11 November 2015, the *Egyptian Identity* mural was completely painted over with white paint by either state agents or parking lot attendants. The wall was left clean without a trace of what lay beneath the thick layers of white paint.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I explore how meaning-making of two murals in Cairo that were created and erased between May 2011 and November 2015 change if we consider their geographic locations and positionalities of the artists who made them. My goal is to argue that relocating revolutionary visual culture production in their specific geographies gives us an opportunity to create multidimensional narratives for these ephemeral works, their creators, Cairo, and the

revolution. The first mural, *Tank vs. Bicycle* in Zamalek, puts together military might against the fragile balance of a young man on a bicycle with a large bread basket on his head. The mural's various iterations focus on the disproportional power differential between the military and the state on the one hand and demonstrators and working-class people on the other. The second mural, *Egyptian Identity* in downtown Cairo, focuses on Egyptian identity as it is constructed through pharaonic pasts, peasant traditions, food scarcity, violence, and revolution. Through numerous iterations, this mural demonstrates the chaotic, fragile, and beautiful experiences that fashion who is considered an Egyptian. This is important so that we move away from narratives that not only flatten murals and graffiti of the revolution, their creators, and those who erased the work, but make it seem that all graffiti and mural artists are the same, all revolutionary art is the same, and all those who erase the work are state agents. Taking into account the ways geography affects access based on class and gender, gives us an opportunity to create these multidimensional people, places, and material objects. This becomes increasingly important as we try to understand the legitimacy and legibility, and exclusion and inclusion of certain forms of activism, and that beautification and aesthetics are sites of authoritarianism that are not only the purview of the state but also of artists and private citizens.

There are three ways literature has engaged with graffiti and murals of the 2011 revolution. The first is through close readings of particular works in order to argue that there is a relationship between revolutionary art and historical and contemporary Egyptian identity formations through examining iconography and text. This literature does important work to contextualize graffiti and murals within their local Egyptian and Cairene vernacular. This, in turn, allows us to better understand the ways these visual cultural productions relate to the revolution.

The second way is through focusing on particular and central areas. This work tends to examine interactions between these walls, the artists, and the state as a means of unpacking these relationships during the revolution. This literature is important because it provides documentation of revolutionary visual culture production and follows closely the tension between revolutionary art and artists on the one hand, and the state and its agents on the other. But this work often leaves much to be desired in terms of unpacking class and gender dynamics of access to walls or the making of these areas and artists central to the revolution. In other words, this literature does not examine class and gender tensions inherent in the walls, the artists, or content of the work.

The third way graffiti and murals of the revolution have been examined is through focusing on particular artists. This group of scholarly works take up an artist and follow their trajectory as artists and the works they have produced before, during, and since the revolution. This work is necessary in order to give credit and authorship to graffiti and murals that contributed to the revolution. Yet these works often do not analyze the positionalities of these artists, or the privileges they have to be identified as revolutionary artists, while so many others go unnamed, or how these privileges give them access to certain locations that are inaccessible to others.

The gaps in the scholarship create flat narratives of places, people, art, and the revolution. This results in a monolithic narrative that graffiti and murals are understood in the same way regardless where they are, who made them, who sees them, and when.

In this chapter, I take up where some of these gaps in the literature and explore the ways meaning-making changes based on geography and positionalities of the artists. I argue that the politics of location are paramount to graffiti and mural artists as they engage with territorializing

space as part of their ongoing struggle with the state over legitimacy of narratives and claiming space. Artists, state agents/supporters, and audiences are aware of the significance of geography to their negotiations and engagement. For the artists, the significance of location is made evident in the different content of the work in each location: the forms, size, and colors of the work, and process of work (time of day, urgency, and number of people participating). In *Tank vs. Bicycle*, in its different iterations, artists worked during the day with large numbers of participants. This suggests that the artists felt a certain level of safety, as the location was protected in the dim light of the underpass. This was not the same feeling the *Egyptian Identity* artists felt while exposed on a main street in a bustling downtown area. In comparison, they had to work quickly, all day and night long, with many volunteers doing different tasks to make the process go faster. *Tank vs. Bicycle* was large and included detailed stencils and painting, using primarily black, white, and red. This assumed that audiences could get closer and spend time with the work. In *Egyptian Identity*, the work was a large-scale painting and stenciled with bright colors. This was necessary so that whomever saw it as they drove through the street or quickly walked past it, could get its messages quickly. Even in its last iteration, when *Egyptian Identity* became frantic, the stencils were yellow on black background so that they could be registered quickly, and the paintings were not as detailed as the stencils of *Tank vs. Bicycle*, where we could see the creases in protestors clothes. Geography also matters to the level of the involvement of the state in the conversation. In *Tank vs. Bicycle*, it was private individuals, not the state, who engaged with the mural and who ultimately erased it as part of their mission to beautify their neighborhood. This may be due to different reasons, but one of them was the location of the mural in Zamalek as an elite location protected by its status and foreign diplomatic inhabitants. This meant that Zamalek was not a space that was frequented by security services or a site of confrontation with

demonstrators. The location of the mural kept it outside the direct purview of the state and its whitewashing agents. This was not the same for *Egyptian Identity*, which was located in downtown where surveillance was at its highest, so that by the time the mural became a direct reminder of the revolution and critique of the military, it was quickly painted over.

This chapter is by no means comprehensive, nor does it solve the problem of dislocation that is created, primarily because of lack of information on the location of these ephemeral visual cultural productions that are no longer physically there and that are only accessible through photographs and digital documentation. This chapter is not suggesting that graffiti and mural creators should be known so that we can take into account their perspectives and positionalities in order to give meaning to their work. Doing so would defy one of the reasons individuals and groups engage in graffiti in the first place as often an anonymous act of self-expression and assertion. What this chapter aims to explore is the ways geography and artist positionalities influence our understanding of the meaning of revolutionary graffiti and murals. This, I argue, does several things. The first is that it provides us with narratives of the revolution, its participants, and ephemera visual culture that are multidimensional and that illustrate the contradictions and tensions of the Egyptian revolution as a popular social change movement. These readings suggest that that graffiti and murals were sites that diverse individuals participated in who did not always hold the same ideologies. This, therefore, establishes a narrative of the revolution that proposes that protestors who took to the streets also had diverse ideologies and priorities. This helps us understand some of the violence that occurred throughout the revolution. Also, close readings of these murals suggest that geography influences the content of these murals. Therefore, another narrative these readings put forward is that revolutionary demands may also be site-specific. In other words, revolutionary priorities of

people inhabiting and frequenting Zamalek may be different than those whose lives are mostly spent in downtown Cairo or other locations. These are some of the ways that situated readings of ephemeral visual culture influence understandings of the revolution and its participants. The second is to create nuanced descriptions of graffiti and mural artists that also nuance them as individuals whose gender and class positionalities influence not only the content of their work, but also the ways they police others' engagement in public expression. Lastly, the relocating of murals and graffiti in their geographic locations demonstrates the complexities of an urban metropolis such as Cairo that has complex histories of development through colonialism, nationalism, and neoliberalism. This is a process that begins to give depth to a megacity where scholarship on ephemeral revolutionary visual cultural production describes it as uniform.

## Chapter 3: Bodies in Representation

### Introduction



Figure 3.1: *Hisham Rizk*, 2012  
 Ammar Abo Bakr and other artists, paint and paper.  
 Mohamed Mahmoud Street, Cairo, Egypt.  
 (Copyright by artists, photograph credit: alma khasawnih, 2013).

A detailed portrait of Hisham Rizk towered over three meters high and a meter and a half wide. His face is painted with his typical pantomime makeup: white face, with big dark brown eyes made darker by the blue-gray paint around them, lips the same blue-gray color as around his eyes, and lower lip made thicker by exaggerated paint that drips down on the lower right side. His teeth look yellowish because of the color of his lips. His mouth is smiling, making his cheeks rise up a little, but his eyes seem sad and affectionate. His protruding ears make him look as young as he is, twenty-one. His black hair is long enough to show the waves in it. His V-neck t-shirt has traces of paint and covers a skinny and strong torso. His arms are crossed over his chest, one fist holding a crook and the other a flail. Rizk's portrait is set against a checkered background of white, black, and gray, with photocopies of ushabti figurines printed on paper and glued around him. Rizk—a graffiti and mime artist—is resting in a grave fit for a pharaonic king

with a golden crook and flail reserved for kings and ushabti figurines to serve and provide his wealth in the afterlife. His memorial portrait is on the street where he was killed on 19 November 2012 in clashes between the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and demonstrators who took to the streets to commemorate those killed and maimed a year earlier on the same street. Rizk was known for his participation in graffiti and mural initiatives on Mohamed Mahmoud Street over the first eighteen months of the revolution, his mime performances entertained those who flocked to El-Fan Midan (the Square is Art), a monthly visual and performing arts happening that took place in Midan Abdeen from March 2011 to September 2013.

Rizk's portrait is one of a series of large portraits in remembrance of those killed by the SCAF in November 2012 painted and curated by Luxor Faculty of Art muralist Ammar Abo Bakr. Like other portraits on the American University in Cairo wall on Mohamed Mahmoud Street, Rizk is made into an icon, in this case a pharaonic king of the Second Kingdom marked by the golden flail and crook and the ushabti figurines around him. In this chapter, I think through the stories of six activists; three women and three men who have become part of revolutionary visual history and documentation. I examine their portrayals on the walls to argue that politics of respectability and moral policing fashion their bodies differently. I illustrate that their gender, class, and religiosity influence whether their bodies are made mythical, overwritten, or disembodied. This, I contend, gives us insight into how their acts of embodied resistance are understood as legible, legitimate, or not. I structure my argument through an analysis of the disembodiment, overwriting, and erasure of living women's bodies, which in turn disappears them from revolutionary public narratives, while representations of martyred middle-class men transform them into icons and working-class men are made invisible.

My methodology involved examining hundreds of photographs of graffiti and murals of the revolution found in print and social media, online blogs and websites. Although there are countless other individuals represented on the walls of Cairo, I chose these six individuals and a small selection of representational images because they make for compelling comparisons for my argument. The analysis in this chapter shifts understanding of the revolution inside and outside Cairo in several ways. The first is that it illustrates that those who participated in the revolution were not a monolithic group who shared similar ideologies of what constitutes moral public conduct. Rather they were diverse in their perspectives of what makes for acceptable and legible male and female behavior. The second is that it takes up gender, class, and religiosity together as significant factors in the ways their activism was perceived. This intersectional analysis contributes different readings than analysis that focuses on a singular category of identity at a time. The third is that gendered and classed politics of respectability as articulated in graffiti and murals are at the center of understanding the ways these activists' bodies, and in turn their activism, is understood.

Scholars across disciplines have theorized the ways anticolonial and nationalist movements fashioned women's and rural people's bodies in service of modernization and nationalist projects (see Introduction and Chapter 1). In these projects, women and rural people's bodies became embodied symbols of the nation and freedom, as well as sites of protecting an unchanging identity. These processes were effective in bringing diverse individuals and groups into these movements and opening up opportunities for elite Egyptian women to participate in public life, while simultaneously creating strict acceptable forms of Egyptian womanhood and manhood that were policed through new forms of patriarchal rules. In this chapter, I ground my readings in these scholarly works in order to create nuanced and complicated readings of graffiti

and murals outside the binaries of men and women, pious and vulgar, Islamic and Western. My goal in this chapter is to present readings of these representations on Cairene walls that demonstrate the importance of analyzing visual culture production as a primary source to understanding the forms and politics of respectability and how they are fashioned and resisted in a revolutionary moment in postcolonial, securitized, and globalized cities such as Cairo.

This chapter first focuses on the ways the activism and bodies of three women activists are illustrated through graffiti on Cairene walls. I argue that these women's stories are understood differently based on class and religiosity, and in turn made legible, legitimate, or not, through processes of disembodiment, overwriting, and erasure. The chapter then focuses on three men activists who were killed during the revolution at the hands of state security forces. I argue that these men were made mythical and iconic because of their class privilege, which explains why other male martyrs were not represented in similar ways. I contend that this privileging is represented in the size and portrayal of these men as saints and gods. I conclude the chapter by analyzing the difference between understanding women's and men's activism through politics of respectability that are invoked differently across gender, class, and religious lines.

### **Egyptian Women's Participation in the Revolution**

Egyptian women played a significant role in the Egyptian revolution. Many news outlets, blogs, documentaries, and books attest to how women stood at the forefront of the revolution and helped instigate it. For example, Asmaa Mahfouz's vlog on 18 January 2011 was credited by many such reporters as Amy Goodman of *Democracy Now* as helping to spark the revolution, and the *Washington Post* called her a heroine and key organizer of the uprising (Goodman 2011; Fadel 2011). Mahfouz—a political organizer with the 6 April Youth Movement who holds an

MBA from Cairo University—called on men and women to come to Midan El-Tahrir to claim their basic human rights and dignity.<sup>1</sup> She told women to emulate her by being brave enough to stand alone if needed and called men who “have some honor and manhood” to come to Midan El-Tahrir to protect her and other women from violence (“The Speech by Asmaa Mahfouz which Triggered the Egyptian Revolution” 2011).<sup>2</sup>

During the first eighteen days of the revolution, images of women side-by-side with men, leading marches and chants and standing face-to-face against rows of police in full riot gear, filled local and international news. Images of women being beaten by security forces outraged the world. Egyptian women were in the forefront, breaking stones to throw at police, leading field hospitals, and bringing food to squares.

These public actions made women visible and marked a difference between the lives of women before and during the revolution. Before the revolution, family members and random strangers policed women’s access to the public sphere. This policing, albeit presenting differently, included working-class and middle-class, rural and urban women. This was done under the guise of conservatism through limiting where women could go and when. For example, in her documentary film *Mamnou'* (ممنوع) (forbidden), Amal Ramsis interviews diverse groups of women who articulate the diverse ways their access to the street is controlled by family members who forbid them from leaving the house without a male companion or visiting friends (Ramsis 2011). Another example is researcher and activist Mona Saif’s reflections on demonstrations before the revolution and after where she said: “Pre-January 25 whenever we would attend protests I would always be told by the men to go to the back to avoid getting injured and that

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<sup>1</sup> 6 April Youth Movement is a movement that started with the 2008 labor movement strikes in El-Mahalla El-Kubra and was one of the main organizers for the 25 January 2011 uprising.

<sup>2</sup> Full transcript of Asmaa Mahfouz’s video is found in Appendix C.

used to anger me. But since January 25 people have begun to treat me as an equal. There was this unspoken admiration for one another in the square” (Naib 2011). Several first-person accounts described how women’s voices were louder and their clothes brighter (Prince 2011; Soueif 2012).



Figure 3.2: *Circle of Hell*, 2011  
Mira Shehadeh and El-Zeft, paint.  
Mansour Street, Cairo, Egypt.  
(Copyright by artists, photograph credit: alma khasawnih, 2013).

Women’s greater access to the streets did not last long after the utopian first eighteen days of the revolution. When President Hosni Mubarak stepped down on 11 February 2011 from his thirty-year reign as Egypt’s president, he left the management of state affairs with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). Egyptians then witnessed the might of the military and police bound together inside Cairo. The SCAF issued a daily curfew from 6PM to 7AM, increased the number of checkpoints and police and military personnel around the city, began targeted arrests and assassinations of activists and demonstrators, and heightened the violence against women demonstrators. During this interim period, the SCAF was also in control

of the legislative and judicial branches of government, which gave them the ability to pass anti-demonstration laws and try civilians in military courts.

Even though many of those who camped in Midan El-Tahrir left shortly after Mubarak stepped down, the conditions of the military interim period prompted them to continue their occupation of the streets and to return to Tahrir in protest on an almost daily basis. These demonstrations continued the revolutionary demands of *عيش، حرية، عدالة اجتماعية* (life, freedom, and social justice), and demanded that figureheads of the old regime be put on trial. New demands were added to the agenda, such as prosecution of those who ordered and executed attacks on and torture of demonstrators in Midan El-Tahrir while in custody awaiting trial; an end to civilian military trials; and the drafting of a new constitution. During this period, graffiti and mural artists were more active than ever and larger scale murals began to emerge more frequently. The walls of the city became a revolutionary news source updating the names of the martyrs and changes in government as they occurred. They reflected revolutionary agendas by making clear their awareness of the various military and Muslim Brotherhood tactics to co-opt the revolution and divert its agendas, as well as commented on general happenings of the revolution. The Muslim Brotherhood's involvement with the revolution became more official at this point in ways that were seen in different ways by protestors. Some saw their engagement as a positive form of mass -participation, while others saw it as the Brotherhood's way to co-opt and takeover the revolution (Abaza 2015b and 2013c; Amar 2013b).

In addition to increased state-sanctioned and enacted violence against male and female demonstrators, the SCAF's interim period witnessed a soaring number of reports of women demonstrators being mass harassed and raped by fellow male demonstrators. In multiple incidents, women were attacked with sharp objects, taunted, and sexually violated (Nazra for

Feminist Studies 2013; Langhor 2013). As seen in Mira Shehadeh and El-Zeft's *Circle of Hell* (figure 3.2), masses of men engulfed women, groped them, tore their clothes, and raped them. Mira Shehadeh is a female artist and yoga instructor who moved to Cairo more than twenty years ago and she solicited El-Zeft's (who is a Cairene male artist) assistance for writing the speech bubbles. The speech bubbles included: "She is not like my sister," "She wants it," "Can't you see what she is wearing." These acts of violence were propagated by diverse groups of men who were part of, as well as independent from various state agencies and political parties; i.e. these men were not all part of state military or police, nor were they all members of the Muslim Brotherhood. In his essay "Turning the Gendered Politics of the Security State Inside Out?", Paul Amar (2011) argues harassment, including sexual harassment, has played a central role in the Egyptian state's way of controlling political activities of women and working-class men, where the state creates conditions in which women are sexually harassed by thugs acting on behalf of the police or military, then young working-class men, in turn, get harassed and brutalized by the police in order to protect the women (Amar 2011). These acts of violence were meant to incite fear in women and deter them from participating in the revolution, which they did to some degree. But they also made critique of state-sanctioned sexual harassment against women a much more public conversation in Egypt (Amar 2011).

In addition to increased harassment, men dominated decision-making processes as well. For example, there were no women on the eight-member committee of the 2011 Constitutional Review Committee, which was formed on 25 February 2011, and only five women in the constitutional committee of fifty, which formed on 1 September 2013. The harassment of and violence against women on the street and the exclusion of women from public decision-making

processes not only influence the ways women engage in civil society at large, but also how their acts of participation are being fashioned and perceived.

As examples of the ways women's participation is understood within the context of revolution, resistance, and harassment, three women—Samira Ibrahim, Aliaa ElMahdy, and the Girl In the Blue Bra—became part of the narratives of women's inclusion and erasure of the revolution. They entered through a sit-in, online blogging, and a demonstration, and their bodies became sites of moral and social critique. These conversations were represented on Cairo's walls in ways that illustrate the role politics of respectability plays in understanding women's activism.

### Disembodiment



Figure 3.3: *Samira Ibrahim Above the Military*, 2012

Abood, spray and stencil.

Mohamed Mahmoud Street, Cairo, Egypt.

(Copyright by artists, photograph credit: Maya Gowaily) (Boraie 2012, 548).<sup>3</sup>

In this stencil, Samira Ibrahim's portrait appears above a military tank and a group of soldiers who all have the face of Dr. Ahmed Adel ElMogy. Ibrahim's face is serious, her mouth closed, her lips have a slight red hue to them, and her eyes are looking toward the horizon. She is wearing a multilayer red veil. Stencils of Samira Ibrahim began to appear all over Cairo's walls

<sup>3</sup> Image from *Wall Talk: Graffiti of the Egyptian Revolution*, Cairo: Zeitouna Publishing, 2012, 548.

in March 2011 as a result of her arrest on 9 March 2011, subjugation to a virginity test (rape) by military doctor Ahmed Adel ElMogy, and her subsequent case against the military. Samira Ibrahim, twenty-four years old, was arrested with a number of other women during a sit-in in Midan El-Tahrir. While in detention, Ibrahim was subjected to a virginity test conducted by Dr. ElMogy. The virginity tests were administered by military officials who argued for their necessity to ensure that women would not falsely claim being raped while in detention. On 31 May 2011, an Egyptian military general addressed these tests on CNN saying: “The girls who were detained were not like your daughter or mine...These were girls who had camped out in tents with male protesters in Tahrir Square...We didn’t want them to say we had sexually assaulted or raped them, so we wanted to prove that they weren’t virgins in the first place...None of them were (virgins)” (Amin 2011). After her release, Ibrahim sued the military for rape. In December 2011, she won her civil court case and virginity tests are now illegal in Egypt, although in March 2012, she lost the case against ElMogy in military court. The stencil above shows Ibrahim triumphant over an army of the military doctor, and the military as a whole is implicated in the violence against Ibrahim.

Samira Ibrahim, a daughter of a well-known member of the Muslim Brotherhood who was arrested several times under the Mubarak regime, did not anticipate what would happen to her as a result of taking to the streets on 9 March, nor the aftermath of her participation in the sit-in. As a result of her embodied participation on the streets, she was arrested and raped. By suing the military, she became the subject of news headlines in Egypt and across the globe, and her portrait became part of a visual historical narrative on Cairene walls.



Figure 3.4 *Samira Ibrahim on an Egyptian Flag*, 2012  
 Artist unknown, spray and stencil. Sheikh Rihan Street, Cairo, Egypt.  
 (Copyright by artists, photograph credit: Caram Kapp) (Hamdy and Karl 2014, 213).



Figure 3.5: *You Can't Break Me*, 2012  
 Spray, spray and stencil.  
 Mohamed Mahmoud Street, Cairo, Egypt.  
 (Copyright by artists, photograph credit: Maya Gowaily) (Boraïe 2012, 538).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Image from *Wall Talk: Graffiti of the Egyptian Revolution*, Cairo: Zeitouna Publishing, 2012, 538.



Figure 3.6: *You Can't Force Me*, 2012  
 Artist unknown, spray and stencil.  
 Outside High Court, Cairo, Egypt.  
 (Copyright and photograph credit: unknown) (Boraie 2012, 538).

Representations of Ibrahim's story were all made in stencil form, which means they were easily reproducible and appeared all over the city. All of them focused on Ibrahim's head: in all but one, her face is wrapped with a multilayer veil, her eyes looking into the horizon, and her mouth closed. One stencil, sprayed on the ground outside the High Court, shows Ibrahim smiling (figure 3.6). These stencils celebrate and support Samira Ibrahim's stand against the military. They make it clear that she has nothing to be ashamed of, that the violence perpetrated against her will did not break her or affect her honor or her family's. The graffiti artists who stenciled Ibrahim's head around the city genuinely found her a heroine, worthy of celebration, solidarity, and respect. In *Samira Ibrahim Above the Military* (figure 3.3), Ibrahim reigns over an army of Dr. ElMogy. The positioning of her portrait above the army is reminiscent of the ways portraits of the president and all government officers are found; looking down at and observing the people. In *Samira Ibrahim on an Egyptian Flag* (figure 3.4), Ibrahim's head is tilted up, with her gaze stern and focused, making her appear defiant as she is put together with the eagle of the Egyptian flag to mark her Egyptian-ness. In *You Can't Break Me* (figure 3.5) and *You Can't*

*Force Me* (figure 3.6), the texts accompanying the stencils with Ibrahim addressing a large group tell them they cannot break or force her. These are statements that indicate that she can endure much more than those who are punishing her thought she could.

After examining countless stencils of Ibrahim found in books and online, it is hard not to notice that all of them depict only her head. There are no images of her full body or ones with a torso. This appears odd, especially in comparison with hundreds of other representations of activists, female or male, on city walls whose necks and bodies are shown, with some exceptions of small and one-off representations of some martyrs. Samira Ibrahim's body was the site of state-sanctioned, gender-based violence, and her lawsuit against the military made public this violence. Yet, representations of her erase her body, therefore removing the site of violence from sight. The exclusion of Ibrahim's body is a form of female disembodiment that, in part, reflects feelings of shame and indecency found in women's bodies, especially raped bodies. Therefore, her body as a site of violation was isolated and removed from the center of conversation. Graffiti artists' supported work that used encouraging words and portrayed Ibrahim as strong with her head held high, publicly marking her strength, and supporting her decision to sue the military. The text with the images makes clear that the military was unable to break Ibrahim, despite subjecting her to public rape. Yet, they removed the site of violence itself. This disembodiment can be read in different ways. A first reading is through politics of respectability for Ibrahim, as a choice to adhere to "ideal virtuous self" though veiling. This practice by a middle-class woman could signal to graffiti artists that they should adhere to Ibrahim's form of respectability by not including her body in their representations, thus avoiding any further public scrutiny of her body. A second reading is that the disembodiment of Ibrahim's body is an attempt to detach from national shame that comes when women's bodies are violated. Evoking shame

through violating women's bodies as way of dishonoring family and community is an ongoing tactic of colonization and authoritarian regimes in Egypt and elsewhere that is used to crush resistance (Johnson and Moran 2013; Amar 2011). This is part of the process of repurposing women's bodies as symbols of the nation in anticolonial struggles and the making of modern.

Therefore, graffiti that disembodies Ibrahim does two things simultaneously. The first is removing her body from public space in order to disorient the conversation away from her violated body in order to reorient it toward her stance against the military, which is a collective revolutionary stance and brings someone affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood into the revolutionary fold. The second is reorienting the shame that was intended to subdue resistance away from women back onto the state. This process of reorienting shame is what political scientist Paul Amar (2011) defines as turning the security state inside out, where violence against women is not seen as individuals enacting violence against women and the state's role is seen as securing women's safety. Rather the state is implicated as the source of violence and therefore must be challenged directly for its role in perpetuating violence against women.

This disembodiment continues the tradition of leaving women out of the public sphere. This tradition is reflected in the public's responses that blame women for the violence and harassment they experience by questioning their mere presence in public or the clothes they are wearing, as well as incessantly harassing women visually and physically when they leave their homes and enter public sphere. Ibrahim's body remains a contested erotic site that must be policed and surveilled. Despite the strongly supportive nature of the visual representations of Ibrahim on Cairo's walls, the erasure of her body transforms her into an exception, ideal, and a saint that demonstrates the expected ways Egyptian women should behave and be: veiled, honorable, and virginal.

Ibrahim is an example of Amar's (2011) articulation of a state tactic whereby the state "delegitimize[s] political opposition" by sexualizing protesting women and destroying their respectability by charging them with prostitution (2011, 309). Yet when Ibrahim files her lawsuit against the military and garners local and international support, she disrupts the military's attempts to use her gender and sexuality against her and turns the gaze away from her toward the state. This, Amar would argue, is a process of turning the security state inside out by highlighting the state's role in the harassment and violence (Amar 2011). But how do we understand Ibrahim's reliance on the same state for her rights? Anthropologist Sherine Hafez argues that Ibrahim's presence in public (both in protest and lawsuit) inverts "disciplinary power and destabilize[s] patriarchal gender tropes just as [it is] also regulated and disciplined [by them]," where she is resisting control over her body "through the same processes of power that constitute it" (Hafez 2014, 22). Therefore, I argue that even though Ibrahim's case against the military is a form of turning the security state inside out because it challenges conventions that criminalize working-class men and instead holds the state accountable, the reliance on the state for resolution and protection allows for the blame to be constructed as that of an individual perpetrator, the military doctor, but not that of the larger system itself.

Additionally, Ibrahim's filing of the lawsuit puts her at an unsettling intersection of what is expected of her as a victim, and tradition and westernization, where tradition demands she keeps her experience quiet and within private space, while western ideologies of human rights make it possible for her to bring this issue into the public. Ibrahim treads this space well by remaining a chaste and pious Muslim woman, at the same time articulating her demands through human rights discourse in ways legible to global communities that would understand her plea and who would stand in solidarity with her. In doing so, Ibrahim constructs a form of agency that

is built individual and collective forms of agency. The individual form of agency that Ibrahim pulls from is that of the individual liberal agent constructed through human rights rhetoric that constructs her as a singular individual standing up against state violence. The second is collective agency expressed through her belonging to a larger pious Muslim community where her personhood and agency are constructed through this membership, which is a process explored by anthropologist Saba Mahmood (2005) in her study of Egyptian women and the piety movement.

The contradiction in supporting Samira Ibrahim in her case against the military, while at the same time feeling shame in her violated body can be overcome by making Ibrahim's body implicit in other forms. For example, in *Samira Ibrahim Above the Military* (figure 3.3), Ibrahim's body can be imagined as hanging over the military tank and army beneath her head. Another reading is that Ibrahim's body is overtaken and infiltrated by a military-state structure. Yet another reading is that Ibrahim's body is the military tank and army, in other words, her body has engulfed them to be made visible once more. In *Samira Ibrahim and Aliaa ElMahdy* (figure 3.7), Ibrahim's unseen body is imagined as contrasting with that of Aliaa ElMahdy's shamed body that is covered with text, while leaving the rest of her exposed. The juxtaposition of Ibrahim's erased body and ElMahdy's overwritten body illustrates the complex ways politics of respectability are used to make legible and legitimate one act of resistance, while simultaneously delegitimizing another.

## Overwriting



Figure 3.7: *Samira Ibrahim and Aliaa ElMahdy*, 2011  
 Ammar Abo Bakr and Hamdy Rida, spray and stencil.  
 Mohamed Mahmoud Street, Cairo, Egypt.  
 (Copyright the artists, photograph credit: This is Not Graffiti) (jsuzdak 2012).

The stencil above of Samira Ibrahim (right) is put in conversation with another woman, Aliaa ElMahdy. The image and text, read from right to left, show Ibrahim's serious face with the following text underneath: "Tribute and homage to cherish and support For Samira Ibrahim, daughter of Upper Egypt." Similar to the other stencils of her, this one also shows only her head. In contrast, ElMahdy's full body is represented. ElMahdy is wearing polka dotted stockings and a pair of red shoes on her feet, with a red flower in her hair. The text over the space where her body would be reads:

Samira Ibrahim: 25 years old. Has been forced naked and her virginity tested in front of military and police officers. And she refused to not avenge her honor, so she filed a lawsuit in Egyptian courts. No interest..No audience..No media..It is like talking to a brick wall. Aliaa ElMahdy: 20 years took off her clothes to show off

her body at her own free will. Audiences and media went mad over her, and almost three million saw her picture, and no less than fifty articles and TV programs.<sup>5</sup>

The stencil was made by male artist Ammar Abu-Bakr (who also painted Hisham Rizk's portrait in Mohamed Mahmoud Street) and used text written by male artist Hamdy Reda. The work poses Ibrahim and ElMahdy as opposites. Aliaa ElMahdy came into the spotlight on 23 October 2011 when at age twenty she posted a nude photograph of herself, taken in her parents' living room, on her blog. ElMahdy's blog post reads:

Put on trial the artists' models who posed nude for art schools until the early 70s, hide the art books and destroy the nude statues of antiquity, then undress and stand before a mirror and burn your bodies that you despise to forever rid yourselves of your sexual hangups before you direct your humiliation and chauvinism and dare to try to deny me my freedom of expression (ElMahdy 2011).

In her text, ElMahdy (2011) demands an end to religious and social hypocrisy that make it possible for men to violate women's bodies, while simultaneously policing them through morality and demands of chastity. Journalist Mona Eltahawy argues that Aliaa ElMahdy "is the Molotov cocktail thrown at the Mubaraks in our heads—the dictators of our mind—which insists that revolutions cannot succeed without a tidal wave of cultural changes that upend misogyny and sexual hypocrisy" (Eltahawy 2011). Eltahawy's use of molotov cocktails is a reference to the military general's CNN interview, mentioned above, where he argues for the necessity of

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<sup>5</sup> Translation is my own.

subjecting female detainees to virginity tests. He continues to say that the army found “Molotov cocktails and (drugs)” in the tents (Amin 2011).

The only visual representation of ElMahdy on Cairo’s walls sees ElMahdy’s participation in the revolution differently than Eltahawy does. The work reproduces Aliaa ElMahdy’s nude photograph in an intricate stencil but covers most of her body with text and marks her act of resistance as lesser than Ibrahim’s because it was done at her own free will and thus is showing off. The text that overwrites ElMahdy’s body covers it even though she wanted it uncovered in order to reclaim it and have agency over when it is made naked. Therefore, in covering her body, the stencil takes away ElMahdy’s act of free will and silences her again. The overwriting, although it covers ElMahdy’s body, makes it hyper visible. This is made especially obvious when put in contrast with the disembodied but celebrated Samira Ibrahim.

ElMahdy is a self-proclaimed liberal secular feminist. At the time of her blogpost, she was a student of art at the American University in Cairo; a prestigious, expensive, and American university where most Egyptian elites send their children if they do not send them abroad. In the photograph, the background of ElMahdy’s family living room can be seen as spacious with lush curtains covering big windows. Her blog, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, included stories and images of her with her boyfriend sitting close to each other and kissing. All this marked ElMahdy in particular ways that influenced how her nude photograph was read by Egyptians in Egypt and the diaspora. Reactions to ElMahdy’s nude photograph varied from celebration to condemnation. Those who celebrated ElMahdy’s action read it as an individual woman taking control of her body; they saw her as courageous and as a feminist. These reactions came from individuals inside Egypt and strongly from Egyptians and non-Egyptians outside. For example, a number of women took nude photographs of themselves and posted them on social media in

solidarity with ElMahdy. Local and international feminists and artists compared ElMahdy's nude photograph with other activists and notable individuals who took nude photographs of themselves, including Ai Waiwai, the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals' (PETA) campaigns with nude celebrities, and FEMEN, the feminist organization in Ukraine where women activists stand topless protesting for women's rights. Those who condemned her act saw it as a distraction to the revolution, inappropriate to the Egyptian conservative context, and influenced by foreign ideologies. These reactions came from activists who participated in the revolution calling for social justice and equity for all, as well as conservative Egyptians who saw her act as religiously immoral. For example, the spokesperson for the 6 April Youth Movement, Tarek Al-Kholi, said in a statement regarding ElMahdy:<sup>6</sup>

[T]he movement does not have any members who engage in such behavior and the girl is only an agent of State Security. They want to tarnish our image after our role during the revolution and the increasing support we get from the Egyptian people...[the movement] has certain criteria in choosing members and among them is to not accept atheists nor those who adopt outrageous ideologies under the pretext of freedom. We are conservative youths and we always encourage our members to be role models as far as ethics are concerned ("Organisation Denies Ties with Activist: Aliaa Al-Mahdy Not with Egypt Youth Movement" 2011).

Al-Kholi's statement makes ElMahdy's nude activism hyper visible to a point where not only is she invisible through moral ethical policing, she is also so illegitimate that she becomes

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<sup>6</sup> 6 April Youth Movement is a youth organization that began in 2008 in support of the textile workers' strike in El-Mahalla.

the symbol of ultimate betrayal: an agent of the state. She, and in turn her body, becomes everything Egypt and revolution are not: atheist, outrageous, and unethical. The artists who put ElMahdy in conversation with Ibrahim in a stencil are both liberal and not religious individuals who made it clear in their work that Ibrahim's activism is of a higher moral status than ElMahdy's.

Samira Ibrahim and Aliaa ElMahdy's acts of resistance are similar in that they both aim at taking control over their bodies and highlighting the hypocrisy of gender-based violence that is sanctioned by the state and conservatives who simultaneously want to hide women's bodies, while they themselves force them naked. They are, however, different in that Ibrahim was on the street when she was arrested and used state courts to seek justice, while ElMahdy utilized digital space for her activism because she felt unsafe on the streets, which was due to the growing number of mass rape and harassment reports. By contrasting the two women's acts and overwriting ElMahdy's embodied act of resistance, the two male artists attempted to shame her and put her body of display for further consumption by the male gaze. All of this results in a reading of her body as immoral. Highlighting that her nude photograph was taken at her own free will further suggests that whatever violence she faced was her own fault, suggesting that women's bodies and their voices can only be taken seriously when they are sites of violence and when they are made to do things against their will. This is exactly the double bind that women find themselves grappling with constantly: be a victim or a show-off. ElMahdy's taking control of when and how her body is seen challenges masculinist notions of proper moral women's behavior. It also illustrates the discursive production of masculinity in which men can solely understand women as victims needing patriarchal protection, but not women as agents of their own bodies.

The ways these two women activists' bodies are read is also a site of debate of the kind of national imaginary being constructed at this particular moment in the Egyptian revolution of what the future Egyptian nation should be like. Anthropologist Saba Mahmoud's argument that Egyptian women participated in the piety movement—which included embodied modifications of modesty and full body covering—articulated a “kind of agency...[that] does not belong to the women themselves, but is a product of the historical contingent discursive traditions in which they are located” (Mahmood 2005, 32). While sociologist Mino Moallem argued that wearing a black chador during the Iranian revolution of 1979 was not a “sign of passivity or a sign of religiosity, rather it was a gendered invitation to participation in political activity and a sign of membership, belonging, and complicity” (1999, 333). Therefore, Samira Ibrahim's veiling, an act performed on the body, became a symbol of tradition, community, and belonging to a larger Muslim community, as well as resistance to Western influences. Contextualizing Samira Ibrahim and Aliaa ElMahdy within this form of participation and agency, we can understand the graffiti that supports Ibrahim as understanding her activism as part of a collective national agency that is in opposition to the military. We can also understand the overwriting over ElMahdy's nude body as a form of rejection to neoliberal Western individualist agency.

The dichotomy between chaste Samira Ibrahim and immoral Aliaa is complicated further because of Cairo's globalization and development of public spaces after colonialism (Amar 2013a). In his book, *The Security Archipelago*, Amar argues that Cairo has grappled with the tension between sexuality and sex on the one hand, and culture and tradition on the other, especially after modernity and globalization, which was marked as sex versus culture wars “between liberal moderns versus religious traditionalists, Westerners versus Easterners” (2013, 54). Although Amar focuses on the policing of homosexual sex workers in Cairo as site of

contestation and negotiation between globalization, tourism, sexuality, and public space, his argument is reflected in Samira Ibrahim and Aliaa ElMahdy and our understanding of their sexualities within cosmopolitan Cairo. Each woman is situated within the binary of liberal moderns versus religious traditionalists. Elmahdy uses an internet blog to engage with the debate on bodies and violence against them; she poses nude, which is a form of activism that became more visible with FEMEN's actions in Russia and elsewhere in Europe. She also has an older boyfriend and posts images of the two of them kissing and touching on her blog, which is accessible to wide audiences. Her online public displays of affection and her sexuality made her activism read as shocking and immoral to many Egyptians—including some who were key players in instigating the revolution such as 6 April Youth Movement, thus illegible, deserving of policing and marginalization, all which result in her actual removal from the country for her own safety. Ibrahim is seen as Muslim and traditional, following norms of the Egyptian nation that construct proper respectability for women. Although Ibrahim's presence in the public sphere is made immoral by a military official's statement that she is not a respectable daughter nor is she a virgin, her lawsuit against the military inverts "disciplinary power and destabilize[s] patriarchal gender tropes just as [it is] also regulated and disciplined" (Hafez 2014, 22). Ibrahim resists control over her body "through the same processes of power that constitute it" (Hafez 2014, 22). This suggests that women use patriarchy to negotiate some of their needs (Hafez 2014, 23). This process of negotiation is legible to the graffiti artists who stenciled her on city walls because she remains within patriarchal structures. Ibrahim became "the daughter of Sa'ed" and the men uphold their "patriarchal obligations" by acting as her protectors (Hafez 2014, 26).

All of this is further complicated when these activists' actions are examined through differences of the private and public spheres. Ibrahim is the daughter of a public figure,

therefore, the accessibility of the public sphere to her is different than that for ElMahdy, who is a private citizen. This difference, thus, gestures to the accessibility or lack thereof depending on one's social class. In other words, ElMahdy may be financially wealthier than Ibrahim, but her social capital within Egypt is not, although her globalized form of activism gave her access to other public spheres, which in turn facilitated her access to gaining asylum in Sweden.

### Erasure



Figure 3.8: *No to Stripping the People*, 2012  
Bahia Shehab, spray and stencil. Tahrir Square, Cairo, Egypt.  
(Copyright and photography credit: Bahia Shehab) (Hamdy and Karl 2014, 117).

Shortly after the stencil with Samira Ibrahim and Aliaa ElMahdy was sprayed on Mohamed Mahmoud Street, Bahia Shehab, a female artist and lecturer of Islamic art history at the American University in Cairo, stenciled a blue bra. The text “no to stripping the people” ( لا لتعرية الشعب) appears above, and below is a boot footprint whose treads read “long live a peaceful revolution” (تحيا الثورة سلمية).<sup>7</sup> This graffiti was done in early 2012 on one of the separation walls

<sup>7</sup> The typeface used for the “no” is one of Bahia Shehab’s *No, and a Thousand Times No* exhibition pieces of Arabic calligraphy of the word “no” for the Khatt Foundation in Germany in 2010. Shehab then used the *noes* she collected in numerous stencils in Cairo starting November 2011.

set up by the Ministry of Interior to block access to the Ministry from Mohamed Mahmoud Street and Midan El-Tahrir.

This work refers to the 17 December 2011 clashes between demonstrators and army personnel in Midan El-Tahrir and Qasr El-Aini Street in downtown Cairo. Among the many images and videos of these clashes, one video caught the attention of observers inside and outside Cairo. In it, a group of army personnel in full riot gear pull a woman by her arms and beat her on the street. The woman's black abaya comes undone and bunches up around her neck, exposing underneath a pale body in a pair of blue jeans and a blue bra. The officers kick and stomp on the woman's almost naked torso, while she lies there unmoving, probably unconscious. The video and still images from it went viral all over the Internet. Because the identity of the woman in the video is unknown to most people, she became the Girl In The Blue Bra.

In most of her conversations about these works, Bahia Shehab is aware that she is addressing an English-speaking audience in non-Egyptian contexts where Islamophobia is a real concern. Therefore, whether in her TedTalk in June 2012 or her interview conducted by Marc-Christoph Wagner for the Louisiana Channel, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 2014, she makes it very clear that the Egyptian people should be ashamed of allowing a veiled woman to be stripped and beaten on the street (Shehab 2012; Wagner 2014). Her words are curious because in pointing out so clearly that the Girl In The Blue Bra was veiled, and violence against a veiled woman should bring shame to all, then is there less shame in stripping and beating an unveiled woman on the street? I suspect Shehab finds both acts of violence incomprehensible, but her emphasis on the veil suggests that an act of stripping a chaste religious woman is worse than that against women who are less conservative in her attire. Shehab is responding to a subtext that demands she point out that veiled women were active participants in the revolution, thus are not

the docile women that need to be saved as they are constructed in Western narratives of Muslim and Arab women. Also, Shehab is making clear that veiled women face similar violence from the military as others; i.e. unveiled women are not more likely to be beaten by the military than veiled women.

Even in abstracting the body, Shehab manages to convey the violence of this incident. She succeeds in creating a silhouette of a body that is being stomped on by heavy boots. She does this by positioning the verbage, “no to stripping the people” as the head of the figure, the bra as the torso, and the boot stomping on the stomach. The violent exposure of the body of the Girl In The Blue Bra connects her to other women who have experienced and seen similar violence, including Samira Ibrahim and Aliaa ElMahdy. Also, Shehab’s stencils reveal the contradiction of the military that strips in the name of covering. Her stencil shows a kind of masculinist complicity between the state and the revolutionary artists who also erase women’s personhood and agency through erasing their bodies from representation. Women, thus, are reduced to just bodies to be shamed, disciplined, exposed, tested, and hidden. This erasure not only erases women’s participation from histories of the revolution, including their pre-2011 actions as workers that were part of political and economic demands that fueled the 2011 revolutionary moment, it also makes it near impossible for women to craft political selves and gain a sense of agency over their present and future lives. Masculinist complicit agendas limit the possibilities and ways women can fashion their political selves and develop a sense of agency over their lives and their bodies for no matter what form of political embodied engagement women participate in or claim, their bodies are either made invisible and hyper visible. This tension is produced and reproduced because “[w]hen the only two sides fighting are

conservative—even if one of them is just conservative in appearance— then everyone loses. And women don't just lose; they're also used as cheap ammunition" (Eltahawy 2011).

These stenciled visual representations disembody, overwrite, and erase women's legitimate political participation from the streets. The contradictions in these stencils highlight tension between wanting to celebrate women's engagement in public social change, but the disembodiment and overwriting suggest there are limits to what is acceptable as legible and legitimate acts of resistance to state and gendered violence. The three women represented in the stencils discussed above participated in the revolution not knowing their activism would result in their physical bodies becoming topics of public debate on city walls and sites of discourse on morality, legibility, and legitimacy. These limits are seen in the stencil that puts Samira Ibrahim at odds with Aliaa ElMahdy. Also, even in celebrating Ibrahim's defiance to state power, she is put within the bounds of honor that are found in her chaste-self, which is illustrated in her representation as a strong woman completely disembodied from her physical self. This, in turn, makes it seem as if she is exceptional in her story. This exceptionalism erases other women who have been arrested and subjected to virginity tests. The exclusion and erasure of other women who were with Samira Ibrahim and were similarly subjected to virginity tests but did not sue the military signals that utilizing state institutions (such as courts) as a tool to fight for a virtuous woman's honor is the only legible way to legitimately participate in resisting state oppression. Not including or gesturing to the other women also indicates that certain types of women can be celebrated: middle-class who have social, political, and financial networks to support them against the state military apparatus. While taking control of when and how her body is seen naked, ElMahdy's activism becomes illegible because it traverses a space that is outside social and political expectations. ElMahdy's nude activism becomes so illegible that it becomes

illegitimate, as seen in the 6 April Youth Movement spokesman Al-Kholi's statement included above.

The erasure is also different from Bahia Shehab's stencil that, despite erasing the Girl In The Blue Bra's body, includes other women who have experienced such violence. This is done by the exclusion of a particular physical body, expanding the call for protection to *the people*, and demanding peace rather than military violence. Also, not knowing the name of this woman who never came public and referring to her as the Girl In The Blue Bra results in abstracting her to a degree where it is possible to imagine many other women in a similar situation, including oneself. This makes Shehab's nonrepresentational stencil even more inclusive and the burden of the violence more widely shared.

Although the revolution shifted perceptions of women's participation in the public sphere, this shift was limited to include women who behaved within acceptable social limits set by historical and contemporary conditions and expectations. The disembodiment, overwriting, and erasure of women and their embodied activism has the consequence of the disappearance of women's bodies from public visual representations in the Egyptian revolution. This disappearance results in the continuous violence against women that demands that their bodies be concealed from public view even as they are stripped and violated by a military that purports to protect them and discipline unruly bodies into respectable conformity. Also, these representations continue the policing of women's bodies within discourses of shame and morality. The role that politics of respectability played in the ways of men and women's forms of activism is not unique to the 2011 revolution, but rather have been part of previous Egyptian nationalist and anticolonialist movements. Coverage of the 2011 revolution celebrated women's public participation, hailed them as instigators via their front-row engagement, yet at the same

time, they paid the high price with their bodies, which became sites of men's and familial honor, as well as sites of performing patriarchal conservatism. Additionally, this analysis illustrates that men are not outside the scrutiny of politics of respectability but demonstrates that men are bound by class and social clout that influence how they are remembered as martyrs of the revolution.

## **Making of Saints and Mythical Beings**

### Martyrdom, Portraiture, and Disposable Men

Martyrdom is defined in Islamic doctrine as someone (usually a man) who gives his life in defense and expansion of Islamic thought and nation, and in the case of the three monolithic religions, the country is synonymous with religion. Therefore, the honor is bestowed to those who give their lives to their country (Marzolph 2013). Labeling someone a martyr is often an important act of recognition and especially meaningful to the families of the martyrs who feel that their loved one did not die in vain. In the Egyptian context, and especially since January 2011, being defined as a martyr is filled with ambiguity and its own hierarchical contestations. For example, in his essay, "The Martyr Pop Moment: Depoliticizing Martyrdom," (2014) Daniel J. Gilman argues that the Egyptian regime considers members of its security forces who were killed during the revolution martyrs, but not civilians. This definition shifted twice. The first was during the SCAF interim period, when the Egyptian government announced in early June 2012 that 509 families of those martyred from 25 January 2011 until then were eligible for governmental compensation (Mittermaier 2015). This compensation included security servicemen and demonstrators. In November 2013, after the military took over state affairs via coup/counter revolution, and after the violent end of the Muslim Brotherhood's sit-in at Midan Raba'a al-'Adawiyya that left more than 800 members of the Brotherhood dead, the military

claimed all security service personnel and demonstrators martyrs since 25 January 2011, but not members of the Muslim Brotherhood. They erected two monuments commemorating the martyrs: the first for the fallen security officers at Midan Raba'a and another for the demonstrators in Midan El-Tahrir. According to the newspaper *Ahram Online*, the first monument was built in 2013 by the military and is of “two brown arcs enclosing a large pearl-like ball”— the larger arc represents the army, the smaller one the police, and the ball represents the Egyptian people (*AhramOnline* 2014). It was vandalized by protestors a year later, but without causing much damage (*AhramOnline* 2014). The second monument was a marble platform with a placard commemorating the martyrs. It was destroyed within twenty-four hours as activists claimed that the military was creating a commemorative monument for those they killed (Mittermaier 2015). For the revolutionaries, martyrs were those who lost their lives or were killed by military and police forces on the streets, hospitals, and prisons. This ambiguity of who is given the status of a martyr helps “us see how quickly a revolutionary moment can be reabsorbed into state hegemony” (Gilman 2014, 694). The state’s monuments and martyrdom compensation aimed at diluting the definition of the martyr and establishing military and demonstrators as one unit against the Mubarak and Brotherhood regimes. The demonstrators’ use of “martyr” for those killed by military and police forces aimed at redefining the country away from the state and claimed that a rightful death (that of the martyr) should be understood as against the state. In this text, the martyrs I refer to are those commemorated on city walls and claimed martyrs by demonstrators. This definition does not have much overlap with Islamic and religious definitions of martyrdom because it is not grounded in religious thought nor does it consider the Islamic nation as a reference point to one’s sacrifice.

The number of martyrs of the Egyptian revolution is unclear because of the ways the numbers are tallied. Some sources claim they number 1,000 and others 6,000. These statistics depend on when one dates the end of the revolution: 11 February 2011, 30 June 2012, 30 June 2013, or ongoing. Also, as described above, who gets counted as a martyr is also made complicated by who gets claimed by whom: those killed by military forces, those killed by protestors, those who died on impact, in hospitals, or while in custody. All of these factors make the number of those killed 1,000-6,000. In her essay, anthropologist Farha Ghannam (2015) states that at least thirty women and girls were martyred. Of these thousands martyred, most have gone unnoticed by public commemoration or debate, except by their families. Of these women and girls, only a handful of women martyrs are commemorated on city walls, some of whom have their names listed, and most of whom look similar and have no names attached to them. Figure 3.9 below is an example of this, where we see portraits of other martyrs, some with their names identifying them, while others without.

Martyr portraiture is a tradition in Egypt that goes back to ancient Egypt. Portraits of the departed were found as part of caskets. For example, some mummies buried in a wooden casket had a flat canvas portrait painted of them instead of a three-dimensional sculpture of wood or gypsum of the deceased face. These portraits “were regarded as the immortal surrogate of the deceased [and were] holy objects in themselves” and were “visual reincarnation of their subjects” (Doxiadis 39 and 45). Pharaonic portraits of the deceased and martyr portraits are similar in that they commemorate the dead. But they are different in that the former were usually created for those of higher stature, while martyr portraits are made for all those who die for the nation (although they are more frequently than not working-class men). The commemoration of martyrs’ portraits shortly after their passing is also a contemporary tradition found in nation-

states such as Palestine and Lebanon. Anthropologist Lucia Volk (2010) argues that these portraits, within the Lebanese context, are used both as tools of remembering the martyr, as well as making visible national political independence projects. In her book, *Memorials and Martyrs in Modern Lebanon* (2010), Volk illustrates how martyrs' portraits—regardless of religion—are similar in “typeset to match one another in size and style. The men's faces reveal solemn determination, as most of their gazes are fixed on some distant horizon...” (Volk 2010, 41). These portraits often show a person's head down to their lower shoulders. This description fits that of portraits of most martyrs of the Egyptian revolution. For example, the walls of Mohamed Mahmoud Street saw numerous layers of martyrs drawn and stenciled after 19 November 2011 and again a year later on 19 November 2012. Another example are the portraits of the seventy-four Al-Ahli football fans killed in 2012. The Al-Ahli football fans, also known as Ultras Ahlawi, are a well-organized group of football fans that typically focused on supporting their team at games in Egypt and outside.<sup>8</sup> They, with other teams' ultras, engaged in activities focused on organizing chants and transportation to the matches, and spraying walls with supporting messages of their team. But during the 2011 revolution, these groups shifted their attention to include political activism, and as a very well-organized group with an ambiguous power structure, their ability to mobilize was impressive and confusing to the Ministry of Interior. Therefore, their status changed from agitators at football matches to highly effective mobilizing, and now illegal, groups. This change in perception of the Ultras Ahlawi manifested itself in a semi-organized attack on the group by the opposing team, Al Masry, at the Post Said

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<sup>8</sup> Ultras is the collective name to football (soccer) fans. In Egypt there are several ultras group, most famous are Ultras Ahlawi (fans of the Al-Ahli team) and Ultras Zamalkawi (fans of the Zamalek team). Historically they have engaged in several violent encounters between other Egyptian and African teams. Although mostly sports fans, they are highly organized with several layers of membership and leadership, which makes them highly effective at mobilizing thousands of people and difficult to prosecute or dismantle.

Stadium on 1 February 2012. The Ultras Ahlawi found themselves under gunfire and tear gas, unable to escape the stadium after police closed the exits. Seventy-four of them were killed and their portraits lined the walls of the Al-Ahli club in Zamalek. In these portraits, the martyrs' heads and their shoulders were shown and their facial expressions serious. These paintings stood for the martyrs where their families created shrines for them that were often visited by mothers and family members who stood beside their loved ones for commemorative photographs.



Figure 3.9: *Martyrs of AlAhli Ultras*, 2012  
Group of artists, paint.  
Al-Ahli Sports Club, Cairo, Egypt.  
(Copyright the artists, photography credit: alma khasawnih, 2013).

These walls became memorials until the new layer of paint covered them with portraits of new martyrs. These public displays of remembrance made visible those killed and their numbers, as well as made clear the violence of the state against demonstrators, which in turn fueled the anger of others to join. It also made the families of martyrs feel their young had not died in vain and could be remembered by their comrades in struggle.

But not all martyrs were treated equally on city walls. Some received small painted portraits with their name beside it that were covered in the next layer of paint a few days later; others received full wall commemorative portraits that took hours to paint and multiple layers of

paint to cover up; and still others become icons of the revolution with multiple representations. Both men and women martyrs were seen in the first form of portraits, while only male martyrs were represented in the latter two forms of commemorative murals. I offer several possibilities to understanding the difference in forms of remembrance, the overwhelming number of male versus female martyrs, and why none of the female martyrs are made icons, and so few men are.

### Making of Icons

On 9 October 2011, Mina Daniel was shot outside the national television station building, Maspero. Daniel was in the front lines at a demonstration of mostly Coptic Christians calling for state action against those who burned St. George Church a few days before. On 15 December 2011, Sheikh Emad Effat, a clergyman of the Azhar Mosque, was shot and killed in clashes with the military. Mina Daniel, Emad Effat, and Hisham Rizk (introduced in the chapter's Introduction) did not anticipate their lives ending on the days they did. In the imagery that followed their deaths, they became not only martyrs of the revolution, but also icons of it.



Figure 3.10: *Emad Effat and Mina Daniel*, 2012

Walid Ebeid, paint.

Mohamed Mahmoud Street, Cairo, Egypt.

(Copyright the artist, photograph credit: Maggie Osama.) (Hamdy and Karl 2014, 103).

Mina Daniel (left) and Emad Effat (right) were painted on the American University in Cairo's wall on Mohamed Mahmoud Street. They are dressed as saints: Daniel has long hair and black clergy flowing gown and Effat is in his Muslim clergyman garb and head dress. Their figures tower over everyone and everything around them. They are floating in a background of blue sky and white clouds. Their arms extend toward each other as if introducing one another to a congregation. Their extended arms gesture as if welcoming the Christian and Muslim martyrs whose portraits are drawn below, welcoming them into the heavens. Their extended arms also act as protectors over a mass of people in black paint below them. The difference between a martyr visualized and a martyr made into an icon is demonstrated in the mural above. Effat and Daniel are singled out as unlike other martyrs because of the size, details of their representations, and lack of need to include their names. They are both represented as saints of their perspective religions. Therefore, they become representations of ideal Christians and Muslims. Other martyrs are visualized through small portraits that may or may not include their names. Effat and Daniel's did not need to be identified by name, as their images circulated widely enough for

them to be known without their names. Also, Daniel and Effat were subjects of numerous murals and graffiti on Mohamed Mahmoud Street and elsewhere in Cairo and Egypt. The same cannot be said of most other martyrs who, at best, received a portrait as in the mural above.

Daniel, a 19-year-old middle-class university student, was an active participant in the revolution since its beginnings and was respected and loved for his support of fellow demonstrators regardless of religion. He famously said: “You are not coming down to make a revolution and live. You are coming to make a revolution and die” (5rom 2016). Effat, also a middle-class highly educated Muslim clergyman, was active in the revolution and made clear his criticism of the interim period of military rule. At the time of their deaths, there were efforts by state and Islamic religious groups to highlight the difference between Muslims and Copts. These efforts manifested in setting fires to churches and starting rumors within communities and in the press that the Copts were firing at the military and police outside Maspairo. These dividing efforts were met by counter efforts on the revolutionaries’ end that focused on highlighting the unity between members of these religions as they had experienced them during the first eighteen days; this entailed Christians creating a human chain around Muslims as they prayed on Qasr El-Nile Bridge and a reproduction of the flag with an intertwined crescent and a cross. These acts of resisting a divisive agenda were reflected in muralists and graffiti artists responses who created visual symbols of religious unity and often put Effat and Daniel together to highlight real-life advocates of unity across religious lines, as well as giving them both martyrdom status.

Unlike other martyrs drawn underneath in the classic martyr portrait with some of the names written by the likeness, in their deaths Daniel and Effat become saints, overseers of other martyrs, and messengers of unity. Hisham Rizk was made into an icon once more in 2016 when a stencil of him appeared everywhere across Zamalek and downtown Cairo as an abstraction a

meter tall, impeccably sprayed in black with the words *تاجر البساطة* (merchant of simplicity) in red at his feet. The stencil shows Rizk as a Greek god, standing on a pedestal in flowing garb and holding a balance in one hand, while gesturing with the other as if giving a speech. His hair is longer and the curls more pronounced. His mouth is closed and his face is turned away toward the horizon. The stencil commemorates Hisham Rizk's passing and advertises an exhibit about his life that was held in July 2016 at Merit Publishing. The exhibit included Rizk's own artwork, a documentary about him, and a mime-interpretive dance performance. It also included wall pieces of his portrait that were painted on the AUC wall on Mohamed Mahmoud Street in 2012 and demolished in September 2015.



Figure 3.11: *Merchant of Simplicity*, 2016  
 Artist unknown, spray and stencil.  
 El-Mansour Mohamed Street, Cairo, Egypt.  
 (Copyright by artists, photograph credit: alma khasawnih, 2016).

The recognition of Mina Daniel, Emad Effat, and Hisham Rizk as martyrs shifts the definition of a martyr within the national Egyptian context, which often centers on police and military personnel who lost their lives defending the state. It also reorients the nation away from the state toward a new imagined nation that takes seriously the contributions and sacrifices of young people, artists, religious minorities, and clergymen who disagree with hegemonic

doctrines. This documents the success of graffiti as a legitimate public forum of the revolution; again this touches on the very concept of the public sphere and civic society. This reorientation gives us insight to imaged possibilities of a different Egyptian nation that celebrates and honors difference in religions and opinions, takes up the contributions of young people seriously as creators of Egyptian identity, and encourages critique of hegemonic ideologies. This imagined nation is divergent from the one Egyptians took to the streets to bring down, which was protecting the old guard through corruption, prosecuting those who challenge it, and who welcome one president's leadership for more than thirty years.

On the day Mina Daniel was killed, at least twenty-five other Coptic Christians also lost their lives. Mina Daniel became an icon of the revolution, but not the others. Daniel became an icon because the relationships he built in Midan El-Tahrir crossed expected religious lines. Similarly, clergyman Emad Effat became a revolutionary icon because of his dislike of the Mubarak regime, the military rule, and the Muslim Brotherhood. To many Egyptians, he resembled a progressive Muslim clergyman who presented a hopeful alternative and possibility to counterrevolutionary groups (Elfaky 2013; Zeinobia 2014). The day Rizk was killed, scores of others were as well. But he became an icon, while most others were forgotten or not publicly commemorated.

In various materials centered on these three men that were found online through blogs, videos, and interviews, they were described as generous, kind to strangers, helpful, and engaged Egyptians who loved Egypt, although these three were not the only ones to cross religious lines, stand against the Mubarak regime and military, be outspoken, young, or endearing. They each had a particular level of social capital with friends and supporters who made it a point to keep their legacies alive. In the cases of Mina Daniel and Emad Effat, their middle-class educated

backgrounds helped to make them revolutionary icons. Their families and friends created Facebook pages: We are all Mina Daniel, tweeted their names, called the press, and had interviews so that their legacies would continue. Hisham Rizk, despite his working-class background, was a college student and had access to various cultural spaces that facilitated his crossing, albeit non-material, into middle-class circles. In her essay, “Technologies of Immortality,” anthropologist Farha Ghannam argues that “socio-economic inequities...shape the meanings attached to death” and that this inequity is performed in the widely circulated images of these men who then become seen as symbols of sacrifice, while martyrs of working-class backgrounds and neighborhoods remain invisible (Ghannam 2002, 634, 640). But what of the other scores of men who were killed or who are still alive after being raped and tortured in custody? Why are they not part of the palimpsest of memorials? In his blog entry “The Poor First, You Sons of Dogs!” (الفقراء أولاً يا ولاد الكلب), blogger Mohamed Abo El-Gheit (2011) argues that this exclusion is based on class, that the poor are not included because they died as they lived: forgotten. The making invisible of working-class men—and nearly erasing all martyred women—is of significance when thinking through the imagined new nation that celebrates difference, dissent, and young people, but disregards the lives of poor and working-class Egyptians. This disregard is familiar to many Egyptians, as it is the way the Egyptian state has constructed its relationship to the working-class who have been marginalized and made dispensable through corruption and neoliberal policies. Some portraits of martyred women can be seen under the wings of Effat and Daniel (figure 3.10). None of the portraits include the women’s names and they look very similar, especially because they are all represented wearing a red veil.

### Men and Politics of Respectability

Out of the thousands killed since 25 January 2011, only a small number of them are commemorated on the walls. And even a smaller number of the many still living male activists are represented on city walls. This representational exclusion includes men who have been raped and tortured while in police and military custody, stripped and beaten on the streets, and who have put their lives in the line of fire many times. Only a handful of these men are idealized on Cairo's city walls. Most of the graffiti and murals of living men are figures of the Egyptian regime, such as Presidents Mubarak and Morsi, commander-in-chief of the Egyptian Armed Forces Mohamed Tantawi, or a handful of demonstrators, such as Ahmed Ali (aka Ahmed Harara) who lost both of his eyes (the right one on 28 January 2011 and the left one on 19 November 2011) and Alaa Abd El-Fattah who was arrested in October 2011, again in 2013, and sentenced to five years in prison in 2015 for instigating violence in demonstrations.<sup>9</sup> There is no denying that Harara and Abd El-Fattah have earned their spots on Cairo's walls. But these are not the only men who have sacrificed their livelihood and lives to the revolution. Both Ahmed Harara and Abd El-Fattah are middle-class and upper middle-class young men whose social standing, similarly to Mina Daniel and Emad Effat, gave them access to a social network that ensured they would be remembered and supported. For example, Harara's highly publicized and photographically documented story made him *Time Magazine's* "Man of the Year" in 2011. Abd El-Fattah is a blogger, software programmer, and nephew of Ahdaf Soueif, a world-renowned novelist and activist. His arrests prompted statements from the United Nations High

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<sup>9</sup> Ahmed Ali became known as Ahmed Harara (*harara* means heat) because he was first to go the front lines at demonstrations; i.e. Ali was on fire.

Commissioner for Human Rights, Human Rights Watch, and others. Both men's class privilege, in addition to their activism, made their inclusion on city walls possible.

These examples make class privilege a determining factor of the visibility of men on city walls. Regardless of in death or in life, working-class men's bodies and contributions continue to be made invisible. This erasure continues the silence around state and social violence against working-class men. This act of exclusion erases working-class men's narratives from the history of the revolution. In her book, *Live and Die Like a Man* (2013), Farha Ghannam examines the ways men in El-Zawya ElHamrah, a working-class area north of Cairo, have to navigate impossible expectations of performances of masculinity and respectability. These performances are wedged between performing respectability through care for their physical appearance and hair styles, while simultaneously engaging in just the right amount of aggression toward other men of their class and women in their families to assert their masculinity without attracting police attention and harassment. Ghannam's ethnography on El-Zawaya ElHamrah and her essay, "Technologies of Immortality," signal that working-class men's actions can rarely be seen or immortalized because of their class status (2015). The selective representation of men on city walls when they are the aggressors (Mubarak, Morsi, a rapist doctor ElMogy) or middle-class heroes and martyrs makes it impossible for working-class men to meet the expectations of those made significant; ergo, their actions are irrelevant and their bodies dispensable. Therefore, similarly to the ways the revolution and the state together reproduce patriarchal expectations on women's bodies and acts of engagement in the public sphere, they reproduce respectability norms for working-class men, which includes policing of women. In the latter case, class privilege makes it near impossible for certain men to enter into public visual narratives of the revolution, and their lives and deaths are bound to their class and social networks regardless of

their acts of heroism and sacrifice to the nation, country, revolution. Thus, they continue to be seen as abundant in numbers and dispensable (Blum 2010).

### The One Female Super Heroine, a Return



Figure 3.12: *Ongoing*, 2012  
El Teneen, spray and stencil.  
Heliopolis, Cairo, Egypt.

(Copyright the artist, photograph credit: Basma Hamdy) (Hamdy and Karl 2014, 4).

The only woman who becomes mythical is the Girl In The Blue Bra. El Teneen, a Cairene male artist, represents her as a super heroine with a red cape, blue tights, a blue short skirt above the tights, and red boots. She has the letters *th* (ث) for the word “revolution,” and *thawra* (ثورة) tattooed on her upper chest. The three-dimensional text at her feet reads: مستمرة (continues). Her torso is bare except for the bra. Her legs are in blue just like the blue jeans she was wearing and the abaya has turned into a cape. Her body looks strong and in motion, her fists

clenched, and her eyes angry and focused. This depiction is a rereading of the events captured on video. In the video her body is limp and she is unconscious. In contrast, El Teneen puts her body in action: the revolutionary Girl In The Blue Bra is strong and able not only to defend herself but others. He makes her blue bra, naked torso, and bunched up abaya sites of power and physical strength rather than sites of shame and weakness.

By making her a super heroine, the transformation of the Girl In The Blue Bra's body from a site of shame to that of power is only possible if she is mythical. Also, because she is largely unknown, the heroic stencil is reminiscent of war statues of the unknown soldier that stood for the millions of soldiers who were too inconsequential to be remembered individually, but rather, are remembered collectively via the statue. Additionally, the Girl In The Blue Bra is made beyond human, mythical, and ideal, and marked with "revolution." In other words, the Girl In The Blue Bra became a stand-in for the revolution and nation. Once more, this is a burden on Egyptian women's bodies that continues to be bound by ideals outside of them, made by patriarchal notions of legitimacy. This representation also made it women's work to ensure the revolution continued through instilling revolutionary cultural ideologies into generations to come. Having said that, the figuration of woman as revolution is also powerful because it signals women as active participants in a social, political, and cultural revolution. It also marks their contributions publicly.

El Teneen's *Ongoing* (figure 3.12) and Bahia Shehab's stencil *No to Stripping the People* (figure 3.8) both incorporate Arabic text as part of the figuration of the Girl In The Blue Bra. Shehab creates an imagined body of the Girl In The Blue Bra in how she positions text in where the head and torso would be. These texts are not a direct reference to the girl, but rather incorporate a larger collective into this figurative body: the head is a refusal of state violence

against the people and the torso is a commitment to a non-violent revolution. Through incorporating text in her stencil, Shehab makes collective the body of the girl is the blue bra, as well as the violence against her. Similarly, by the use of text as part of her body, El Teneen marks the super heroine as a body of the revolution, defending it and ensuring the revolution is ongoing. Additionally, the use of text makes clearer the meanings of these representations and the ways the Girl In The Blue Bra's body and violence against her are understood as part of a national shame, imagination, and dialogue.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I follow the ways bodies of six activists were represented on Cairene walls. I argue that these representations challenge state narratives of men and women activists in the revolution. Where the state aims at constructing women activists as immoral by being on the street, and either co-opts martyrs as its own or attempts to erase their murder, these representations make women into heroines and gives those killed the highest honor of martyrdom. Yet, while these representations celebrate those individuals, they simultaneously construct womanhood and manhood. Through disembodiment, overwriting, and erasure of urban middle-class women's bodies, these representations make these women, their bodies, and activism legible, legitimate or not. While representations of martyred urban middle-class men transform them into icons of the revolution through making them mythical, these representations commemorate martyred working-class men minimally. I argue that differences in representation are constructed across gendered and classed lines that contribute to the ways we understand Egyptian women and men.

The making-mythical of Hisham Rizk, Mina Daniel, and Emad Effat is a process of commemorating some figures of the Egyptian revolution who were killed by the SCAF and Central Security. Visual representations of them and their bodies are larger than life, closer to the skies, holding scales of justice, and keeping a watchful protective eye over others. Their bodies are made whole despite the crushing of a tank or bullet holes in the chest and side. Rizk, Daniel, and Effat are made into heroes who stand tall, proud, and defiant, even in death. Representations of their lives and deaths are either painted into large murals with great detail by a team of artists working, or stencils that are sprayed all over downtown Cairo.

The same is not afforded to Ibrahim, ElMahdy, or the Girl In The Blue Bra. Even though the three women are still alive, their acts of embodied political activism are dislocated from their bodies, which were central sites of their resistance and violence. Even when their bodies are included, such as in ElMahdy's and the Girl In The Blue Bra's cases, their bodies were either overwritten or made beyond-human.

Disembodying, overwriting, and erasing women's bodies from public visual representation further emphasizes the inaccessibility of the public sphere to women, even at the very moment of social and political revolt. These processes also strengthen the discourses of illegibility and immorality of women's bodies that makes them sites of violence and the male gaze. All of this has the consequence of pushing women further away from public civic engagement by basically saying that women's bodies are fair game to violence when in public and when engaging in political and cultural social change.

Women's bodies continue to be seen as respectable only when removed from public and their bodies are used as sites to police them as well as men whose perceptions of honor are found in women's bodies. Men's bodies are seen as dispensable since the street is a site of conflict.

Therefore, they become combatants and their killing is fair game. Additionally, politics of respectability are performed on the bodies of both women and working-class men in ways that negate them as active participants in public social change. This results in co-opting women's participation and annexing them into the realm of the body of the nation and takes working-class men for granted as available bodies to die for the revolutionary cause.

## Chapter 4: Visual Authoritarianism

### Introduction



Figure 4.1: Pieces of the AUC wall, 6 March 2016  
(Photograph credit: alma khasawnih).

On 6 March 2016, a Facebook status post on Abdelrahman Zin Eldin read:

الحيطة اتهدت خلاص بقت حنتت صغيرة انزلوا خدو حنة من الحيطة واحفضوا ذاكرة محمد محمود. كسم  
الجامعة الامريكية على كسم وزارة الداخلية. الحيطة اتهدت خلاص.

(The wall is demolished into tiny small pieces go take a piece of the wall and keep the memory of Mohamed Mahmoud. Fuck the American University and fuck the Ministry of Interior. The wall is demolished, that is it.)<sup>1</sup>

With this news, I went downtown to see what is happening. When I arrived, I saw the wall of the American University in Cairo was almost all gone and corrugated metal sheets stood in its place. There were fragments of the wall on the street and pavement, which I started collecting as discretely as possible and putting them in my cloth tote bag. I entered the campus,

<sup>1</sup> Translation from Arabic to English is my own.

with my expired AUC ID, and asked if I could take pieces of the wall from inside the university. I was accompanied by one campus security officer inside the area where the Science Building once stood. If I had been by myself, I would have sat down in the dirt and cried: the wall was in tiny pieces of rubble, piled cement, metal, brick, grey with specs of paint, and recognizable patterns. The wall was brought down with a vengeance, heavy machinery that could only remove all traces of what was once there.

The bringing down of the AUC wall was expected, since the university had begun demolishing it in September 2015 as part of a citywide beautification project. Khalid Mostafa, a spokesperson for the Cairo governor's office, claimed the demolition was not about the graffiti (Mada Masr 2015). Rihab Saad, head of AUC's Media Department, asserted that the demolition was necessary in order to bring in machinery to tear down the long-abandoned Science Building that sustained damage during the 2011 revolution and to work with the city on its downtown beautification project. AUC's contribution to the beautification project was to replace the Science Building with a garden, accessible only to those who were granted entry to the exclusive AUC campus.

This chapter examines debates about the so-called beautification of urban spaces, arguing that such practices are in fact forms of authoritarianism and counterrevolutionary co-optation of graffiti and policing of public space. To do so, I track the walls of the GrEEK Campus in downtown Cairo from 2015 through 2017, during which time the walls underwent two significant projects. The GrEEK Campus is a private institution started by Egyptian entrepreneurs Ahmed El Alfi and Tarek Ali who signed a ten-year lease with the American University in Cairo to use the five abandoned buildings as a "technology and innovation park in the heart of Cairo, offering state-of-the-art office spaces for both startups as well as established

multinational technology and media companies” (The GrEEK Campus website 2018). The first of these projects was the 2015 Women on Walls’ “Unchain Yourself” art intervention staged as part of Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival (D-CAF), a three-week, international, multi-disciplinary arts festival established in 2012. The second project was the whitewashing of these same walls in November 2017, and, through the sponsorship of a private paint company, decorating the walls with calligraphy and a hipster Nefertiti. In examining these two projects of urban renewal, this chapter considers forms of authoritarian control of access to and exclusion from public spaces based on class, gender, and nationality. Importantly, as Rustin Zarkar (2016), scholar of Middle East and Islamic studies, argues in his research of muralism in Iran, the state is not the sole player in shaping public space through so-called beautification projects. Rather, these projects include the state, as well as civilians who claim to act on their own behalf, civil society initiatives, and private sector companies. Each actively play a role in fashioning and in turn, controlling public space. Often these are collaborations between the Egyptian state, foreign funding organizations, private institutions, and independent citizens, and a closer examination reveals the different, and sometimes divergent agendas and stakes for each participant.

On 12 February 2011, the day after President Hosni Mubarak stepped down as president, Egyptians went to Midan El-Tahrir again with their own resources to sweep the streets, remove broken concrete, collect garbage, put trash bins on electric posts, and paint the pavement edges with yellow and black. This was, perhaps, the first beautification project since the revolution began where Egyptians expressed their sense of belonging, taking pride of what the revolution had achieved, and modeling what futures they desired. Anthropologist Jessica Winegar describes this beautification as a form of “aesthetic ordering” that “reproduce[s] both the civilizing, exclusionary tendencies of that state ideal, in which middle-class people are the exemplary

citizens, and, inadvertently, also reproduced neoliberal exclusions based on individualist, consumer citizenship” (2016, 611). A similar argument is made by political scientist Leela Fernandes who considers beautification projects in Mumbai, India as “sites of special politics” where “the production of an exclusionary form of cultural citizenship” is created that further marginalizes working-class groups and constructs middle-class Indians as “consumer-citizens” (2014, 2416-2417). Fernandes identifies these undertakings as political projects whereby the state can exercise its power and collaborate with the private sector to create spatial boundaries that separate the middle-class from the working-classes, which in turn allows the middle-class to “forget” about the life conditions of the poor. Although the context for Fernandes’ argument is not one in the midst of a national revolution and focuses on class as a category of analysis, her theorization of beautification projects as sites of political forgetfulness is useful within the context of Cairo, also a mega-postcolonial city in the Global South. In this chapter, I contend that beautification projects in downtown Cairo create visual boundaries that separate the middle-class from the working-class, as well as create divisions across nationality and gender. In addition, these projects are visual tools of erasing, therefore forgetting traces of the revolution once preserved on Cairene walls.<sup>2</sup>

### **Women Unchained and Burial Sites**

During the first week of April 2015, passersby on Mohamed Mahmoud Street at the corner of Yousef El-Gendy Street could watch, and for twenty Egyptian Pounds (\$1), join

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<sup>2</sup> Relatedly, several non-profit organizations launched campaigns raising awareness of sexual harassment and ways to combat it and passenger etiquette on the Metro. These projects focus on spaces mostly frequented by working-class individuals for shopping and transportation. These are not without debate, as Paul Amar (2011), has noted the adverse of effect was that many of the anti-harassment campaigns in Cairo often end up with the vilification of working-class men as perpetrators of sexual harassment and violence against middle-class women. This, again, results in the increase of policing of working-class men’s bodies for the benefits of protecting middle-class women’s access to public spaces.

twenty-five artists, mostly women, perched on cranes to graffiti the walls of the GrEEK Campus, who offered their walls to the D-CAF festival and WoW's (Women on Walls) project in support of women's rights (Eickhof 2015). The artists—from Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, Lebanon, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, and Sweden—were invited to participate in the project entitled WoW Unchained, as part of the contemporary art festival D-CAF, a festival aimed at reviving downtown Cairo as a vibrant cultural center. Participants were asked to create works that responded to the Women on Walls project mission: “to express the female hero succeeding in being unchained from all the anger and the fear that is controlling us. In our daily life we face various restrictions that, in the long run, create chains around us. Sometimes these chains are compelled by outside forces, and sometimes they are a creation of our own selves” (Women on Walls 2018c). WoW, founded by Swedish journalist and photographer Mia Gröndahl, who hired Egyptian artist Angie Balata as program manager, in Spring 2013 uses graffiti “to talk about women and women's issues and rights, with the aim to contribute to the empowerment of the Arab woman...and form a more visible female presence in the streets of Egypt and the Middle East” (Women on Walls website 2018a).

Despite its purported mission of empowerment, many local male and female graffiti artists felt Gröndahl, in earlier projects, had been too controlling in the graffiti's subject matter. In 2014, artists feeling too pushed by Gröndahl's agenda went to Youssef El-Gendy Street and changed a drawing of President Morsi painted during his short presidency and replaced his face with that of Gröndahl's (figure 4.2). Morsi, in this drawing painted in 2013, is seen laughing with his shirt open superman style. The undershirt has the logo of the Muslim Brotherhood with the text: “If he speaks, he lies.” The new graffiti replaced Morsi's face with Gröndahl's; one eye has a dollar sign and the other feces, and instead of the Muslim Brotherhood logo, her shirt showed

the logo of Danish Center for Culture and Development (CKU): WoW was funded by the Danish Center in 2013 and 2014, while WoW Unchained was funded by the Swedish Institute and the Embassy of Denmark in Cairo.



Figure 4.2: *President Mohamed Morsi* (left), 2013 and *Mia Gröndahl* (right), 2015  
(Copyright the artists, photograph credit: Ilka Eickhof, left, and alma khasawnih, right).

Unsurprisingly, controversy started as soon as work began on WoW Unchained. A day before the project started, rumors circulated on social media platforms that the WoW project was aiming to whitewash the revolutionary graffiti on the walls of the GrEEK Campus in order to make space for new works. Gröndahl assured the press that no previous graffiti would be painted over, stating “We are not painting over graffiti from the revolution, despite rumors about town. Most of the art is already ruined from the past few years by police or whoever,” (Nader 2015). Despite Gröndahl’s claims, some of the graffiti was painted over by WoW Unchained artists to make room for their work, as was the graffiti of Gröndahl described above (Eckhardt 2015; Nader 2015). But in an effort not to erase (much) of the revolutionary graffiti already on the walls, WoW Unchained opted to paint “above them” using cranes (Primo 2015). As the work on WoW Unchained began, Ammar Abo Bakr—one of the most prolific muralists of Mohamed

Mahmoud Street since the start of the revolution and whose disagreements with Gröndahl were no secret—posted on his Facebook page: “In my opinion, this kind of commercial graffiti does not respect the art on a street like Mohamed Mahmoud with all that’s happened here. There’s nothing wrong with commercial graffiti, but it does not respect the art on this street which is more ephemeral” (Nader 2015). Abo Bakr’s statement highlights that one of the characteristics of revolutionary graffiti is its ephemerality, which allows for it to respond to current happenings and engage in debates through additions, erasures, and overwriting. This is not possible when the work is physically removed and too high to reach.



Figure 4.3: Work by “WoW Unchained” artist, *Mystical Woman* (top) and Dina Saadi, *Unlock your Passion* (bottom), 2015.

Paint on wall.

Mohamed Mahmoud Street, Cairo, Egypt.

(Photograph credit: Women on Walls).

Also, a few hours after the WoW Unchained project started, freehand graffiti by an unknown writer was sprayed in below some of the new works. It read: “This street is a necropolis. Only here no commercial graffiti allowed.” The graffiti is in English, which is unlike

much of the graffiti previously on the wall, in order to speak directly to Gröndahl and the foreign funding agency, as well as to the festival organizers and its participating artists, and GrEEK Campus management who all spoke English. To this, Gröndahl responded: “People think that the street’s art is somehow holy, because of the history and the people who died there” (Nader 2015) and “[t]hey call this street a necropolis, so does it mean we should respect the dead by not touching these walls? No, my understanding is that the respect to the dead is to make sure that we can get a good life for the future and what these women are doing is showing people that they have something to give, that they have not given up” (Primo 2015). In these statements, Gröndahl included herself as part of those who should benefit from the countless martyrs of the revolution by getting a better life and future. But what Gröndahl did not seem to acknowledge was her positionality as a European middle-class woman whose stakes are entirely different than those of Egyptian women (middle-class or otherwise) and men. In fact, Gröndahl faced very little of the social and political policing experienced by Egyptians.

Referring to the works of WoW Unchained as commercial is a response to some of the participating artists receiving money for their role and work in the project. This is unlike graffiti and murals of the revolution, where writers used their own money to buy materials and supplies and were not paid for their works. Another reason WoW’s works were called commercial is because they were mostly in English and the works’ contents could be found in locations not necessarily tied to the revolution in any way.



Figure 4.4: *This street is a necropolis*  
 Unknown artist, April 2015.  
 Mohamed Mahmoud Street, Cairo, Egypt.  
 (Photography credit: Women on Walls).

WoW Unchained is not part of revolutionary graffiti, and rather overshadows that graffiti because of its physical location and because it is a part of a curated contemporary art happening that includes international artists and is funded by international development agencies with a mission to advocate for women's empowerment. Unlike the works that preexisted on the walls, WoW Unchained is an example of Winegar's aesthetic ordering and Fernandes' politic of forgetting. With bright and colorful works of art that are positioned too high for any conversation and negotiation with the works below them, WoW Unchained "daubed over" the revolutionary legacy of these walls. Organizers and artists of WoW Unchained in general, and Mia Gröndahl in particular, had a difficult time understanding why local graffiti artists responded negatively to their project. However, an analysis of the positionality of the participants and the conditions during which WoW Unchained took place offers an understanding of this dynamic.

At the time of D-CAF 2015, the military had been in power for almost two years, after a coup/counterrevolution had ousted President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood in

June 2013. Since their tenure, the military and the new state—headed by President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi—had been active in reshaping public space in different ways. In one instance, thousands of surveillance cameras around downtown were installed. In another, Midan Talaat Harb had been transformed into a semi-permanent military base with tanks and personnel carriers. Lining pavements with metal fences making it impossible to get onto the street except at permitted openings, was another form of special control. Even Midan El-Tahrir had been reconfigured. Until 16 November 2013, the Midan was a semi-flat mound that had grass and some plants. The lack of barriers, fences, or other obstructive objects allowed the square to be easily accessible and open to the surrounding areas. On 17 November 2013, then Prime Minister Hazem Al-Beblawi and Cairo Governor Galal al-Saeed laid the first brick of a structure commemorating the fallen martyrs of Mohamed Mahmoud I and II, who were killed in clashes with the state security services on 19 November 2011 and again on the same date in 2012. As part of the ceremony, Police General Hani Abdel-Lateef claimed the killed protestors as their own, blaming the previous regime for the violence: “all martyrs of the revolution whose immaculate blood will nourish the tree of our national struggle” (LeVine 2013). In response to this, on the next night, protestors went to Midan El-Tahrir and destroyed the newly-erected monument, citing its presence as an insult to the memory of those killed at the hands of the Ministry of Interior and state security. Then, on 8 February 2015, a twenty-meter-tall flag pole with an Egyptian flag was put up instead of the memorial. By May 2015, the Midan had been transformed into a highly tailored garden with grass, flowering plants, and a short stone fence around it.

The increased state control of public revolutionary spaces by various state agents were the conditions surrounding the *WoW Unchained* project. Gröndahl reasoned that the attacks were directed at her project because the local artists “don’t like women...and some street artists are

trying to have control. It is a war of territory, they are trying to own it” (Nader 2015). Gröndahl was not wrong in articulating revolutionary artists’ anger as stemming from a desire to control territory. These artists had fought for these streets since January 2011, risking their lives and losing their friends. Yet Gröndahl and participating artists refused to acknowledge this. For instance, Dina Saadi, a Syrian-Russian artist participating in the project argued that the tension “is not about the wall, it is about some people’s ego, and we are actually painting over ruined walls, leaving everything else intact. But just because a group of ladies decide to do something on the wall, then suddenly everyone is not happy about it. Well, I guess that is exactly why we are here” (Primo 2015). Yet what Saadi labeled as “ruined walls,” are in fact sites of meaningful production for those graffiti artists who, since 2011, had battled for these walls and by June 2013, had almost completely lost access to them. To revolutionary graffiti and mural creators, this moment is one of counterrevolution. In figure 4.5, for example, a freehand graffiti comments on the work by Dina Saadi who drew an anatomical heart (figure 4.3) that read: “We’r Locked in a Counterrevolution. Fuck You and Your Passion.”<sup>3</sup> Since the increased surveillance and militarization of public spaces in Cairo since June 2013, many revolutionary graffiti and mural artists had lost access to Cairene walls with the increasing threat of being arrested.

The privileged work of WoW is further made evident through not only their access to city walls, but also their use of cranes, which required collaboration with state authorities for official permits. Furthermore, WoW Unchained had European funding, a European organizer, and included non-Egyptian women. As a result, state authorities considered the project and its participants less of a threat because they were removed from affective relationships that local artists may have had to Mohamed Mahmoud Street and the revolution. In turn, by approving the

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<sup>3</sup> Misspelling of “We’re” as “We’r” is in the original.

project and granting permits, the military state could claim its support of freedom of expression and women's empowerment as values of the liberal nation-state. All of this rendered WoW's state-sanctioned access to not only public space, but also to the walls of one of the most iconic locations of the revolution even more fiercely contested, revealing the disconnect between WoW's proclaimed liberal ideologies and the realities of life after the revolution.

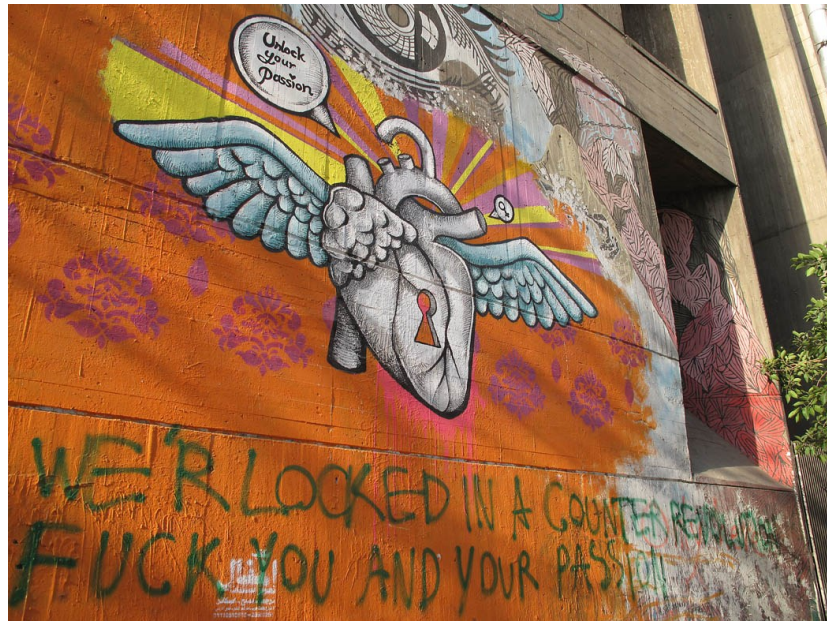


Figure 4.5: *We'r locked in a counterrevolution*  
 Unknown artist, April 2015.  
 Mohamed Mahmoud Street, Cairo, Egypt.  
 (Photography credit: Women on Walls).

WoW's access to city walls, while local artists were continually denied access, is constructed through tensions across class, gender, and nationality. WoW's access to the walls of the GrEEK Campus is embedded in WoW's middle-class, international, liberal women's empowerment agenda, which is articulated through a generalized and globalized middle-class sisterhood that promotes individuals living their dreams and unlocking their passions. This is reflected in the visual imagery of the works included in "WoW Unchained," which was mainly of women's bodies, often with their wombs highlighted as places of growth and rebirth, or of anatomical hearts with slogans encouraging women to dream and follow their passion, and

calling for women's education. These works celebrated global sisterhood through the celebration of women's bodies. Although the works did not go through formal pre-approval, their themes were safe forms of engagement for the organization and its artists, as much as they were unthreatening to the state. This discourse resonates with the anti-sexual harassment campaigns launched after the revolution that focused on individuals taking actions against aggressors through the use of state-sanctioned avenues of police and court intervention. In the case of WoW's murals, the graffiti claims that women's access to public space is limited not because of state-sanctioned forms of oppression, but rather because of uneducated men and Islamic dogma. This is most directly visualized in the WoW mural of a Muslim man whose mind is filled with nude women, while he forces full body cover on the women beside him.



Figure 4.1: *Religious Man*  
 Work by WoW Unchained artists, April 2015.  
 Paint on wall.  
 Mohamed Mahmoud Street, Cairo, Egypt.  
 (Photograph credit: Women on Walls).

In many ways, WoW's imagery resonates with Jaspir Puar's argument in her 2007 *Terrorist Assemblages* that Western queer activists pinned Islam against homosexuality in ways that obscures "the undercurrents of conservative homonormative ideologies and queer

liberalism,” which become part of defining an ideal queer that assumes *free in the same way* around the world (19). Similarly, WoW Unchained assumed that all Arab women shared similar issues with Egyptian women during moments of revolution and counterrevolution. As a form of state-private sector collaboration, the project exemplifies who had access to public space. Moreover, by taking the upper, higher, part of the GrEEK Campus wall, WoW Unchained drowned out the palimpsest of graffiti and murals below, making them seem chaotic, illegible, and therefore, irrelevant.

### ***Hipster Nefertiti and Private Sector Collaboration***

After two years, with few additions to the walls of the GrEEK Campus, Graffiti Ultras in Egypt—a group dedicated to political and football fan (ultras) graffiti—posted a photograph on 27 November 2017 of men on cranes with white paint rollers covering the campus’ graffiti and murals on their Facebook page with a critical caption: “The government is erasing graffiti in Mohamed Mahmoud Street!!!” (Graffiti Ultras in Egypt 2011).



Figure 02: *Government erasing Graffiti*  
 Graffiti Ultras in Egypt Facebook Status Update, 27 November 2017.  
 (Photograph credit: Graffiti Ultras in Egypt) (Graffiti Ultras in Egypt 2011).

Three days later, on 30 November 2017, they followed up the post with another: تعديل. (Edit: On the government news, they did not erase anything. The wall will all be painted again. Sorry about the news) (Graffiti Ultras in Egypt 2011). By 2 December 2017, the walls of the GrEEK campus were whitewashed with new calligraphy work being painted. In his Twitter feed, AUC sociologist Amro Ali followed the painting developments and posted several updates. On 6 December, Ali posted images of the wall with the painting almost completed with works that focused on calligraphy and Islamic art motifs, a calligraphy tree, and a hipster Nefertiti.



Figure 4.8: *GrEEK Campus wall repainted*  
 Amro Ali Tweet, 6 December 2017  
 (Photograph credit: Amro Ali) (@\_amroali, December 2, 2017).

These new works were a collaboration between two private sector institutions: the GrEEK Campus and Sipes (a commercial paint company that donated the paint). The new works not only whitewashed the graffiti and murals that had been there since 25 January 2011, erasing critical signage of the revolution, but also the new additions sterilized the street and co-opted the revolution. During the revolution, for instance, Nefertiti became a symbol of resistance that grounded Egyptians in a claimed common pharaonic past. Most famous, perhaps, is El-Zeft's rendition of Nefertiti on the walls of the French School at Mohamed Mahmoud Street. Online, El-Zeft shared his work with the added caption: "A tribute to all women in our beloved Revolution. Without you we wouldn't have gotten this far. Thank you" (lindsey 2016). In El-Zeft's 30 x 20 centimeter wheatpaste-paper work, Nefertiti is depicted wearing a gasmask and an unwavering gaze, with a spray can nearby with El-Zeft's name on it. El-Zeft's Nefertiti is a male representation of woman as revolution and as nation. Therefore, this representation, once more, puts the revolutionary labor and national culture onto women's bodies. Yet, this representation

reminds Egyptians of the active role of women in leadership since pharaonic times, where Nefertiti ruled Egypt alongside her husband, Akhenaten. Therefore, Nefertiti in this graffito is claiming her role as an active and steadfast participant in the front lines of the revolution.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the December 2017 Nefertiti is modernized and sexualized. As Hassan Massoud tweeted, “she’s now a fair and lovely user with lips for sex and a taste for expensive sunglasses. She is their political statement now” (@Hassan\_Massoud, December 6, 2017).



Figure 4.9: El-Zeft, *Nefertiti*  
*Wheatpaste, paper, paint on wall, 23 September 2012*  
 Mohamed Mahmoud Street, Cairo, Egypt.  
 (Photograph: El-Zeft) (El-Zeft 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Wheatpaste is the process of sticking paper-based work on the walls.



Figure 4.10: *Hipster Nefertiti*  
Amro Ali Tweet, 6 December 2017  
(Photograph credit: Amro Ali) (@\_amroali, December 6, 2017).

The importance of Nefertiti to the Egyptian nation-state can be traced to the mid-1300s B.C. when she reigned as the queen of Egypt with her husband Pharaoh Akhenaten. Since 2011, revolutionaries utilized Nefertiti's image as a symbol of collectivity and as representation of women's active participation in political life. In her new rendition on the GrEEK Campus wall, Nefertiti is transformed into "a depoliticized, cleansed individual and emptied of any meaningful self-expression hipster" (@\_amroali, December 6, 2017). Hassan Massoud describes Nefertiti, represented here at a large scale of several meters long and high, as an advertisement for Fair & Lovely whitening cream because her face appears lighter than her neck. She is sexualized with plump lips with hot red lipstick, her eyebrows plucked, eyes hidden behind reflective sunglasses, and her wings spread wide ready for flight. The wings are also part of WoW artist Dina Saadi's anatomical heart drawn during the WoW Unchained project. Here, Nefertiti is seen as a passive and depoliticized consumer.

The new walls of the GrEEK Campus are a collaborative beautification project between the private sector and the state. The result of the new mural, however, erases the revolutionary history from the walls of Mohamed Mahmoud Street and Youssef El-Gendy and reconstructs the

area into a well-tailored and sanitary public space. Drawing on Islamic motifs and Nefertiti as conventional symbols of Egyptian nationalism, the mural promotes a passive middle-class orientalist aesthetic that uses depoliticized Islamic motifs and an individualist, neoliberal, consumer pharaonic Nefertiti.

The reworking of Nefertiti into a neoliberal consumer symbol is an example of the ways in which women's bodies continue to be deployed as symbols of acceptable Egyptian womanhood. In this case, acceptable Egyptian-ness is a hipster Muslim woman grounded in her pharaonic past, even if as a costume. She is middle-class, a consumer in the world market, while at the same time culturally comfortable with Islam as the underlying social context represented by the calligraphy. In other words, there is nothing threatening to the status quo in her reformulated image—unlike the powerful Nefertiti of the revolutionary graffiti. This articulation of the GrEEK Campus secures this particular woman as the appropriate citizen, while the whitewashing of the diverse voices represented over the past six years of revolutionary graffiti and murals indicates that there is no room for these forms of participation on the pristine and well-manicured walls.

Through the aesthetic ordering of these walls, private institutions (Sipes paints and the GrEEK Campus), under the watchful eye of the state (there is a security camera at the traffic light at the intersection of Mohamed Mahmoud Street and Youssef El-Gendy) clarify who is welcome in this area alongside acceptable forms of behavior. Through visual cues of this beautification project, women's bodies and acceptable forms of visual participation are policed.

## Conclusion

The two case studies above are examples of authoritarian urbanism, and state and peer policing. Through an examination of the different participants, visual language and messaging, and geographical location of the murals, this chapter demonstrates that visual interventions on one wall over a period of time generates distinctly different affective and physical responses to access to public space. In the first example, a women's empowerment project that included imagery focusing on women's bodies and global sisterhood paradoxically resulted in politicizing one of the most highly active revolutionary public spaces since 25 January 2011. By physically painting a higher part of the wall than revolutionary graffiti below it, WoW Unchained presented itself as a more valuable form of art, with a more significant agenda that should be protected from intervention; a privilege conventionally given to art, but not to revolutionary graffiti that feeds off of intervention and alteration. Also, by collaborating with private sector institutions, international funding agencies, and the state, WoW Unchained dislodged the corner of Mohamed Mahmoud Street and Youssef El-Gendy Street from its anti-state and revolutionary ideology that was embedded in ephemerality and claims and negotiations over access to public space. Instead, the project reconfigured this space into a state-sanctioned, private-sector sponsored consumer project that prioritized middle-class aesthetics and the protection of middle-class women from working-class and revolutionary men. Working-class women were positioned outside WoW Unchained for three reasons. The first is because most of them were unable to read English, therefore, could not read most of the works' messages. The second is that some of the works, such as figure 4.6, undermined women who wear the niqab (veil that also covers the face) by representing them with one large eye, which made them look alien-like, and made them seem as if they were shepherded by the religious man who only had sex on his mind. The third reason is

that working-class women probably did not have the twenty Egyptian pounds needed to pay in order to participate in the project. Therefore, despite WoW's statements that their project focused on increasing women's access to the street and working to unchain themselves from fear, the project's language, imagery, and affordability excluded working-class and lower-class women.

In the second case study, whitewashing the whole wall and centering pharaonic and Islamic motifs resulted in a process that constructs Egyptian identity within middle-class consumer citizenship that is depoliticized and removed from its political and cultural histories of the past and present. The act of repurposing Nefertiti into consumer-culture is an act of political forgetfulness of not only her role in Egyptian pharaonic history, but also the meanings she held for and about women in the 2011 revolution. Also, these new works invoked previous historical uses of pharaonic and Islamic motifs that helped construct Egyptian national identity in anticolonial and nationalist movements since the late 1800s. In doing so, the alliance between two privately owned companies became a site of coalition with the state that relies on neoliberal consumerism to help it depoliticize urban space through co-opting revolutionary public space and graffiti.

In this chapter I critique beautification projects as violent acts of political forgetfulness and public purification. I also argue that the very nature of graffiti is its ephemerality. These claims seem to suggest a particulate use or visual language for graffiti; that of revolutionary graffiti. This is not my intention; i.e. I am not arguing that all graffiti is revolutionary graffiti, but instead, that all graffiti is ephemeral. My point here is to distinguish different forms of ephemerality: on the one hand, ephemerality resulting from public forms of conversation, debate, and negotiation between diverse peoples and groups (including private citizens and the state agents) that result in changing or erasing graffiti, and on the other hand ephemerality as a process

of sanitizing public space for the benefit of forgetting and catering to middle-class safety and aesthetic. The former process of change is one that is open to democratic polyvocality not only of meaning but also of access, while the latter is univocal, providing only one hegemonic narrative that is not open for debate or adjustment.

Together these two projects on the same corner in downtown Cairo demonstrate processes of erasure, co-optation, and forgetting that create safe spaces for the middle-class as constructed through liberal consumerism. They also assist the state project that aims at eradicating contemporary revolutionary history by giving the state the opportunity to demonstrate its support for liberal values found in WoW's women's empowerment project and through constructing a national identity based on private sector middle-class consumerism. Both these projects are violent acts of forgetting, authoritarianism, and aesthetic ordering that not only serve the military state in its systemic co-optation and erasure of the revolution, but also purify public space in service of the middle-class over the working-classes.

### **Postscript**

When I left the AUC campus on 6 March 2016 with a heavy bag filled with concrete, I called Ammar Abo Bakr to let him know that the wall was almost completely destroyed and that he should go there soon should he want pieces of it. Two days later, actor Ahmed Malek posted a picture of a group sitting on a mountain of rubble on the AUC wall on Mohamed Mahmoud Street, drinking soda and eating sandwiches. The group looked like they had just arrived at the top of a mountain. The caption read: "hard labor;" words used for people in prison who have to do hard labor as part of their sentence.



Figure 4.11: *Hard Labor*  
 Ahmed Malek Facebook Status Update, 8 March 2016  
 (Photograph credit: Ahmed Malek).

Whether through independent citizens and private-sector actions or through citywide beautification projects, access to public space is being fashioned and controlled in Cairo during this moment of counterrevolution. This control is not only erasing contemporary visual culture production of the revolution, it is constructing, via visual and physical boundaries, downtown Cairo as spaces for middle-class Egyptian consumers to navigate safely and without visual discomfort. These processes keep people apart based on their class, gender, and nationality.

## Epilogue

This dissertation argues that ephemeral visual culture production serves as an active participant in fashioning access to streets during periods of social and political revolution. To do so, I examined street art in Cairo at different moments throughout the ongoing 2011 revolution and authoritarian counterrevolution in Egypt. Combining an iconographical analysis of a selection of graffiti and murals, with a consideration of geographical location as well as historical and contemporary contextualization of visual symbols and locations, I demonstrate that the body of women and rural men have been taken up as symbols of revolutionary resistance and persistence. However, at the same time, these bodies are constructed through the visual imagery also to be sites of national honor and patriarchal nationalism, thereby hindering the very possibility of a truly revolutionary politics. The dissertation concludes with an analysis of the ways in which access to the street is determined by not only an authoritarian state, but also private sector institutions and independent citizens. Projects of purported beautification that include whitewashing revolutionary graffiti, for instance, underscore forms of authoritarianism that service the state, aim at forgetting the working-classes, and erase revolutionary visual histories. Everyday, more of these works are being drowned under layers of white paint and heavy sledgehammers.

### Alternate Spaces

The feelings of artists and the general public about the revolution and current conditions in Cairo are dystopic and the weight of loss and heartbreak are undeniable. But, while aware that I do not want to present a narrative that is grounded in positive or *but-it-is-better-than-before* trajectories, the work of the revolution and its graffiti remain ongoing. Although public spaces

and access to the streets in Cairo are increasingly policed, activists and graffiti artists persist in claiming the revolution and revolutionary activities in multiple ways. In order to continue painting the city walls, many artists and activists ask for permission from private citizens for use of the wall space. Additionally, they initiate collaborative projects where graffiti and mural painting are part of, if not central to, the activities. For example, in summer 2016, graffiti artist Snooby participated in an environment awareness workshop for youth where he worked with youth on making stencils and drawing murals around the theme of environmental protection. His portion was part of the workshop that included a lecture series and other workshops. These committed artists and activists also graffiti in alleyways and less monitored streets. For example, the signature of Mona Lisa Brigades member, Nofal, is visible throughout Zamalek, downtown Cairo, Ard El-Lewa, and other places.<sup>1</sup> Egyptian graffiti artists, both in diaspora and living in Egypt, also claim walls across the globe when they get invited for artists residencies and participate in cultural happenings. One such wall is in Berlin close to the From Here to Fame Publishing house (the publisher of *Walls of Freedom*, 2014), where a wall is dedicated to Egyptian artists who transit through or live in Berlin. These artists often include icons and themes from the Egyptian revolution. Moreover, through the theorization of these murals and graffiti, we can understand the role of visual imagery in the Egyptian revolution and the effect of shifting social conditions and the politics of geography on the production of that imagery.

Further policing of the public sphere has prompted artists to mobilize the virtual sphere as they have taken their revolutionary participation onto online platforms. One such example is poet and artist Amira Hanafi's قاموس الثورة, or *Qamos Al-Thawra* (The Dictionary of the Revolution), which is “a project that documents the rapid amplification of public political speech following

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about the Mona Lisa Brigades, see Chapter 2.

the revolution of 25 January 2011 in Egypt.” An ongoing project, the dictionary demonstrates the ways words and concepts were articulated and networked with each other during the revolution. For example, the word *graffiti* is strongly connected to revolution, and equally networked with traitor, reconciliation, coup, continuous revolution, youth, army, Brotherhood, martyr, media, and protest, among others. In another instance, Ahmed Ghaneim, an Egyptian activist living in the United States, auctioned off, in February of 2016, President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi on eBay to support the Egyptian economy. The sale of a “field marshal, doctor to philosophers with a military background for use as doctor” was in response to a speech by President El-Sisi to the nation on 24 February 2016, where he told Egyptians that he would sell himself if he knew it would help the Egyptian economy. A few hours later, an artist created an eBay auction for a “For sale, field marshal, doctor to philosophers with a military background for use as doctor.” The post only lasted twenty-four hours before eBay took it down. These two cursory examples document the connection between art and activism that persist, despite an increased state control of public, semi-public, and online spaces.

The screenshot shows an eBay auction listing for 'Ahmed Ghaneim, For sale'. The page is in Arabic. At the top, the eBay logo is visible along with a search bar and navigation links. The main heading of the listing is 'للبيع: مشير وطبيب للفلاسفة بخلفية عسكرية استعمال طبيب'. Below this, there is a photo of a man in a suit, presumably Ahmed Ghaneim. The current bid is \$100,301.00, with 106 bids. The time left is 6d 21h. The seller is 'dr\_motown67', a Longtime Member. The listing includes shipping and payment information, a PayPal advertisement, and a detailed description in Arabic. The description mentions that the seller is selling the infamous Egyptian field marshal and military coup leader Mr. Abdel Fattah El Sisi on eBay to bail out the Egyptian economy. It also states that the field marshal himself stated that if selling himself will help, he will not hesitate to do it, and that the seller is doing it for him, for us, and for the humanity. The seller asks for help to help Egypt gain its political and economic independence and to follow and sell or sell-out leaders on eBay like us.

Figure 5.1: Ahmed Ghaneim, *For sale*. Ebay Auction, 24 February 2016.

## Protect and Critique

One of the most difficult aspects of writing this dissertation during a moment of counterrevolution and increased authoritarianism was to resist the desire to safeguard the graffiti and murals from critique and write about them in solely positive terms. In other words, how can one adopt a critical perspective towards a visual presence that is either under imminent threat or disappearing right before your eyes? This protectivist urge stems from not wanting to neglect the affective and phenomenological responses that those visual works initiated in the first place, and wanting to assure their contribution to one of the most significant political, cultural, and social moments in Egyptian history, as well as for the region and the world. That these works would go uncritically examined would be an injustice to the revolution and its ideals of life, freedom, and social justice. Importantly, these works are as complex as Egyptian society itself, and thus deserve critical examination for what they share about the revolutionary world that they

themselves helped fashion. As I hoped to have suggested, these works promote revolutionary and normative ideologies simultaneously, and by unpacking this paradox, we can begin to understand the ways in which the production of the visual imagery of the revolution reproduces some of the very structures of injustice and power that the revolution sought to undo.

### **Archiving What is Lost**

Although graffiti and murals of the revolution were intensely documented during the first few years of the revolution, this documentation lacks detailed information on geography and dates of creation. Often photographs do not include the larger context that enables audiences to relocate these works within the specifics of individual geographical locations. Also, much of the documentation focused on popular and internationally recognized streets and areas such as Mohamed Mahmoud Street and Zamalek in Cairo. In addition, the documentation by local and international press and graffiti enthusiasts slowed down after June 2013, whereas the graffiti continued to serve as an important element of revolutionary activity, albeit not as frequently. This shift reflected an increased presence of surveillance of public spaces that made it difficult, and often dangerous, to take photographs of these works. Moreover, much of the photographic documentation that does exist circulates between public and private realms, located in personal archives, artists' social media feeds, and online blogs.

Together, the violent and incessant erasure of these works and difficulty accessing the various archives, encouraged me to start a collective in Cairo to build an online archive of these works to restore their geographic and temporal lives. *Grashif* (a blend of the words graffiti and the Arabic for archive, *arshif*) is an open source, bilingual (Arabic/English), and searchable database that is made of an image wiki and a visual representation of the data in the wiki. The

aim of the archive is to connect, contextualize, and historicize ephemeral street visual production to human affective and phenomenological experiences on the streets. The project came as a response to my interlocutors and my feelings of alienation and fear due to increased policing of the streets and digital spaces over the past two years. It also responds to the erasure and demolition of street visual culture and a desire to preserve it as historical documentation. Therefore, Grashif is a collective of Egyptians and myself who come together with different skills and expertise that include computer programmers, archivists, map-makers, researchers, graphic designers, and artists. The collective is dedicated to creating and centering non-hegemonic narratives through visual representations and believes in the importance of alternative archives to state archives in order to create these narratives; is passionate about Arabic (standard and colloquial) as living, changing, and malleable languages that are used in the digital landscapes to create and support local stories and scholarly research; and is committed to open-source and creative-commons as spaces to share and generate ideas and works.

This digital archive, like works by Ahmed Ghaneim and Amira Hanafi, signal to the increased use of digital spaces as sites of political, social, and cultural activism. These spaces have become increasingly important as access to the physical street becomes even more restricted.

### **Why Do Streets Matter?**

As I write this epilogue, news of missing, now found and detained Egyptian doctoral student, Walid al-Shobaky, conducting fieldwork in Cairo occupies my mind (Mada Masr 2018). Some of my friends know him. This disappearance is part of an increasingly frightening trend over the past few years where the state kidnaps activists, lawyers, artists, and people who critique

the state in any way. This state tactic aims at instilling the fear barrier in Egyptians that was broken in 25 January 2011 so that they stop protesting, critiquing, and asking questions. The disappearance of this student brings up feelings of uncertainty, fear, and loss of control because this happened to an Italian student in 2016 who was kidnapped on the eve of the fifth anniversary of the Egyptian revolution while I was doing my fieldwork. Unlike the time in 2016, I am now far away from where things are happening. Distance keeps me physically safe. While I was in Cairo, many things protected me from this all too common occurrence: I am a non-Egyptian Arab, native speaker of Arabic, middle-class woman, in my late thirties. I had numerous friends in Cairo who gave me advice on how to talk about my work, to whom to talk, and where to go. This advice kept me from going to certain public spaces and streets at certain times and, in turn, very possibly kept me physically safe. All of this privileged my access to the streets in Cairo in 2015 and 2016. Many others, including aforementioned graduate students, did not have these privileges. This difference in accessibility to the street as the public space is at the crux of my research project: Who has safe access to the street? When and where are they safe on the street? And what influences their safety?

In this research project, I investigated these questions through closely examining ephemeral visual culture production that was produced since 25 January 2011 until today. I analyzed what these primary sources shared about the systems of privilege and power that fashion access to public space through geography, time, and history. My focus on revolutionary ephemeral culture is to argue that these forms of public performances challenge the state, as they continue to perpetuate structural injustices because we need to work not only to bring down the regime, but also the structures that hold it in place. One such structure is the nation-state itself. I claim that in order to speak against the state and organize Egyptians to take to the streets, graffiti

and murals of the 25 January revolution spoke for the nation in the language of the nation-state. For example, in representing those killed in clashes with security services as martyrs, graffiti spoke for the nation, its loss, and redefined martyrs away from the service of the state. At the same time, by articulating women and rural people as symbols of national honor and unchanging ideologies, murals and graffiti perpetuated the language of the nation-state. In the quest for freedom from colonialism, we sought and continue to a European construct of the nation-state in order to organize ourselves, be legible to our captors, and be given freedom. As part of a larger questioning of injustices perpetuated within the confining parameters of the nation-state, my investment in access to the street comes from personal experiences of physical and verbal sexual harassment as a child on the street. This has led to engaging with collective concerns over honor crimes as a way to control sexuality and sustain rape culture; to the Black Lives and Say Her Name movements that respond to racist and gendered police brutality that more often than not happens on the street; to fears that force scholars to hide their public support for Palestine, graduate student employees' strikes, and other issues of justice. These are all social phenomena that play out in public and semi-public spaces and demonstrations against them is a form of coming out in public support. This dissertation's subtext is to argue that without moving away from the nation-state as a way of organization, we will continue to perpetuate structures of injustice that are inherently part of the formation of the nation-state that produce the subaltern. Therefore, we need to shift the context, stop trying to be understood by the dominant narrative, and begin imagining alternative forms of organization that do not bind us to borders, language, or nation.

This is, of course, happening all around the Global South. For example, the Black-Palestinian solidarity group states: "We choose to build with one another in a shoulder to

shoulder struggle against state-sanctioned violence... From Ferguson to Gaza, from Baltimore to Jerusalem, from Charleston to Bethlehem, we will be free” (Black-Palestinian Solidarity 2018). This movement works to build solidarity across nation-state borders that focuses on ending settler-colonial state-sanctioned racist violence. Another example is the Occupy Movement that addresses the social and economic inequity that affects the lives of 99% of the world. The movement centers transnational connections in order to build alliances between minoritized peoples. This dissertation is the formal beginning of my life project to unravel the construct of the nation-state in postcolonial and settler-colonial contexts in order to imagine different forms of social, cultural, and political organization.

### **A Final Thought**

On 25 September 2016, one of the *Grashif* collective members, designer and artist Ola Abulshalashel took her own life. Ola was strong, funny, determined, and creative. She built a gender wiki in Arabic (<https://genderation.xyz/wiki/الصفحةالرئيسية>). She drew an adult coloring book for people with depression. She had and loved cats and old Egyptian films. We had a lot in common. Ola—with her critical, inquisitive, curious, and empathetic self—fueled the revolution with her desire to affect change in the world and commitment to stand by others. I see her every time I contact my revolutionary Egyptian friends, watch videos of demonstrations across Egypt, and witness Egyptians’ humorful, witty, and steadfast resilience to military authoritarianism. These personas and groups are the revolution.

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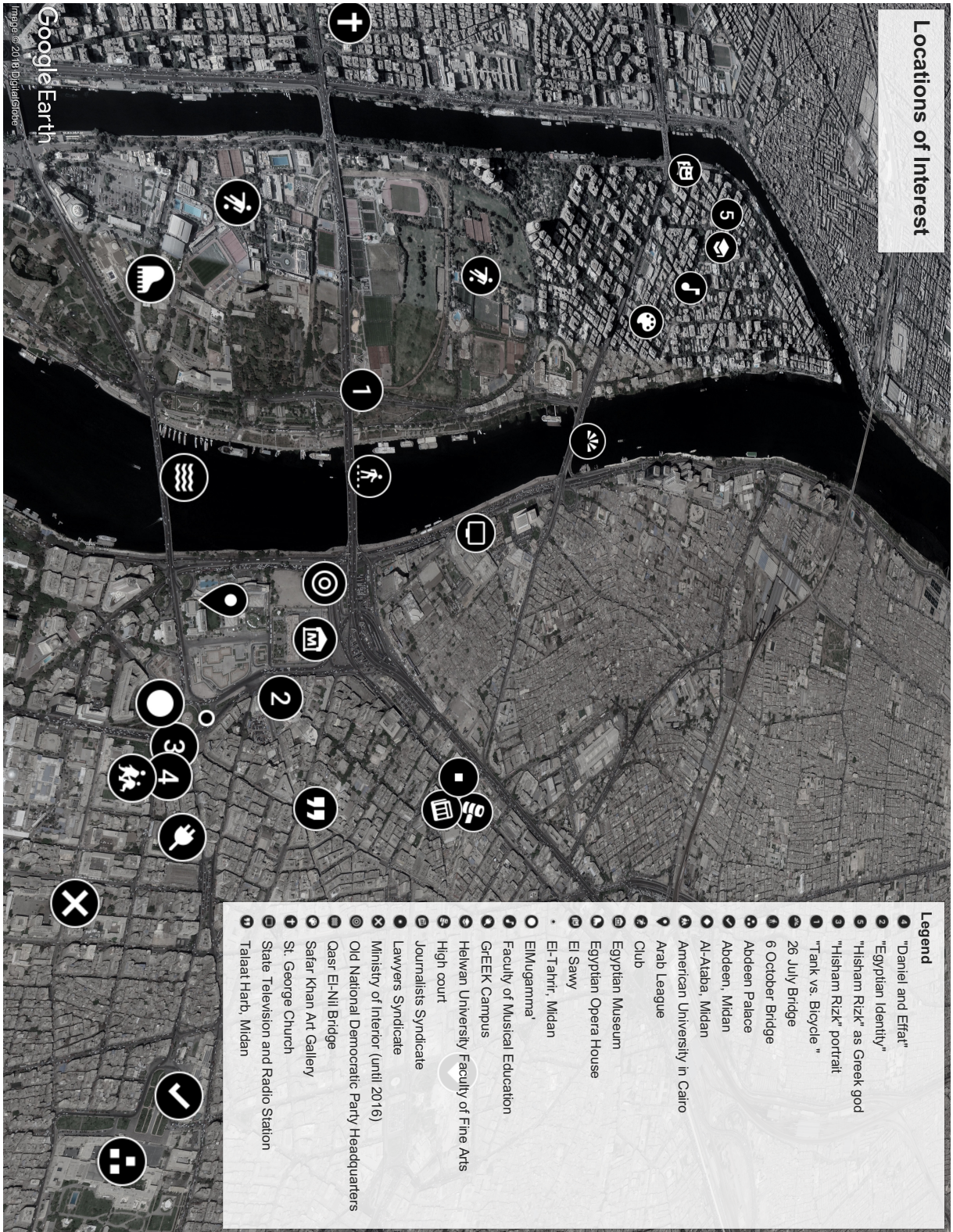
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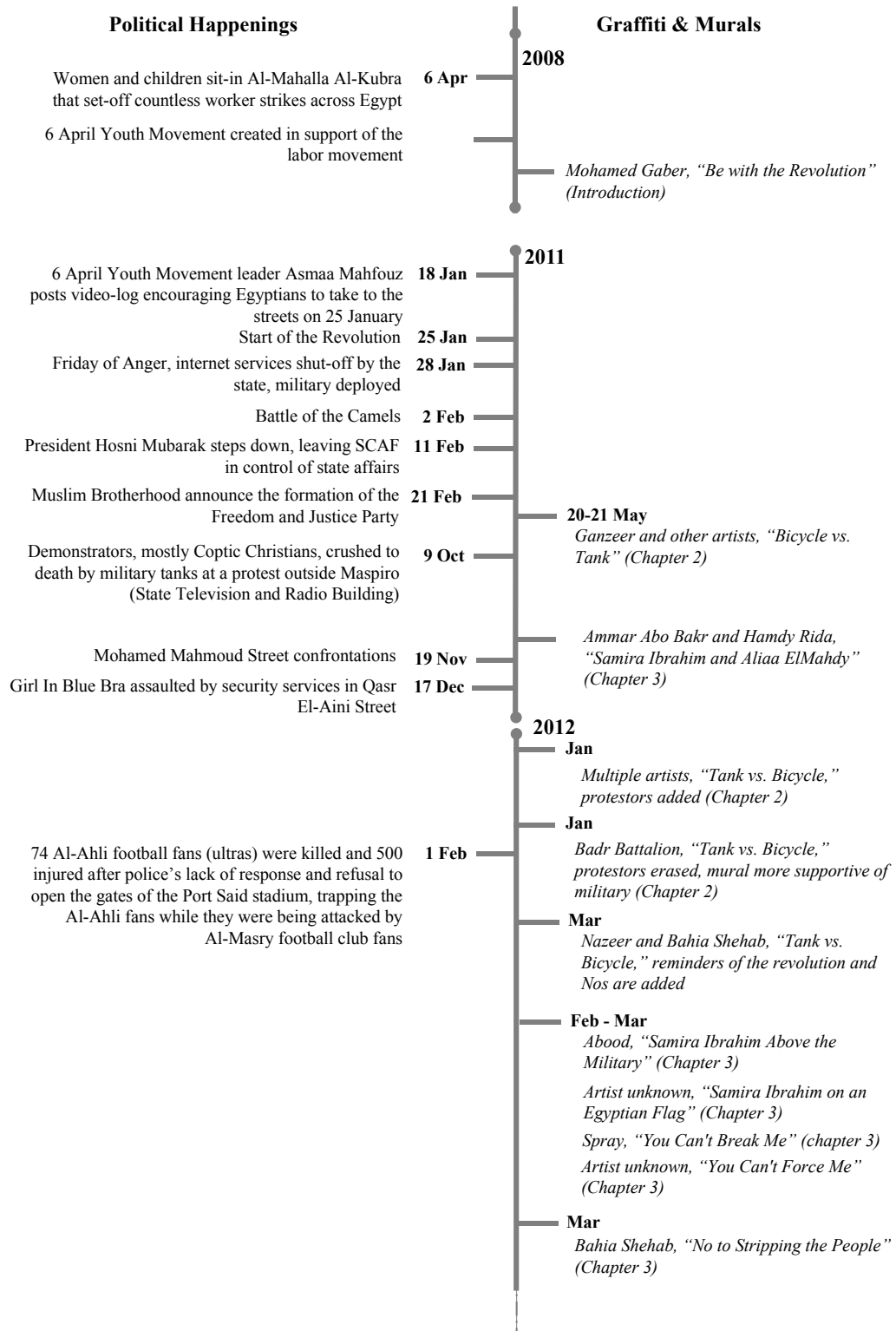
## Appendix A

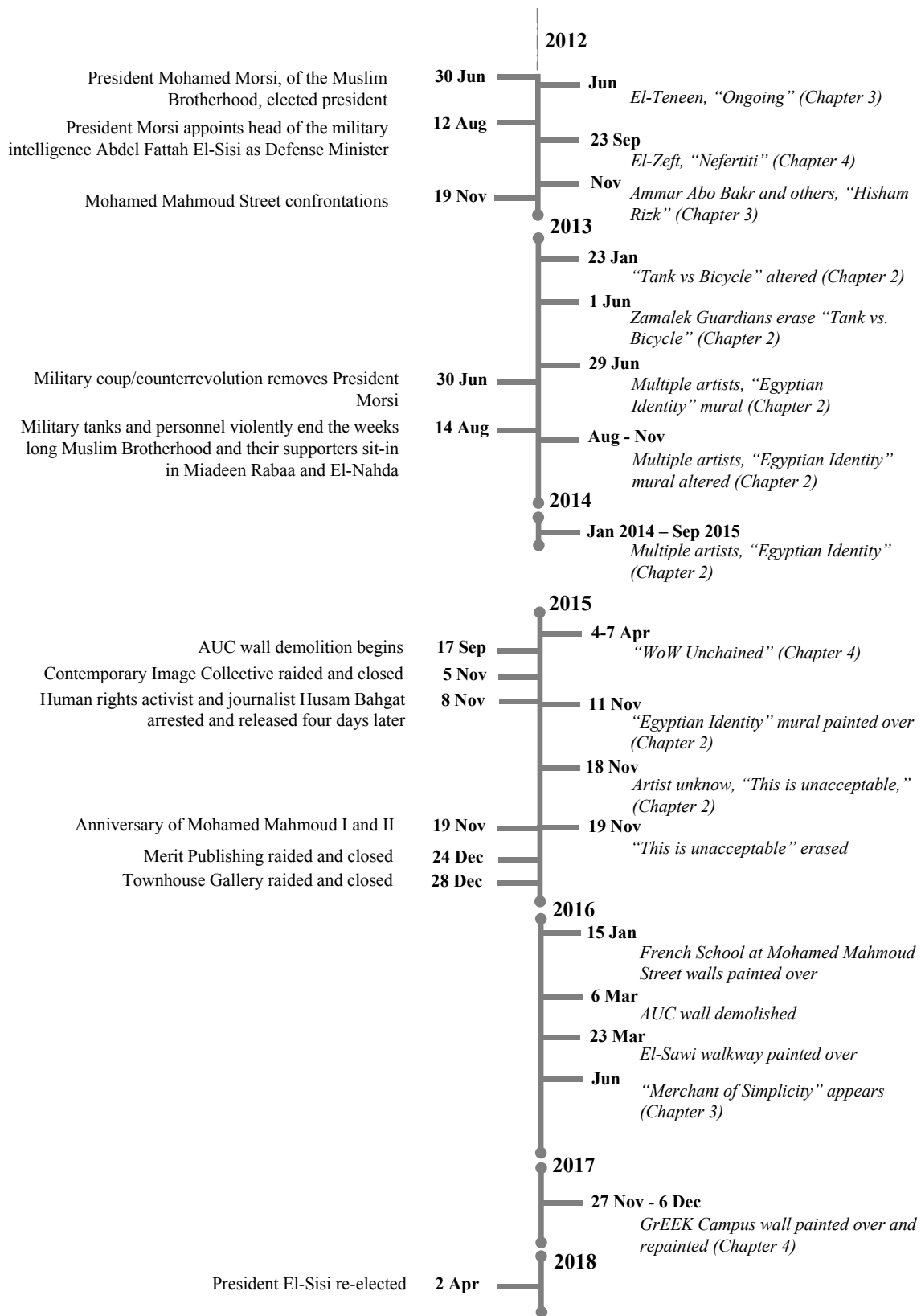
### Locations of Interest



## Appendix B

### Timeline





## Appendix C

### Transcript of Asmaa Mahfouz 18 January 2011 vlog

*Transcripts of the speech from Luthfispace, 23 March 2011*

*<http://luthfispace.blogspot.com/2011/03/speech-by-asmaa-mahfouz-which-triggered.html>*

Four Egyptians have set themselves on fire to protest humiliation and hunger and poverty and degradation they had to live with for 30 years. Four Egyptians have set themselves on fire thinking maybe we can have a revolution like Tunisia, maybe we can have freedom, justice, honor and human dignity. Today, one of these four has died, and I saw people commenting and saying, “May God forgive him. He committed a sin and killed himself for nothing.”

People, have some shame.

I posted that I, a girl, am going down to Tahrir Square, and I will stand alone. And I’ll hold up a banner. Perhaps people will show some honor. I even wrote my number so maybe people will come down with me.

No one came except three guys—three guys and three armored cars of riot police. And tens of hired thugs and officers came to terrorize us. They shoved us roughly away from the people. But as soon as we were alone with them, they started to talk to us. They said, “Enough! These guys who burned themselves were psychopaths.” Of course, on all national media, whoever dies in protest is a psychopath. If they were psychopaths, why did they burn themselves at the parliament building?

I’m making this video to give you one simple message: we want to go down to Tahrir Square on January 25th. If we still have honor and want to live in dignity on this land, we have to go down on January 25th. We’ll go down and demand our rights, our fundamental human rights.

I won't even talk about my political rights. We just want our human rights and nothing else. This entire Government is corrupt – a corrupt President and a corrupt security force! The self-immolators were not afraid of death. But they were afraid of the security forces! Can you imagine that? Are you like that? Are you going to kill yourselves too? Or are you completely clueless?

I am going down on January 25th and from now till then, I am going to distribute fliers in the streets. I will not set myself on fire! If the security forces want to set me on fire let them come and do it!

If you think yourself a man, come with me on January 25<sup>th</sup>.

Whoever says women shouldn't go to protest because they will get beaten. Let him have some honor and manhood and come with me on January 25<sup>th</sup>. Whoever says it is not worth it because there will be only a handful of people, I want to tell him, you are the reason behind this. And you are a traitor, just like the President or any security cop who beats us in the streets

Your presence with us will make a difference, a BIG difference. Talk to your neighbors, your colleagues, friends and family and tell them to come. They don't have to come to Tahrir Square, just go down anywhere and say it, that we are free human beings

Sitting at home and just following us on news or Facebook leads to our humiliation. Leads to my own humiliation! If you have honor and dignity as a man, come. Come and protect me and other girls in the protest.

If you stay at home, then you deserve all that is being done to you. And you will be guilty before the nation and your people. And you will be responsible for what happens to us on the street while you sit at home.

Go down to the street, send SMS's, post it on the net, make people aware. You know your own social circle, your building, your family, your friends. Tell them to come with us. Bring 5 people, or 10 people if each of us manages to bring 5 or 10 to Tahrir Square and talk to people and tell them, THIS IS ENOUGH!! Instead of setting ourselves on fire, let us do something positive. It will make a difference, a BIG difference!

Never say there is no hope! Hope disappears only when you say there is no hope! So long you come down with us, there will be hope. Don't be afraid of the Government, Fear none but God! God says that He "will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves" (Quran 13 : 11)

Don't think you can be safe anymore! None of us are! Come down with us, and demand your rights, my rights, your family's rights. I am going down on January 25th and I will say "NO" to corruption. "NO" to this regime!