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Reconsidering the Image of the Blue Bra: Photography, Conflict, and Cultural Memory in the 2011–2013 Egyptian Uprising

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Abstract: The role of photography and social media have been seen as pivotal to the Egyptian political uprisings of 2011 where icons of the revolution circulated widely, helped galvanize protesters, and documented key events against the backdrop of a rapidly shifting discourse of photojournalism. By examining the citizen-produced image of the ‘girl with the blue’ in its capacity to reflect the spatial-temporal dynamics of the revolution, to mediate complex social issues of gender and political visibility, and to contribute to the development of cultural memory role through contemporary street art, this essay uncovers the significance of an icon in the digital age.

Keywords: citizen-photojournalism; icon; photography; conflict; Egyptian revolution; girl with the blue bra; cultural memory

In the days following mass demonstrations that would eventually lead to the 2011 Egyptian political revolution, many mainstream media reports claimed the influence of social media as the primary catalyst spurring thousands into the streets to protest.¹ Specifically, the Facebook page, “We are All Khaled Said” begun by Wael Ghonim, a young Google executive, was hailed as almost singularly igniting the uprisings that would eventually spread across the country and lead to the fall of a 30-year repressive regime. Anchoring the online campaign was a graphic image pairing of twenty-eight-year-old Khaled Said, before and after he had been brutally beaten and killed by security forces in Alexandria in early June 2010.² Although more recent research has called into question the circumstances surrounding the young man’s death, the image of Said’s brutalized face—one that recalls eerily the 1955 photograph of a young and severely tortured Emmett Till in the United States that helped galvanize the civil rights movement—spread rapidly online and on the streets.³ It would become in art critic Nat Muller’s terms, “a symbolic *pars pro toto* for a whole generation.”⁴ Despite extensive scholarship and popular Egyptian sentiment that point to a range of intensifying social and political factors preceding Said’s killing as factors contributing to the revolution, it is undeniable that the far-reaching distribution—both virtual and physical—of this picture of conflict helped stimulate public action in the form of political dissent.⁵ Publicly shared and emotively identified, it can be equated with countless photographic icons of war, natural disaster, and social revolutions, but Said’s images,

¹ (Logan 2011; BBC World Service 2011; Vargas 2011; Ahram Online 2012).

² Said’s alleged crime had been to post to YouTube a video implicating police members of their role in a drug deal. The following sources discuss the role that the memorialized Facebook page played in the mass demonstrations that came to define the Egyptian uprisings of 2011. See (Alaimo 2015) and (Khamis and Vaughn 2012).

³ See (Ali 2012; Herrera 2014).

⁴ (Muller 2014, p. 86).

⁵ Rabab El-Mahdi dismisses this media-based claim by citing three major protest cycles in the decade preceding the Egyptian Revolution: the Palestinian Second Intifada and demonstrations against the US-led invasion of Iraq in the early 2000s; the 2004–2006 prodemocracy movement demanding political diversification and specifically, restrictions on the presumed ascendancy of Gamal Mubarak; and the protests citing unfair labor systems from 2006 to 2011. See (El-Mahdi 2014, pp. 52–75).

like that of another photograph from the Egyptian revolution—known as the “girl with the blue bra”—diverge from pre-digital icons of conflict in two critical and interrelated ways. In contrast to analog-based images of conflict produced by professional photographers and subject to the editorial structures of a photojournalistic industry, the “girl with the blue bra” video still highlights the growing significance of citizen photojournalism in conflict zones. Secondly, it was the image’s digital medium that contributed to its propagation across social media platforms and in physical spaces, resulting in an unprecedented level of access and mobility. Operating in an expanded realm of digital media in which the relationships between image-maker, subject, and viewer have become far less predictable, the image is emblematic of the ways in which we encounter and engage with contemporary events of conflict. This paper examines the implications of these key differences to argue that the digital nature of “girl with the blue bra” image bore a direct impact both on public debates regarding gender norms in Egypt while contributing to the development of the country’s cultural memory of the 2011 uprising.

1. Photography, Social Media & Revolution

Before analyzing the specific image of the woman with the blue bra, it is important to outline briefly the role played by photography and social media in the 2011 Egyptian revolution. Arguably, the medium of photography’s dual capacities to document and distort can be linked to major social uprisings as far back as the 1871 Paris Commune,⁶ yet in the context of the Egyptian revolution, images and video acquired central prominence by helping advance what Marwan Kraidy has dubbed a, “hypermedia space in which “old” media like television and the newspaper join emergent media like mobile devices, social media, video on the Internet, and others to create a communication space the social and political implications of which we are only beginning to discern.”⁷ Prior to the uprisings, practices of amateur photography in public spaces (as with other forms of expression including graffiti) were largely seen as suspect, if not altogether prohibited by government forces. Amid the intensity and magnitude of the 18 days in Tahrir Square, however, photography became, in the words of artist and participant Lara Baladi, “a political act, equal in importance to demonstrating, constituting civil disobedience and defiance.”⁸ (Figure 1) Where Baladi sees citizen photojournalism as watershed moment and catalyst activating a performance of dissent in the streets, Ariella Azoulay describes the medium of photography functioning alternatively as a kind of chirographic surface recording the physical gestures of demonstrators, or the “language of revolution” in Egypt.⁹ Admittedly, events in Tahrir helped give rise to new practices and attitudes toward photography, yet its use in 2011 was not necessarily eruptive. Lina Khatib has shown that beginning in 2005, the use of individual cell phone cameras enabled members of dissident movements such as Kifaya (Arabic for “enough”) to circulate photographs exposing election fraud and violent encounters with security forces onto large banners used during demonstrations.¹⁰ Shortly thereafter, online platforms such as Flickr and individual blogs provided, “a new politics of seeing,” and a public space of accessibility to images that were excluded from state-run media sources. As many have noted, the proliferation of social media not only registered a growing sense of political dissent, but was highly influential in mobilizing action, contributing to what Khatib posits a, “reversal that transformed the citizen from a passive visual object into an empowered agent.”¹¹ From publicizing logistical information such as maps, diagrams, and meetings points, social media also allowed for the accumulation of visual data documenting abuse and memorializing those who had died in the revolution. The photograph in question here suggests, however, that citizen-produced photographs of conflict did more than provide visual records. As it

⁶ See (English 1984) and (Przyblyski 2001).

⁷ (Kraidy 2010, p. 1).

⁸ (Baladi 2014, p. 66).

⁹ (Azoulay 2011).

¹⁰ (Khatib 2013, p. 10).

¹¹ Ibid., p. 129.

circulated amid digital screens—mobile phones, social media, and satellite television—while moving physically through clenched hands of protesters crowding urban streets, the photographic image of the “girl with the blue bra” not only registered the spatio-temporal complexities of the Egyptian uprisings, it catalyzed a public discourse on gender politics and the formulation of cultural memory.



Figure 1. Lara Baladi, Tahrir Square, February 2011, used with permission from the artist.

Taking place during military action to clear a planned sit-in almost a year following the widely publicized 18-days of the revolution, the violent incident that led to the “girl with the blue bra” image was captured by an independent photographer from a distanced elevated viewpoint in Cairo’s Tahrir Square on 17 December 2011.¹² The horror of the scene unfolds as swarms of security officers rush down an unidentifiable major street off of Tahrir Square toward a group of three protesters trying to flee the area. In their attempt to break free, the two male protesters are seen pulling the female along when club-yielding security forces descend upon on them. One male manages to untether himself from the ensuing clash while officers begin swinging with ferocity their clubs as they drive the male to the ground. Although any potential editing of it cannot be verified due to the amateur source of the video, the clip released to news outlets shows fourteen seconds of the pair of protesters being separately, but repeatedly beaten and kicked before a group of four security forces hauls the female protester by her garment, or *abaya*, several feet as it is torn open and eventually pulled over her head revealing her blue brassiere undergarment. Extracted from the video’s extended context in which the brutality against both the female and male protester is made evident, the composition of the still image is significant (Figure 2). In it, the woman appears lying on the ground (many believe that by this point, she had lost consciousness) alone, her extended arms are held by masked security officials triangulated around her. Two continue to drag her while a third will immanently lodge his boot into her abdomen. The woman’s *abaya* has shrouded her entire head, effectively obscuring her identity. Despite this concealment, the image reached extensive levels of exposure across the region and internationally, becoming to many, a commanding symbol decrying persistent violence against ordinary citizens and specifically, brutality against women. Through examining the terms of production and distribution

¹² (YouTube 2017).

that frame this digital still, we can begin to understand why it emerged as an “icon” of the uprising, and how it provoked debates that roiled Egyptian society in the year following the January revolution.



Figure 2. Egyptian army soldiers arrest a female protester during clashes at Tahrir Square in Cairo. 17 December 2011. Reuters/Stringer. Used with permission.

According to Liam Kennedy and Caitlin Patrick, any study of contemporary photographs of conflict must consider the rapidly changing backdrop of photojournalism where images are conditioned by, “an ongoing blurring of the boundaries between news and entertainment, between professional and amateur journalism, and between modes and genres of photographic representation.”¹³ One way to begin to do this in the case of the “girl with the blue bra” image is to examine the work’s source of production: an independent video. Taken from a nearby building, the video from which the image emerges as a potent exemplar of citizen photojournalism on three accounts, as outlined by Mette Mortensen. As it circulated through satellite television, YouTube, and social media, it eluded not only government forces, but also the kinds of institutional frameworks or ‘old’ media filters such as editorial constraints that governed pre-digital photojournalism. Secondly, by including graphic images of violence, it challenges established codes of content considered socially appropriate and finally, owing to the lack of censorship and its graphic substance, it “lends itself to radical readings and reactions.”¹⁴ The reorientation from professional to independent in the production of video and photographic images in contexts of conflict has gained increasingly wider acceptance and validity among media outlets. This greater recognition of independent image production meant that the image would not be restricted, as it would have been prior to the uprising, to distribution on individual blogs, independent print journalism, or activist sites with a limited viewership. Rather, mainstream international satellite television sites such as CNN and Al Jazeera which exist beyond the reach of state-sponsored censorship, carried the video while citizens posted and linked to the video on social

¹³ (Kennedy and Patrick 2014, p. 3).

¹⁴ (Mortensen 2011, pp. 10–11).

media. Within this widened terrain of exposure, the image garnered a level of visibility that would not have been possible in print form. That the now infamous image was mapped across a spectrum of social, political, and popular terrains—both virtual and physical—attests to its pervasive cultural presence and its problematic position as an “icon” of the revolution.

As we probe deeper into the image’s iconic connotations, we not only begin to uncover the role this photograph of conflict plays in a shifting discourse of photojournalism, but also consider its relationship to questions of gender and representation in the Middle East. Historically rooted in a Western pictorial, often religious set of connotations, the word “icon” is also closely associated with the medium of photography and specifically to the context of photojournalism. Referring generally to an image that operates on a cultural level to convey shared ideas, emotions, issues, or circumstances beyond the moment captured on film, iconic photographs accrue significance through repeated media-based dissemination. When representing a type of conflict or atrocity, scholars agree that photographs that become iconic often share the following characteristics: they often depict women and children, often represent individuals “a world apart,” reveal some degree of physical vulnerability, and can be difficult to forget, traits that can with certainty be applied to the image in question.¹⁵ Furthermore, the terms upon which the image derives its iconicity—considerations of gender, violence, public space, and vulnerability—also serve to mirror the image’s relevance to a discourse of photographic representations depicting women from the Arab world. Compositionally striking, the subject’s vulnerable position and exposed torso recalls a visual history perpetuated by various colonial powers in the Middle East that portray Middle Eastern women as, “nameless icons of orientalist fantasies.”¹⁶ One can see how the full concealment of the subject’s face may become entangled in re-inscribing the kind of visual narratives whereby Western audiences view women in the Arab world as vulnerable and without agency through a distant and voyeuristic or often patronizing prism of power, epitomizing what Wendy Kozol describes as a, “politics of pity.”¹⁷ Understanding the spatio-temporal mobility that characterizes the “girl with the blue bra” image, however, helps advance new interpretive frameworks.

While upon first glance, the image may conform predictably to these well-worn paradigms of visibility, I’d like to consider how recent theoretical approaches to pictures of conflict have yielded valuable methods for moving beyond dualistically oriented power paradigms. For example, in her analysis of recent Associated Press photographs of Afghan women, Kozol applies Judith Butler’s notion of precarity—a recognition of a shared human vulnerability when faced with the suffering of others—to argue that we, “need to understand more fully how affects operate in a visual reportage of conflict zones.” Kozol believes that by considering the potential emotional responses a photograph may elicit, we may begin to reveal, “the unknowability of the historical conditions” of the women represented, thereby challenging the hegemonic gaze of Western media and victim narratives common to photography of women in the Arab region. Thus, by taking into account the access made possible by its digital circulation, the image of “girl with the blue bra,” opens up a range of possible interpretations beyond more conventional portrayals of women in the Middle East. Compatibly, we might think of Ariella Azoulay’s conception of the “civil contract of photography” that calls for an interpretive shift away from focusing on the photograph as a final product toward examining instead the, “infinite set of encounters” that takes into account the conditions surrounding the event of the image. Affirming that the viewing of a photograph extends beyond a simple aesthetic exercise, Azoulay emphasizes a move “away from the ethics of seeing or viewing to an ethics of the spectator.” The act of sharing the image of the “girl with the blue bra”—both digitally and physically—by citizens enacts an form of participatory engagement accordant with Azoulay’s proposition, one that allows for a range of voices to shape the discourse around gender codes and political dissent. From this perspective, the practice

¹⁵ (Batchen et al. 2012, pp. 9, 63).

¹⁶ (Deb 2016, p. 172).

¹⁷ (Kozol 2014, p. 193).

of engaging with images becomes a type of civil act.¹⁸ The image's presence across multiple platforms, in innumerable viewing positions, and within various contexts, complicates a singular, predictable system of understanding its iconicity. The impossibility of knowing precisely how many viewers across the globe engaged with the image precludes any attempt at defining a set of emotional responses, opening up what Kozol describes as the potential for, "responses that are multiple, unpredictable and not necessarily aligned with each other."¹⁹ From the proliferation of digital media technology and specifically, cell phone cameras, the rise of citizen photojournalism not only contributes to the defining principles of the Egyptian revolution, but has become pivotal to the collapse of traditional models of photojournalism. That the image in question was produced by an independent photographer and moved through innumerable sites and screens complicates previous assumptions regarding the relationships between photographer, subject, and viewer. In so doing, the image invites a new kind of civic participation while cultivating a space through which to frame a different set of questions related to iconicity, affect, and agency.

Facilitated both through social and mainstream platforms, the image's widespread virtual presence, not only eluded the kind of state-sponsored strategies of censorship that would have constrained or banned it in print but resulted in a public reckoning of gender codes within Egyptian political and social life. Scholars agree that the image was important for the ways in which it both threatened to upturn entrenched gender-based norms while exposing longstanding patterns of state-sponsored violence against ordinary citizens.²⁰ Due in large part to the graphic, "reality of the pictures," contends Sherine Hafez, the images produced from the video worked to discredit the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces' (SCAF) official claims of maintaining restraint against Egyptians during the revolution.²¹ What constituted the image's thorniest point of critique, thus propelling the image across transnational boundaries and into vigorous public discourse in Egypt, was of course, the subject's vulnerable physical position and partial nudity.²² While many expressed outrage over the barbaric treatment of the woman, some television commentators openly lampooned the female protester's forced disrobing, relying, as Hafez contends, on patterns of conspiracy theories and suspicion that often undergird patriarchal codes of dominance over women's bodies.²³ Pundits were quick to criticize the woman simply for being out in the street and demonstrating; some referred to her sexuality and veil as a kind of hoax, a premeditated exhibition of sorts. Some cast aspersions on the woman's decision to attend the protest—"Why did she ever go there?"—a seemingly diversionary, if not irrelevant question that Shereen Abouelnaga convincingly argues, "re-enacted the beliefs of the ex-regime where the 'victim' is not to be defended since she tarnished the gendered national image, because her photo spread virally across international media."²⁴ In a move that became, as Hafez asserts, "part of an exercise in state violence aimed at sociopolitical control and the reaffirmation of the state's hegemonic power over the public sphere," the Egyptian military, which had by that point, sought to preserve the image of control it had assumed following the 18 days, responded to the public debate both by denying indiscriminant violence against citizens and concomitantly shaming Tahrir's protesters.²⁵

While the image's widespread digital dissemination led to a torrent of accusations and denouncements on one hand, it also worked to subvert the overtly patriarchal conditions suppressing

¹⁸ (Azoulay 2008, 2012).

¹⁹ (Kozol 2014, p. 205).

²⁰ Although a significant degree of scholarly and popular attention has been paid to the image of "the girl with the blue bra" in the context of the Egyptian revolution, the following essays foreground the image using critical analysis and context: (Hafez 2014, p. 24; Deb 2016; Salem 2017).

²¹ (Hafez 2014, p. 24).

²² (Abouelnaga 2015, p. 46).

²³ (Hafez 2014, p. 25).

²⁴ (Abouelnaga 2015, p. 46).

²⁵ (Hafez 2014, p. 25).

the presence of the female body in public. Functioning as Basuli Deb describes, as a “counter-narrative,” that “talks back to the empire and its toxic legacies of Islamophobic representations of Muslim women,” the digitally circulated image generated both a physical and virtual mobility in the political sphere that was successful in evading the authoritative grip leaders have held over more conventional, “dangerous” print-based materials.²⁶ Similarly, in his analysis of the image, Marwan Kraidy sees the “girl with the blue bra” and the controversy that materialized by its release as emblematic of the kind of “creative insurgency” that characterized the revolutionary activism of the Egyptian uprisings. Exemplars like the “girl with the blue bra” insist on the presence of the defiant human body in the public sphere. And while, in Kraidy’s view, technology plays a prominent role in circulating challenges to authority, it is ultimately the human body that remains the “indispensable political medium.”²⁷ The image’s digital nature of dissemination thus, has a direct impact on its social function by challenging norms governing print media, complicating traditional, patriarchal interpretations, and revealing the revolutionary capacities of visual culture.

2. Activating Civic Spaces

To see the image’s significance as performed exclusively on screens, however, would fail to recognize its impact in the material dimension. The image’s social currency was bolstered by the impact it had both in online spheres as well as in the streets of Cairo; a duality of form that mirrored, in many ways, the dynamics of the revolution. Indeed, within three days of the incident that resulted in the widespread circulation of the woman with the blue bra, thousands of women gathered in Tahrir Square to protest the mistreatment of Egyptian women.²⁸ (Figure 3) As it was publicly displayed in the form of newspaper covers and homemade printed copies that women and men carried as they marched, the image of the blue bra accrued a tangible social currency in the streets of Cairo. Its presence in the street enacted a social performance of collective dissidence and asserted the visibility of the body in public space.²⁹ In doing so, the image epitomizes precisely Azoulay’s premise that, “[o]nce photographs are spoken of...they are spoken of among many, in regard to many, and obtain the power to remind citizens that what brings them together, what motivates them to look at photographs, is the common interest, the *res publica*.”³⁰ As several scholars have noted, Egypt’s 2011 political uprisings were as much shaped by virtual space as they were physical.³¹ Reflecting on the “shifting spatialities” of the revolution, Helga Tawil-Souri asserts that on one hand, revolutions must materialize in the protesting by people on the streets, yet, “place becomes less contextually important through the landscape of media.”³² In this landscape of “de-centeredness” and the rise of globalized media systems, Tawil-Souri contends, “messages emanate from across the globe, whether about national events or not, so that both the state and its opponents are influenced by and respond to wider, audiences, interests, and events.”³³ As connectivity and audiences expand, while systems of censorship and state power diminish, it helps broaden an interpretive field in which photographs like that of the woman with the blue bra can be seen as less restricted by geopolitical boundaries and inflected instead with what Azoulay proposes as, “the citizenry of photography.” Signifying, “a global form of relation that is not subject to national regimes, despite existing within their borders, and that is not entirely obedient to global logic, even as it enjoys the channels of exchange and association the latter creates,” photography in this sense becomes untethered from traditional nationalistic dictates and editorial

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ (Kraidy 2016, pp. 11, 177–81).

²⁸ (The Guardian 2011).

²⁹ For more on how the notion of the body emerges as “creative insurgency” in public space across the Arab region, see (Kraidy 2016).

³⁰ (Azoulay 2012, pp. 129–30).

³¹ See, for example, (Sadiki 2014, pp. 1–13) and (Gregory 2013).

³² (Tawil-Souri 2012, p. 162).

³³ Ibid.

constraints, and assumes instead a practice of engaged civics.³⁴ The kinds of visibility and access presented to many, but certainly not all people, by the Internet, proposes an expansion of dialogue with pictures made, viewed, and shared by ordinary individuals.

Asked to reflect on the relationship between the uprisings in Egypt and the almost concurrent protests of the Occupy movement, W.J.T. Mitchell likewise focuses on the tension between physical and virtual dimensions, arguing that the truest figure of protest is not the monuments or the people, but the *space* of occupation—both virtual and physical—that, “perhaps has been overlooked because it is hiding in plain sight.”³⁵ Mitchell refuses an exclusively rhetorical explanation of the trope of occupation, however, by making direct reference to the image of the woman in the blue bra. An iconic figure that is not to be read merely as symbolic of police brutality against the female body, instead, the image represents in Mitchell’s terms, “a flesh-and-blood human being who becomes virtual and goes viral, returning within a few days to haunt the real space of Tahrir Square as the banner of the Egyptian women’s movement.”³⁶ Significantly, the circulation of this citizen-based photograph concurrently helped give shape to a collective consciousness while reflecting the spatio-temporal dynamics of the revolution. While we have considered how it operated digitally and physically in the present-ness of the uprising, we must now examine the ways in which this iconic image of conflict might inflect how the revolution is remembered.



Figure 3. Egyptian women angered by the recent violence used against them in clashes between army soldiers and protesters, one carrying a poster with a picture of a woman that assaulted by soldiers, chant anti-military slogans during rally that ended in Tahrir Square, Cairo, Egypt Tuesday, 20 December 2011. Nasser/Nasser, Associated Press. Used with permission.

³⁴ (Azoulay 2012, pp. 130–32).

³⁵ (Mitchell 2012, p. 9).

³⁶ Ibid., p. 16.

3. Conflict and Memory

For many in Egypt and beyond, the image of the woman with the blue bra became imprinted onto a social consciousness, evoking a decisive moment in the ongoing struggles between activists, ordinary citizens, and the military-led government almost a year following the heady 18 days of early 2011. As evidenced by its widespread virtual dissemination along with its physical presence in urban demonstrations, the photograph rendered a sense of immediacy and embodied responsiveness. From activating complex online communication systems, galvanizing collective action that manifested in political protest, to memorializing lives lost in the struggle, photographs like that of the “girl with the blue bra” facilitated a fast-moving, in-the-moment, often live-fed, participatory experience of the uprisings. And yet, the image’s digital nature ensures that the incident and the public debate surrounding it would not fade from collective consciousness once news and social media cycles moved on to the next story. In fact, the image would become embedded in a broader cultural discourse framed by questions of how the revolution might be remembered and by whom.

Despite the pervasive reluctance to remember a revolution that has largely been deemed unsuccessful in yielding the kind of political change that most had hoped for in the “Arab Spring,” notable archival efforts have signaled an openness to the construction of a cultural memory of the revolution. The range and scope of initiatives committed to memorializing the revolution—academic archives, personal blogs, formal monuments positioned within Tahrir Square, and even the establishment by Egypt’s National Archives’ of a “Committee to Document the January 25 Revolution”—point to a shared interest in documenting and commemorating the revolution. Reflecting the digitally inflected nature of the uprisings, many of the archival projects underway in Egypt represent virtual technologies that, as Judy Barsalou indicates, serve as, “platforms on which different versions of history do battle daily.”³⁷ In a context where distinctions between official narratives and citizens recollections of the uprisings remain contested and voices of opposition continue to face state-led resistance, the act of collective, public remembrance becomes fraught with risk. Moreover, although the social impulse to collectively memorialize major political movements is certainly not without centuries of precedent, the development of a cultural memory in the aftermath of the Egyptian uprisings is particularly important in the hyper-saturated image-oriented digital spaces of the Internet. As Astrid Erll posits, “the digital revolution confronts us with the paradoxical connection of unprecedented medial storage capabilities and the looming danger of cultural amnesia. Choosing and appropriating that which is worth remembering, however, becomes ever more difficult in the face of the sheer mass of digital information.”³⁸ In this expanded landscape, what role might iconicity play in the future? If photographs like those of Emmitt Till have come to structure our understanding of social movements like that of the US Civil Rights movement in the mid-Twentieth Century, what impact might digital, citizen-produced and -shared photography have on our collectively remembering current conflicts?

In 1925, Maurice Halbwachs foregrounded his influential concept of collective memory. Grounded in sociological inquiry and based partly on the work of Émile Durkheim, Halbwachs’s theory rests on the premise that individuals’ memories are not experienced in isolation from social networks. Memory in this sense must be understood as both socially conditioned and part of an actively changing process, one that reflects a society’s ability to, “recall, recognize, and localize their memories.”³⁹ Foundational to the field of memory studies that emerged in the early 1970s, Halbwachs’s theory has been adapted into a range of disciplinary contexts including cultural studies where Jan Assmann has articulated a related concept known as cultural memory. Distinct from collective memory in that it, “is exteriorized, objectified, stored away in symbolic forms that, unlike the sounds of words or

³⁷ (Barsalou 2012).

³⁸ (Erll 2011, pp. 4–5).

³⁹ (Halbwachs 1992, p. 38).

sights of gestures, are stable and situation-transcendent,” cultural memory is facilitated by “external objects—dishes, feasts, rites, images, stories and other texts.”⁴⁰ For Assmann (and for Halbwachs), the idea of shared memory is not characterized by the authoritative fixedness we might associate with history, but remains malleable; in cultural memory, “the past is not preserved as such but is cast in symbols as they are represented . . . and as they are continually illuminating a changing present.”⁴¹ In other words, the idea of cultural memory inflects a temporal set of conditions in which the past can only be interpreted through the present. American Studies scholar Alan Trachtenberg reinforces this point in his study of the relationship between photography and cultural memory in the context of the U.S. Civil War. Trachtenberg writes that, “the framing of visual memory can have major consequences on how people identify shared historical culture.”⁴² And while ‘reminding objects’ such as photographs may serve as emotional visual prompts eliciting shared recollections, they do not in their own right constitute memory; instead, as Assmann suggests, they, “carry memories which we have invested into them.”⁴³ In this way, as latent symbols, photographs become integrated into cultural memory through what Trachtenberg identifies as, “deliberate acts of will and purpose.”⁴⁴ In the case of the blue bra image, then, we can read its presence and afterlife in both virtual and physical levels as beginning to establish a cultural memory of the revolution.

Reflecting its ongoing significance as an object of cultural memory, the “afterlife” of the image was registered in the stenciled graffiti work of many street artists. Among them are Bahia Shehab, the street artist who goes by El-Teneen, and the graffiti artist Ganzeer.⁴⁵ For the purposes of this essay, I discuss the work of Shehab and El-Teneen; Ganzeer’s graphics related to the blue bra appeared two years following the incident in the form of visual prints and were thus, not immediately responsive to the circumstances that led to a national reckoning of gender and the protesting body nor tied to the physical sites of the revolution in Egypt. Driven by an urgency to remind Egyptians, “of our shame as a nation when we allow a veiled woman to be stripped and beaten on the street,” street artist, designer, and art historian Bahia Shehab, responded to the December 2011 incident with a recurring graphic tag that through its size, text, and context, functions as a key indicator of cultural memory in the immediacy of the conflict. (Figure 4) Producing a simple yet immediately discernable stencil that approximates the size of an average female body, Shehab included below it a template outlining a shoe within which the words, “long live a peaceful revolution” appear. Alluding directly to the iconic image, Shehab completes the stencil with a vibrant blue spray paint while merging the outline of the bra with that of a shoe sole, a decision that underscores the photograph’s recognizable “decisive moment” when the security force member’s foot hovers menacingly over the woman’s torso, its swift descent upon her unconscious body imminent. In bold regularized Arabic characters, the text, “No to stripping the people,” pictorially unites the bra with the Arabic word signifying “no,” its shape mirroring the bra’s contours.⁴⁶ In an interview with the Louisiana Channel, Shehab insists, “[m]y work is more concerned with memory . . . Because of the intensity and the speed of events, people tend to

⁴⁰ (Assmann 2010, pp. 110–11).

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 113.

⁴² (Trachtenberg 2008, p. 125).

⁴³ (Assmann 2010, p. 111).

⁴⁴ (Trachtenberg 2008, p. 125).

⁴⁵ The artist Ganzeer produced in 2014 works that respond to the image through the format of prints, rather than on the streets of Cairo as in the case of Shehab and El-Teneen. Available online: <http://www.ganzeer.com/post/158156704954/title-of-course-blue-bra-lady-date-august-2014> (accessed on 24 August 2017).

⁴⁶ For Shehab, the word “no” evoked a resistance that extended beyond the beatings of women in the street. In 2010, the year preceding the Egyptian uprisings, a curator from Germany’s Haus Der Kunst had invited Shehab to contribute to an exhibition focused on work by women artists from the Arab region in which the stated prerequisite was the exclusive use of the Arabic language in her work. In response to what Shehab recognized as a methodological practice rooted in typecasting of “Arab artists” by a dominant Western art world, Shehab replied, “no”—both rhetorically and aesthetically. Her text-image series titled, “A Thousand Times NO: the Visual History of Lam-Alif” visually articulates one thousand iterations of the Arabic word “no” or “la,” found in historic texts from Spain to China. Email correspondence with the author, 12 August 2017, and (Shehab 2012).

forget.” Describing her work as a form of documentation, the artist seeks to remind passersby, “of what is happening and why it is happening,” thereby acknowledging the power of visual forms and by extension, of photography, to the processes of collective remembrance.⁴⁷

In a contemporaneous evocation of the photograph, Egyptian street artist El-Teneen combines the symbol of the blue bra with the Arabic letter *tha'*, signifying the word *thawra* or revolution, on the corner of a public wall in the Cairene suburb of Heliopolis. (Figure 5) If Shehab’s work excises the symbol of the bra from the photographic referent, El-Teneen has reintegrated the symbol onto a female figure in the form of a super hero depicted in mid-flight. Below the image reads the Arabic text, “it continues.” Not only do the visual imprints of police brutality in these two examples signify an act of resistance by constituting a form of expression previously prohibited on the streets of Cairo, but on a broader cultural level, they point to the act of reclaiming a commanding symbol. If the image of the woman in the blue bra may have conjured in the minds of (distant) viewers’ conventional connotations of despair and voyeurism, in the hands of street artists, the image becomes a multivalent and unmistakably identifiable site of resistance. Moreover, the choice to affix phrases such as, “long live a peaceful revolution” and “it continues,” bears out one of the most vital characteristics of cultural memory. By engaging a form of expression distinguished by its *immediacy* or here-and-now-ness to refer to a *past* event in visual form while pointing to the *future* through text, the graffiti of the blue bra embody notion of temporality, or how we remember the past in the present while foreseeing a future.



Figure 4. Bahia Shehab, “No to Stripping the People,” 2011, used with permission from the artist.

⁴⁷ (Shehab 2014).



Figure 5. El-Teneen, Supergirl Blue Bra, Heliopolis, Cairo, 2011.

Notwithstanding the now-well recognized public spaces such as Mohamed Mahmoud Street and the area near Tahrir Square close to the American University in Cairo where some of the most elaborate murals took shape, most of the graffiti commenting on the revolution in Egypt's major cities has been removed or painted over.⁴⁸ Yet as many have shown and a cursory google image search will reveal, the street art's resonance persists digitally. As Marwan Kraidy explains, "graffiti are difficult to track and document; they require local knowledge and a quotidian haunting of the street where stencils are printed, subverted, deformed, erased and restored; where they disappear from one site only to multiply in others; fade away from walls to linger on blogs and Facebook pages."⁴⁹ Echoing this quality of transience, ephemerality and effacement, Bahia Shehab indicates that even though, "the government can resist you . . . with a camera and an internet connection, it's a completely different ball game now."⁵⁰ Examining the image's afterlife as it played out in street art and on the Internet, underscores the ways in which cultural memory becomes enacted through the very means that produced the image of the woman with blue bra. The cell phone camera represents a tool for recording both the events of the conflict as they take place and their multifarious iterations in a digital sphere. In exploring the concept of cultural memory as it relates to shifting forms of media, Aleida and Jan Assmann posit:

We are currently facing, reconstructing, and discussing new forms of memory that open up an access to the past that is distinct from and complementary to that which is provided by historical scholarship. Living memory thus gives way to a cultural memory that is underpinned by media-material carriers such as memorials, monuments, museums, and archives.⁵¹

In this way, we can see that the mobility of digital imagery renders Internet spaces critical communicative sites for the development and negotiation of cultural memory. Referring to an analogous if not more barbaric instance, Mette Mortensen points to the images/objects that sprung from the graphic and widely circulated video depicting Neda Agha Soltan who died in the midst of the 2009 Iranian post-election demonstrations. As a result of the citizen photojournalistic images

⁴⁸ (Naguib 2016, p. 23).

⁴⁹ (Kraidy 2013, p. 3).

⁵⁰ (Shehab 2014).

⁵¹ (Assmann and Assmann 2011, p. 6).

circulated on social media, both the material and virtual objects—the victim’s face on posters carried in demonstrations, T-shirts produced, ordinary citizens’ substituting their Facebook profile pictures for that of Neda—accorded with what Mortensen identifies as the, “emergence of a memorial culture online.”⁵² Likewise, as the image of the woman with the blue bra traversed innumerable personal Facebook pages, Twitter feeds, and the hands of protesters, it gained recognition in a collective consciousness, as a source of cultural memory in the making, while raising a fundamental question about the convergence between public and private platforms of visibility.

Yet, its digital presence, experienced both through the video still and related graffiti online, guards against a certain degree of cultural forgetting. As mainstream news cycles, Twitter feeds, and other social media posts perpetuate processes of continuous change resulting in a possible cultural amnesia related to the revolution, it becomes possible to see how images of the woman with the blue bra, its graffiti-based renderings, and lingering presence in digital archives proposes a sense of continuity and development of cultural remembrance. With the proliferation of digital media and specifically, cell phone cameras, the rise of citizen photojournalism has called for a reassessment of traditional models of photojournalism. While it may seem restrictive to examine a single image in relation to these changes, it is precisely this kind of image, an icon of the Egyptian revolution, that represents more than a fetishistic symbol of a victimized female body. Within the public spaces of Tahrir Square and surrounding areas in which questions of citizenry, human rights, and political activism were being actively contested, the photograph of the blue bra reflected the widespread indignation felt immediately following the incident and thereby evoked a renewed sense of agency and visibility for thousands. That its influence continued to be performed in the streets, through its visual afterlife, and in the digital sphere testifies to the significance of citizen-based photographs equally as critical sites of resistance and powerful markers of cultural memory in the collective expression political dissent.

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⁵² (Mortensen 2011, p. 7).

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