CMC Senior Theses   CMC Student Scholarship

2020

Visualizing Participatory Politics: The Communal Power of Street Art in Revolutionary Egypt, Warring Syria, and Divided Lebanon

Erin Baranko
Claremont McKenna College

Claremont McKenna College

Visualizing Participatory Politics:
The Communal Power of Street Art in Revolutionary Egypt, Warring Syria, and Divided
Lebanon

Submitted to
Professor Heather Ferguson

by
Erin Baranko

for
Senior Thesis
Fall 2019 - Spring 2020
May 11, 2020

Acknowledgements

I would like to extent my sincere thanks to Professor Heather Ferguson—an advisor on much more than this thesis. This thesis would not be possible without her continued guidance, wisdom, and compassion. Thank you for teaching me to be reflective and intentional, in writing and in life.

Thank you to my family for cultivating my love of learning. I am infinitely grateful to my parents for the sacrifices they have made to provide me the opportunity to study my passions at Claremont McKenna College.

To my friends and peers, thank you for believing in this project and in me. In particular, I would like to thank Zoey and Lena for their unwavering friendship and my thesis cohort for being a well of creativity and support.

Finally, thank you to the artists—those known and unknown. I am humbled by the privilege to write about their lives and their work.

Table of Contents

Abstract

This thesis examines the role of street art in the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 in order to investigate the extent to which the political struggle was also a visual struggle. Through analysis of murals and graffiti, it seeks to address how revolutionary politics are created, consumed, and witnessed in images. In Egypt, protesters created street art that coopted public space in order to circumvent the state's authority and subvert the state's legitimacy. Due to its accessible nature, street art also democratized the protest process, facilitating a truly popular revolutionary movement. In Syria, citizens used satire to confront the state's brutality and challenge the unequal power dynamics between the regime and the people. In Lebanon, artists created work that transcended sectarian, national, and regional borders in an effort to cultivate reconciliation, community responsibility, and global solidarity. This thesis argues that the creation, alteration, and dissemination of images gave voice to citizen collectivities in their struggle against the state. It argues that art is a meaningful form of participatory politics and community engagement.

Preface

I never imagined I would be writing this thesis, and, at times, I never imagined I would finish this thesis. This thesis is, in large part, borne out of my experience in a history course at Claremont McKenna College taught by Professor Heather Ferguson called "Nations, Nationalism, and the Global Middle East." Through the instruction, materials, and conversations of this course, I was encouraged to reexamine my understandings of many of the structures and institutions that shape our lives—namely, the nation-state and citizenship. From Hannah Arendt to Benedict Anderson, we studied the historical and theoretical underpinnings of these concepts, investigating how citizens encounter and interact with the state apparatus and charting the constantly shifting power dynamics from one historical moment to the next. My understanding of revolutionary practices, social movements, collective action, creativity, surveillance, and public space began to shift.

This was the context in which I first read "Beeshu's Laugh: The Arts of Satire in the Syrian Uprising" by Stephennie Mulder. This article, which I will revisit in Chapter II, examines the cynical and self-mocking art created during the Syrian uprising in 2011. Mulder argues that, despite their dark nature, these art forms *actually* served to create agency and empower the Syrian people. I had never before quite realized the magnitude of cultural production and its influence on communities and their collective identity. Thus, Mulder destabilized my assumptions about power, agency, and resistance as traditionally and predominately political acts. "Beeshu's Laugh" sparked an array of questions, some of which I spent nearly a year attempting to answer.

This is a thesis about the people, as a collective, and their public art. A series of questions drives this inquiry: how is revolutionary politics created, consumed, and witnessed in images? To what extent is the political struggle a visual struggle? If both politics and art are the performances of representational power, how are they enacted through spatialized processes?

In response to these queries, this thesis presents a series of three case studies—revolutionary Egypt, warring Syria, and divided Lebanon. In each chapter, I investigate the ways in which street art is used to articulate the people's experiences and express their desires. The images form the heart of this thesis. While they are embedded in political contexts and presented against the backdrop of historical legacies, I have attempted to center the role of the people and their art. While I cannot possibly capture the breadth of artwork produced, I intentionally chose images that I believe are illustrative of the themes that emerge in each nation.

This thesis is meant to serve as an intervention in traditional modes of understanding the Arab region and the Arab Uprisings. Faced with an outpouring of scholarship that focuses on the transition of political power from one elite cohort to another—oftentimes facilitated by foreign governments and their neo-imperialist ventures—it is all the more urgent that we study the arts of the uprisings. Art functions as an alternative lens through which to understand the experiences of citizens, the struggle between the citizenry and the state, and the power of collective action. This is a thesis celebrating the liberating power of ground-up social movements, collective action, and truly revolutionary historical moments—all of which found their voice in the arts.

Introduction

Public Art and the Political Struggle

"A good mural is one that talks to the citizens surrounding it;

it becomes part of the city and it becomes theirs, not the artist's."

–Yazan Halwani, Lebanese street artist

In late 2010 and throughout 2011, millions of ordinary people throughout the Middle East mobilized and organized in mass protest, a phenomenon which the international media quickly dubbed the "Arab Spring." While protesters took to the streets to demand that specific authoritarian leaders relinquish power and transfer it to the people, the revolutions were also a product of the longer historical trajectory of the region. In popular discourse, the story of the political and social uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) began with the self-immolation of Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi in 2010.[1] However, the turmoil of late 2010 and early 2011 was actually the culmination of decades of social inequality created by global interference and "liberalizing" market economies, compounded by brutal policing perpetuated by authoritarian regimes in the region. The uprisings were part of a global historical context, inextricably tied to the legacy of colonialism, the imposition of

---

[1] MENA is a popular shorthand for the region of the Middle East and North Africa. The term Middle East is geographically ambiguous and Eurocentric. While alternatives such as West Asia and North Africa, abbreviated as WANA, have been proposed, such terms have not yet become part of the vernacular. For the purposes of this thesis, I will intermittently use the term MENA to refer to the region in question because the term remains the most prominently used by most organizations, academia, and political entities.

artificial boundaries, post-colonial efforts to restructure the nation, the consequential consolidation of power within authoritarian regimes, and the continued intervention of foreign governments.

Historical Background

Before contemporary nation-states existed, the Ottoman Empire dominated the region. The Ottomans began as one of many nomadic principalities in central Anatolia, but by the Battle of Bapheus in 1301, proved themselves as a powerful military force and a rapidly growing empire maintained through a centralized administration. At its height in the sixteenth century, the Empire spanned three continents—reaching from the outskirts of Vienna to Algeria, by way of the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula. Because the Empire encompassed such a large geographic region, it was "a vast mosaic of peoples, a living museum of physical types, belief systems, languages, and cultures."[2] The Ottoman administration practiced a policy of tolerance of most religious and ethnic identities in order to focus their attention on military, economic, and territorial gains.

After the reign of Süleyman the Magnificent from 1520 to 1566, the Empire began to shift and constrict—especially marked by a failed attempt to capture the city of Vienna in 1683. The stagnation of expansion occurred in tandem with political unrest and economic concerns, as the Empire witnessed an upsurge in political participation and dispersion of power. Meanwhile, between 1830 and 1870 in particular, European imperialists amassed colonial influence in the region, namely: the French in North Africa,

---

[2] Lawrence Davidson and Arthur Goldschmidt, "Introduction," *A Concise History of the Middle East,* 9th ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2010), 11.

Lebanon, and Syria and the British in Egypt, Iraq, Palestine and Iran. The Ottoman

Empire was formally dissolved at the end of World War I, when the Central Powers fell

in 1918. Britain and France seized this opportunity to implement a mandate system which

invented regions separated by artificial state boundaries, thus creating a situation in

which physical boundaries were not always aligned with collective consciousness.

Similarly, Egypt technically gained independence from British colonial rule in 1922, but

Britain retained power over matters of defense and foreign policy, effectively creating a

puppet government in Egypt. Thus, European colonial administrations dismantled the

Ottoman Empire and imported the concept of the nation-state to draw new borders,

creating the map of the Middle East that exists today.

The fracturing of the diverse empire into nation-states along artificial borders and

the enduring colonial presence irreparably shaped the consequent history of the Middle

East. The new nation-states were drawn "to serve European imperial interests" in the

region.[3] In fact, the manufactured borders "imposed conditions that were ill-suited to the

needs of the region's inhabitants."[4] In many areas, the European-imposed borders

separated ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups, while also consolidating distinct groups

under the guise of a common national identity. Ever since, Arab leaders "have had to

cope with the consequence of those borders."[5] The uprisings across various Middle

Eastern nations in 2011 was a phenomenon entrenched in the legacy of colonialism,

---

[3] William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, "The 2011 Arab Uprisings and Their Aftermath," *A History of the Modern Middle East,* 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 554.
[4] Cleveland and Bunton, 554.
[5] Ibid.

violence, and state-making projects; it was a product of a much larger historical context than only the twenty-first century.

The process of decolonization in the latter half of the twenty-first century also contributed to creating the particular political and social context from which the 2011 uprisings eventually arose. Following the Second World War, resistance to colonial control and burgeoning nationalist movements coalesced, resulting in the formation of new government systems and independent nations. As with colonization, the transition to post-colonial nation-states was a volatile and violent moment in the history of many Middle Eastern and North African nations; for example, Algeria won independence from the France through an eight-year war in which somewhere between 90,000 and 300,000 people perished.

In the post-colonial period, newly independent countries harnessed a nationalist agenda to establish new political structures to organize society and meet the needs of the population. This "first wave of reformers," as William L. Cleveland describes them, attempted to restructure society to more fairly distribute national resources and economic opportunity.[6] In the 1950s and 60s, many nations established social programs, such as welfare programs to aid the most vulnerable citizens, land reforms to redistribute ownership, and increased expenditures on educational opportunities. Similarly, many transformed their economies into planned economies, wherein the government acts as the central planner that controls or owns the means of production. For example, as President of Egypt, Gamal Nasser instituted social programs, such as free health care, which targeted the most vulnerable strata. Additionally, he grew the national economy through

---

[6] Ibid., 555.

modernization projects such as the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956. However, over the next several decades, it became increasingly clear that many of these initiatives had fallen short of their goal to meet the socioeconomic demands of the people.

In the 1970s and 80s, succeeding generations of Arab leaders adopted free-market strategies, which appeared to improve economies superficially, but in reality, "resulted in crony capitalism."[7] As a result, elites strengthened their grip on political and economic power, while middle and lower class citizens struggled. Reduced expenditures on social programs like education, health care, and housing, coupled with soaring costs of food and everyday items, generated economic turmoil; the undemocratic transfer of power (sometimes even passed down through the family) and the consolidation of power within a single political party revealed the extent to which the public was excluded from political participation; and, the increasing presence of security and policing mechanisms solidified the presence of authoritarian regimes. The failure of post-colonial governments to actualize their national projects led to widespread disillusionment on the part of the people. As historian William L. Cleveland succinctly states, from the 1950s onward, it became increasingly clear that "the political promise of independence had vanished."[8]

The uprisings of 2011 were a culmination of historical moments and legacies ranging from the early nineteenth century to the twenty-first: imperial pursuits in the Ottoman Empire, followed by the dismemberment of the Empire and division into nation-states according to European interests, in which emerging leaders and their successors were unable to adequately uphold the promises of the national project, and the devolution

---

[7] Ibid., 539.
[8] Ibid., 555.

of those government systems into single-party authoritarian regimes. Thus, the precise historical moment in which the uprisings occurred was a product of decades of global political ineptitude and economic turmoil compounded by the failure to grapple with the insidious aftershocks of colonialism. The revolutions, while rooted in historical legacies, articulated distinct demands for economic improvements, civil and political freedoms, and social justice.

Street Art in Protest

As suppression of political activism escalated—especially activism through labor unions, political parties, and religious movements—art became a medium for protest. During the Arab uprisings, one of the multitude of ways protesters articulated their demands for political and social reform was through the use of public art. Activists harnessed their creativity to use the surfaces of the city as a canvas for graffiti and murals. The art produced ranged in topic from critiques of specific leaders and regimes, to calls for collective action, to satirical quips recognizing the complicity of the public, to desperate pleas for peace and nonviolence. Many of these artworks surfaced on the internet and were picked up by an international audience, both throughout the region and beyond.

This thesis will explore the role of public art in protest in the Middle East and North Africa, particularly during the period of popular revolution in the early twenty-first century. The project will address such questions as: What visual forms did protest take during the Arab uprisings? What were the purposes and implications of using art as a form of protest? Why was art a significant weapon for political and social reform? These

questions capture the ways in which many activists drew upon collective experiences of political disenfranchisement, socioeconomic inequality, and violent policing to create art that co-opted public space and facilitated transnational solidarity. In doing so, they asserted a cultural identity that existed outside of the state and inspired an imagining of social change, resulting in the democratization of the revolutions and a decrease in the legitimacy of the state and its authority over the public. From this phenomenon, four main themes emerge: the capacity of street art to subvert state authority, democratize the protest process, challenge state-sponsored violence, and facilitate transnationalism. This thesis analyzes examples of street art in Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon in the early twenty-first century, situating art and artistic movements within each nation's unique political context, in order to elucidate these four main themes.

Theoretical Grounding

Before examining specific pieces of street art, we must establish a foundation of theoretical frameworks that illuminate the interlocking nature of history, art, politics, and power—all of which require us to consider the political and social implications of public space and the movement of bodies within that space. This section will address three areas of theory: first, the relationship between art and politics; second, the political dimensions of public space; and third, the dynamics of gender in regards to issues of the individual and the state. These theoretical frameworks will allow us to conceptualize how these elements intersect and play out in the streets of Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon.

Art and Politics

The relationship between art and politics is dynamic, multifaceted, and often dependent on the political and cultural environment under consideration. Several common themes emerge, however, from an examination of scholarly work on the subject. First, the relationship between art and politics is reciprocal—each depends on and influences the other. As Sarah H. Awad and Brady Wagoner explain in *Street Art of Resistance,* "politics builds on art just as much as art is guided by political values and discourses".[9] Awad and Wagoner clarify that *all* art is political, even if it is not the artist's intention to make a political statement, because all artistic expression relies on those politically influenced "values and discourses".[10] This brings us to our second point: art and politics are inextricably linked. In *Image Politics in the Middle East,* Lina Khatib argues that the political struggle "is an inherently visually productive process"[11] This means that images are central to political struggles and, conversely, politics are central to the production and interpretation of images. The claim that all art is political is easier to see and accept than the latter claim (that all politics is art). This thesis seeks to argue that politics is in itself a form of art because it is a struggle over representation, depiction, and visibility.

Due to its reciprocal and inherent qualities, political art successfully produces a cognitive reaction in viewers, cultivating an imaginative mindset and laying the groundwork for collective action. Awad and Wagoner argue that, unlike other forms of

---

[9] Sarah H. Awad and Brady Wagoner, "Introducing the *Street Art of Resistance*," *Street Art of Resistance,* eds. Sarah H. Awad & Brady Wagoner (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 20.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Lina Khatib, "Introduction: The Visual in Political Struggle," *Image Politics in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 2013), 1.

political discourse, art's aesthetic qualities produce "a kind of 'aura' that lures us to it, that arrests us, affects us, and provokes us to thought".[12] Street art is particularly effective because of its location in highly trafficked and significant urban locations, its often massive size, and the pointed commentary that it provides on an aspect of the citizens' lived experiences within the social, cultural, and political environment. Thus, viewing street art is an engaging and immersive experience for on-lookers, that elicits a kind of "total organic resonance".[13] Awad and Wagoner argue that this resonance operates on several levels: "emotionally, it can be experienced as cathartic and inspire a variety of emotional states from outrage to hope"; "socially, it encourages participation and solidarity"; and, "cognitively, it opens up new perspectives for action".[14] Thus, street art operates on a micro level to produce change within individual minds and on a macro level to inspire collective action—an essential precondition for protest. Art is not only a product, but also is a form of activism—specifically, creative activism. As we shall see further on in this thesis, art is not auxiliary to protest movements, but rather, a central component of political and social change.

Lastly, the relationship between art and politics contains a spatialized element, which is tied to power. As Khatib established, art and politics are both *performances* of representational power. For street art, however, we must consider the added component of spatiality. In *Political Aesthetics,* Crispin Sartwell presents his theory of "political aesthetics," in which he argues that political systems are not only *textual* doctrines, but

---

[12] Awad and Wagoner, 71.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., 30.

rather, are also "aesthetic environments".[15] Because all politics are aesthetic, he purports

that scholars must include an analysis of "aesthetic features," such as design and

configuration, in political theory.[16] The kind of primary sources used in this thesis—street

art borne out of specific political systems—is a prime example of a study where

Sartwell's theory is applicable. Sartwell defines politics as the "place where the power is

transacted or shaped".[17] Given this, and given that all politics are aesthetic, as Sartwell

claims, then political aesthetics must be present at "sites were power is negotiated and

distributed, and public or social identities are constituted or articulated".[18] In other words,

sites of politics are sites of art—both of which are sites of power. Because political power

is represented in design, shape, and form in public places, the street artist asserts power.

As the artist lays claim to alter the design, shape, and form of spaces, his or her actions

are also imbued with political significance. Thus, Sartwell's theoretical perspective

further illustrates the notion that street art is a courageous form of political activism.

Public Space

        The ways in which the reciprocal and inherent relationship between art and

politics plays out in a spatialized landscape brings us to our second theoretical

framework: the development and structure of public space. In order to examine the

political nature of street art in twenty-first century Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon, we must

first consider the physical context of the artwork. A major element of street art's impact

---

[15] Crispin Sartwell, "Introduction: The Idea of Political Aesthetics," *Political Aesthetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 10.
[16] Sartwell, 7-8.
[17] Ibid., 9.
[18] Ibid., 10.

is the fact that it co-opts public space. Thus, we must consider the role of public space in shaping the social and political landscapes of the urban community in which the art exists.

Since the 1960's, philosophers have produced a great body of academic work that explores theories of public space. In 1962, Jürgen Habermas published *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* in which he investigated the origins of what he deemed the *bourgeois public sphere*. Prior to the emergence of this phenomenon in the eighteenth century, the public sphere was simply the sphere of *public authority*, which took the form of "continuous state activity" through the "continuity of contact" with those engaged in the exchange of commodities and labor.[19] In other words, "'public' in this narrower sense was synonymous with 'state-related'".[20] Because the public realm was dominated and controlled by the state, citizens were "the private people" who were "merely subject to" and "negatively defined by" this state authority.[21] Thus, citizens were, by nature of the way in which the state was constructed and functioned, "excluded from any share in public authority".[22] In this sense, Habermas is no revolutionary; many theorists before and after his time agree that the nation-state is a concept predicated on the exclusion of certain groups, such as Hannah Arendt, who we will encounter later in this thesis. However, Habermas's incorporation of public space into this discussion is unique.

---

[19] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989), 18.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.

It was from this exclusionary environment that the bourgeois public sphere emerged in the eighteenth century. Habermas argues that the bourgeois public sphere "may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public".[23] In this new public sphere, the people compelled public authority (i.e. the state) "to legitimate itself before public opinion".[24] As private individuals were incorporated into the public sphere, the state bore an element of accountability to the people. Citizens demanded a voice in shaping public authority, thus transforming the public sphere into a forum where the governing of public exchanges and public-private relations could be debated.[25] In this seminal work, Habermas traces how the public sphere evolved from a narrow state-centered concept to a broader definition that was dually comprised of top-down state authority and bottom-up collective participation.

Habermas sets up the confrontational relationship between the state and the citizens, describing how each group wrestles for control over public space, public authority, and thus, power. This relationship is important moving forward, as we encounter citizens who, through artistic means, acted as agents of change by co-opting state-dominated public space, thus inherently challenging the state's right to control that public space, and consequentially, decreasing the legitimacy of the state apparatus itself. While Habermas' work is primarily a theoretical and conceptual endeavor viewed through a prism of economic thought, he nonetheless illuminates how the landscape of space played a role in the development of modern life.

---

[23] Ibid., 27.
[24] Ibid., 25.
[25] Ibid., 27.

As Habermas interrogated public-ness, he raised new questions about how public relations played out in spatial ways, and thus, how space shaped public relations. Habermas's work catalyzed other philosophers to study the role of public space, particularly urban geography. For many decades, geography was thought of as something that existed in the background and had some influence on our lives, but remained outside of the ways in which society was constructed. Habermas paved the way for others who sought to bring the consideration of public space into philosophical and academic pursuits. The subsequent landmark philosopher of public space, Henri Lefebvre, accomplished this through his examination of what he called "social space."

In 1974, Lefebvre investigated the ways in which space is produced and used in society, both historically and at the time of his writing. In the introduction to *The Production of Space*, he outlines his goal to "expose the actual production of space by bringing the various kinds of space and the modalities of their genesis together within a single theory".[26] Lefebvre's lofty goal rests on the central argument that "(social) space is a (social) product".[27] In other words, every public space is crafted, whether intentionally or simply as a by-product of societal processes, by society. Lefebvre identifies three implications of this argument. First, that "(physical) natural space is disappearing".[28] As societies grow, spaces transform through urbanization. Second, that "every society…produces a space, its own space".[29] Each society, including the multiple unique sub-societies that exist within the larger society (i.e. a nation, a city, a neighborhood), has

[26] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 16.
[27] Ibid., 30.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid., 31.

a unique relationship to space and shapes that space in specific and meaningful ways. And third, that "if space is a product, our knowledge of it must be expected to reproduce and expound the process of production".[30] By this statement, Lefebvre argues that we must give more critical attention to the production of space, not just space itself, in considering how power relations are produced and re-produced.

Inherent in Lefebvre's third implication is also the assertion that the process of production and the product itself are two inseparable aspects of space. A space contains within it both the past and the present. The history of a space, meaning "sense of what happened at a particular spot or place and thereby changed it—all of this becomes inscribed in space".[31] Nonetheless, the space exists in the present as "an immediate whole, complete with association and connections in their actuality".[32] With this assertion that a space contains both the past and the present, the product and the process, Lefebvre moves us closer to the issue at hand in this thesis: public art. Just as Lefebvre writes about space, a piece of street art is "an immediate whole" that addresses an issue in this particular moment in history; yet, the same art piece also interacts with the past via its location in a particular public space, and thus, all that happened in that space. Furthermore, public art is important both as an artistic product and as a creative process. The product itself has value—whether by critiquing a regime, generating a discourse, or inspiring collective imagination; *and,* the process of the art's creation has value because the artist made a deliberate choice to co-opt public space and thus confront state authority. It is crucial to give due consideration to not only the art itself, but also the act

---

[30] Ibid., 36.
[31] Ibid., 37.
[32] Ibid.

of creating the art because space as a *process* contains within it the mechanisms by which power relations are produced and re-produced. It is these power relations that artists struggle to re-define.

Lefebvre, perhaps the single most influential theorist of public space, changed the landscape of academia with the publication of *The Production of Space.* But as we edged towards the turn of the century, academics had more to say about the role of urbanization and public space. In 1985, David Harvey traced the history of the commodification of space in *Consciousness & The Urban Experience*, arguing that the rise of the transportation and communication industries during the nineteenth century was the precise historical moment in which space and power became related.[33] More specifically, in modern urban societies, social power is derived from "command over money, command over space, and command over time".[34] Through the domination of these three separate but overlapping sources of power, a state can continually reproduce its own authority, edging closer and closer to the modern surveillance state. Harvey's argument that command over space is a form of power thus begs the question: "In whose image and to whose benefit is space to be shaped?"[35] He argues that from the nineteenth century onward, "the capacity to appropriate space freely" has become an "important and vital freedom," and thus, restrictions on this freedom sparks uprisings and revolutions.[36] Attempts to liberate public space from state control and domination characterize urban protest movements and community struggles. This situation has produced what Harvey

---

[33] David Harvey, *Consciousness and the Urban Experience* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1985), 13.
[34] Ibid., 1.
[35] Ibid., 13.
[36] Ibid., 18.

sees as "a permanent tension" between, on the one hand, the "*appropriation*" of urban

space by and for members of the public, and on the other hand, the "*domination"* of

urban space by the state in order to solidify social hierarchies.[37] Harvey further articulates

Habermas' positioning of the state against the citizens, applying his theoretical ideas to a

distinctly urban and modern environment. Harvey's exploration of this permanent tension

will factor heavily into our discussion of public art created by citizens in the throes of

revolution and the state's attempt to regulate such creative forms of protest.

Building Harvey's assertion that space and power are related, Edward Soja

focuses on the social hierarchies that are manifested in and reproduced by the

organization and domination of space. Soja recognizes that the spatial organization of

modern urban life has significantly contributed to, if not caused, inequalities among

races, classes, and genders, and thus, suggests an examination of spatiality as a potential

route to solutions. In his 2010 book, *Seeking Spatial Justice,* Soja argues that justice, too,

has "a *consequential geography,* a spatial expression."[38] Thus, the organization of public

space has the potential to shape society in a just or an unjust way, what Soja calls "the

spatiality of (in)justice".[39] By incorporating a spatial perspective into our study of the

world, we can "make better theoretical and practical sense of how social justice is

created, maintained, and brought into question."[40] Particularly, spatial justice takes the

form of "collective struggles to achieve more equitable access of all residents to the

social resources and advantages that the city provides."[41] Soja's study thus focuses on the

---

[37] Ibid., 13.
[38] Edward Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 4.
[39] Ibid., 5.
[40] Ibid., 2.
[41] Ibid., 32.

ways in which the distribution of a city's benefits and burdens constitutes a form of

justice, which is, in turn, shaped by the organization of public space.

Lastly, Bület Batuman's study of the TEKEL protest encampment in Ankara,

Turkey offers an illuminating example of the political struggle over public space,

visibility, and power in the Middle East. In 2010, TEKEL employees formed a make-shift

encampment in Ankara's Kızılay District to protest their mistreatment by the company

upon its dissolution. Batuman argues that, despite its failure to achieve its political goals,

the protest encampment "was significant in terms of the spatial formation of public

space".[42] Due to Turkey's authoritarian government, "state power limits the effective use

of public space".[43] Thus, by occupying public space in the city centre for over two

months, the protest encampment challenges the Turkish government's domination and

regulation of that public space, and therefore, challenges the state's authority. The

protester's use of an encampment as a political strategy reveals the nature of public space

as a political battleground—serving as a manifestation of Henri Lefebvre's assertion that

space and power are related. Furthermore, Batuman echoes Habermas and Harvey by

arguing that public space is "a social construct that requires social relations to produce

it".[44] In other words, the production of public space requires a continued engagement in

the struggle for visibility and representation, spatially. Both the protesters and the

government (represented by the police force) participate in this production by repeatedly

engaging in social relations—in this case, confrontational relations, as each party wrestles

---

[42] Bülent Batuman, "Political Encampment and the Architecture of Public Space: TEKEL Resistance in Ankara," *International Journal of Islamic Architecture* 2, no. 1 (2013): 2.
[43] Ibid., 3.
[44] Ibid., 10.

for control over space, and thus, power. As the nature of these social relations change (as one party or another gains the upper hand), so too does the nature of the space—what Batuman deems "the urban fabric".[45] Thus, space and society have a reciprocal relationship; because space must be socially reproduced, altering space has the capacity to create social change. In essence, this means that political struggles enacted via public space are worthwhile and significant strategies. Harkening back to Batuman's original assertion—that the TEKEL protest encampment was significant despite ultimately failing in its political goals—we see that Batumans' reasoning relies on tenets of Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*: that "(social) space is a (social) product".[46]

From Habermas to Soja, theorists have built upon each other's contributions to construct a body of work that details the origins, history, and nature of public space as both construct and political process. Through this theoretical lens, we can explore how urban space is organized for the benefit of some and the exclusion or repression of others, shaping the landscape of social justice in the community. This review of the existing literature serves as a framework for our exploration of the role of public art in revolutionary moments in which citizens, en masse, challenged the authority and legitimacy of the state through the seizure of public space, much like the TEKEL protests in Turkey.

Most of the scholars discussed here have given ample attention to traditional markers of societal development, like economic exchange and political participation. However, analysis on the role of more creative action, such as art, remains somewhat

---

[45] Ibid., 4.
[46] Lefebvre, 30.

absent from theories of public space. I argue that public art is a significant form of participation in society and mechanism for shaping environments and thus should factor into discussions of public space. Furthermore, since the initial publication of many of these seminal works, public space has taken on new forms. Space is no longer always physical, rather, new technologies and trends have redefined public space. For example, the internet has provided a novel social space where these theorists' arguments must be re-examined and applied to new contexts. Likewise, globalization has challenged our notion of a defined urban city and forces us to consider how public space operates across the borders of nation-states. Nonetheless, these landmark works provide an important and necessary theoretical framework for our exploration of public art in Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon during times of political and social crisis.

Gender

Lastly, we must establish a theoretical grounding of gender in order to analyze street art in protest. At its core, this thesis is about power relations—how communities react to asymmetries of power, how states seek to exert power through violent surveillance, and how the use of public space for cultural expression is a form of power. The process of analyzing power relations is also a *gendered* process, as both are based in questions of agency: Who has agency within a political system? Who has agency within public spaces? Thus, this analysis of power relations *must* include an analysis of gender relations. Gender is not something I am electing to study, but rather a necessary component of the topic at hand. To omit a gendered analysis would constitute a major blind spot in this thesis.

First, we must understand that gender is an unavoidable category of analysis. Anthropologist Maya Mikdashi writes that "the ungendered body does not exist."[47] Every individual performs gender in some manner, to some extent. To exist within modern society, every body is gendered, whether through the individual's conscious choices to conform or resist gender roles or through society's ascribing of gender to an individual based on assumptions about physical appearance and actions. In this sense, gender is akin to class; Mikdashi argues that "the unclassed body does not exist," either.[48] Because both gender and class are integral components to one's social identity (whether the individual desires that or not), "ungendered politics" and "unclassed politics" do not exist.[49] In sum, politics is a gendered process. Just as art and politics are inextricably linked, so too are gender and politics. Given these two premises—that all bodies are gendered and that all politics are gendered—and given that this thesis addresses the movement of bodies within public space and their political relation to the state, this thesis is also a gendered endeavor.

Furthermore, Mikdashi argues that allowing the idea of ungendered bodies to persist "reaffirm[s] the positioning of normative male political practices as somehow 'unmarked'[50] and universal."[51] In other words, if we do not address gender, the default understanding is that the male experience of political participation is standard and

---

[47] Maya Mikdashi, "How Not to Study Gender in the Middle East," Jadaliyya, Arab Studies Institute, March 12, 2012, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/25434.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] In gender and feminist studies, the unmarked category refers to the identity that 'goes without saying,' or is the default. Even our language itself connotes this unmarked and marked categories: "women" is an alternative of "men," suggesting that men is the default condition, and that women are somehow deviant, rare, and/or occupy a lower place in a hierarchy.
[51] Mikdashi.

applicable to all. This is not necessarily true; women have often been viewed as the markers of national identity, public morality, and cultural integrity in pivotal historical moments (more on this later), making their political participation uniquely significant and symbolic. Thus, omitting gender in this thesis would signal to the reader that the male experience of artistic participation in the 2011 Arab uprisings was universal and all-encompassing, would erase the contributions of Arab women to the protest movements, and would assume that political participation and power relations are not *already* gendered relations. Maya Mikdashi's work helps us to understand that gender "is not an analytic lens that can be withheld and deployed."[52] Rather, gender is an integral component of the social and political structuring of human life, and thus, an unavoidable element of this thesis.

Because gender is a part of social and political systems, it has also come to be an essential equation in power dynamics. In *Night to His Day,* sociologist Judith Lorber explains that gender "is a process of creating distinguishable social statuses."[53] These statuses serve as a mechanism for the allocation and distribution of rights and responsibilities within a society. Furthermore, "as a part of a stratification system that ranks these statuses unequally, gender is a major building block in the social structures built on these unequal statuses."[54] In addition to creating *distinguishable* statuses of gender (i.e. that men and women are different), societies simultaneously create *hierarchical* statuses of gender (i.e. that men are superior to women). The hierarchy of

---

[52] Ibid.
[53] Judith Lorber, "'Night to his Day': The Social Construction of Gender," *Paradoxes of Gender* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 32.
[54] Ibid.

gender in turn manifests itself in larger structures and institutions—such as gender inequality in the political or economic realms. This thesis grapples with the asymmetries of power that existed between Arab citizens and the state. As we know, citizens' experiences with socioeconomic and political inequality drove the popular protests in 2010 and 2011 that ultimately evolved into the Arab uprisings. As we examine various ways in which these actors negotiated power (particularly in public spaces), we must not forget that the struggle over power is also a gendered phenomenon. Because, as Lorber claims, "gender is a major component of structured inequality," this thesis must include gender in an analysis of power dynamics.[55]

In addition to power dynamics, gender is also an important component of the history of the Middle East and North Africa. Understanding how gender has functioned throughout the historical trajectory of the region is essential to analyzing it in a contemporary context. An examination of scholarship on gender in the Middle East reveals two primary understandings of women: women as measures of modernity and women as symbols of the nation.

Anthropologist Lara Deeb's research on public piety in the Shi'i Muslim community of Beirut, Lebanon reveals the extent to which women are perceived as markers of modernity. Deeb argues that women take center stage in the production of an "enchanted modernity" through the performance of public piety due to their visibility in the community. Through interviews in the field, Deeb reveals that the community knows women's lives are "of both local and international concern" and that there is "local

---

[55] Ibid., 34.

concern about international concern."[56] Where does this concern over women's

projection of modernity come from? Deeb argues that this phenomenon has historical

roots in the "tendencies of both European colonizers and local elites to use the status of

women as a measure of the level of modern-ness."[57] Throughout history, "a particular

liberal western feminist notion of emancipation and liberation" has been used as a

"universal standard of measure" of modernity, implemented and perpetuated through

colonialist and orientalist scholarship.[58] Because women bear the "burden of cultural

authenticity and the markers of public piety," their participation in public life holds

particular significance for the community, the citizenry, and the nation.[59] The ways in

which women interact with public arenas like political systems, urban spaces, and

community activism are shaped by the cultural responsibilities thrust upon them as

women.

Similarly, Beth Baron's examination of women during the Nationalist period in

Egypt demonstrates the second understanding of women in Middle Eastern history:

women as symbols of the nation. In *Egypt as Woman,* Baron seeks to understand how

women were incorporated into the collective memory of the Egyptian national period.

She argues that "as the details of women's political activism were suppressed or

forgotten, what remained, or were remembered, were female symbols."[60] Despite

significant and tangible contributions to national projects, Baron points out that women's

---

[56] Lara Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'I Lebanon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 29.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Ibid., 30.

[59] Ibid., 31.

[60] Beth Baron, *Egypt as Woman: Nationalism, Gender, & Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 3.

work is often understood as symbolic, rather than truly active participation. In particular, Nationalist reformers harnessed the "emotive power of nationalism" through the use of "family metaphors," wherein women were equated to mothers of the nation.[61] These metaphors, however, exploited the position of women in service to the nationalist cause and reinforced "family hierarchies based on age and gender."[62] As a result, Baron argues that "women's rights in the Middle East…emerge as part of a nation-state building, or in reaction to it."[63] Thus, the history of the nation-state is also the history of women. As this thesis explores the relations between individuals and the state (within the nation-state system), it is invariably intertwined with issues of gender. To discuss the nation and nationalism in the Middle East without discussing gendered power dynamics in addition to the role of women would again render women as solely symbolic figures, obscuring the unique and significant ways in which women interact with the state and thus shaped its trajectory.

This thesis seeks to address the specific challenges faced by Arab women under authoritarian regimes, recognize the powerful contributions of women activists and artists to the collective struggles in the region, and avoid collapsing women to markers of modernity and national identity. Throughout this thesis, I attempt to acknowledge the power in women's political participation and avoid reducing their activism to symbols of national identity, modernity, public piety, or cultural authenticity. Highlighting the active participation of women in popular movements becomes an avenue for exploring power

---

[61] Ibid., 4.
[62] Ibid., 6.
[63] Ibid., 9.

relations and social asymmetries, further avoiding the gendered tropes outlined here and illustrating the ways in which politics are inherently gendered.

Thematic Mapping

In this thesis, I will analyze examples of street art in three countries in the MENA region, discussing the nature of the art and its political significance, in order to elucidate four primary goals and outcomes of street art: the subversion of state authority, the democratization of protest, the reckoning with violence, and the proliferation of transnationalism.

In the first chapter, I will demonstrate the capacity for street art to circumvent and subvert state authority by analyzing street art in Egypt in relation to the nation's political environment. By using methods that exist outside of the state's oversight, artists challenge the state's seemingly inherent authority to dictate how structures of power are formed, maintained, and reformed—therefore challenging the authority of the state itself, and in turn, the state's existence. Additionally, Egyptian street art will show that a rich practice of protest art facilitates the democratization of protest, leading to true popular revolutions. Because, as discussed previously, art exists outside of traditional state avenues of redress, it is available to large portions of the population that are continually shut out of civil society by authoritarian regimes' exclusive hold on power.

In the second chapter, I will examine street art in Syria to argue that art is uniquely able to capture the aesthetics of brutality and communicate the suffering inflicted by violence in war-torn regions of the Middle East and North Africa. By virtue of the art's location amidst the unrelenting violence, particularly on the crumbling walls

and barricades, this type of street art exists in direct conversation with the effects of violent conflict. Artists harnessed the power of satire and dark humor to juxtapose the forces of creation and destruction, provide a place for the people's collective pain, and reckon with the absurdity of the situation.

In the third chapter, I will show the extent to which the protests across the Middle East and North Africa during 2010 and 2011 transgressed the borders of nation-states through an examination of street art in Lebanon. Although Lebanon did not experience the same kinds of revolutions as other nations such as Egypt and Syria, much of Lebanese public art expressed solidarity with the revolutions and captured the sentiments and demands of the revolutionaries. Lebanese graffiti and murals drew attention to the larger themes that plagued many communities across the MENA region, such as the sense of frustration with established systems, the constant presence of violence in daily life, and the desires for a better future marked by peace, stability, and popular representation. The cultural elements of transnationalism examined in this chapter will demonstrate the importance of ground-up social movements in facilitating regional integration.

To conclude, I will argue that public art is a meaningful category of historical analysis and should be recognized as a form of participatory politics and community engagement. Studying creative activism further illuminates the power dynamics that shape how citizens encounter and interact with the state apparatus and reveals alternative forms of collective action. Finally, I will apply the concepts and arguments set forth in this thesis to briefly examine the role of street art in our present-day context amidst the global coronavirus pandemic. I will demonstrate that the visual process not only endures, but in fact, is particularly significant in times of crisis and upheaval.

Chapter I

Art as Revolution:

The State, the People, and the Public Sphere in Egypt

"There is a feeling that Downtown Cairo and Tahrir Square is our land…We need to say that this is our place, and we can write whatever we want."

–Ammar Abo Bakr, Egyptian artist

"We are all Khalid Said"

On June 6, 2010, two policemen dragged a young man from an internet café in Alexandria and beat him to death before discarding his maimed body in the street. Four days later, a Facebook page titled "Kullina Khaled Said" (We Are All Khaled Said) ubiquitously emerged. The page contained mercilessly detailed photographs of Said's broken corpse and disfigured face. As the Facebook page grew in viral prominence, people all over Egypt

knew his story. By mid-June, it had over 130,000 active members. The website continued to serve as a mechanism for exposing police violence through photos, videos, and testimonies. It also became a space for activists to communicate and organize. But it was the broken, bruised, and bloody face of Khaled Said that became an iconic image, representing the visceral reality of police brutality. This face haunted an entire populace. This face ignited a revolution.

The incident, of course, only ignited a revolution by awakening an existing

dissatisfaction among the Egyptian people which had been festering since the failure of

the liberal nation-state model in the mid-twentieth century. This sense of unrest

dramatically escalated under three decades of Hosni Mubarak's rule.[64] After assuming the

presidency in 1981, Mubarak largely continued the "liberalizing tendencies" of his

predecessor.[65] By the 90s, Mubarak had consolidated his power through a single-party

system, ushering in a period of authoritarian rule. In particular, changes to election

procedures minimized public political participation and effectively ensured the failure of

opposition parties to secure seats in the People's Assembly.[66] Unfree elections and the

constriction of political expression, combined with foreign policy criticisms, fomented a

widespread sense of anger and distrust among the Egyptian populace.

Amid this unrest, state security forces beat a 28-year-old citizen to death in broad

daylight, giving the nation a face for their revolution, a martyr for their cause, and an

impetus to act.

On January 25th, 2011 hundreds of thousands of Egyptians flooded the streets of

Cairo and poured into Tahrir Square, chanting "The people want the fall of the regime."

In addition to police brutality, Egyptians protested state-of-emergency laws, corruption,

high unemployment, inflation (especially of food prices), and low wages. While

protesters called for Mubarak's resignation and an immediate end to emergency rule,

---

[64] William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, "The 2011 Arab Uprisings and Their Aftermath," *A History of the Modern Middle East,* 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 540.
[65] Ibid., 540. "Liberalizing tendencies" refers to Mubarak's (and other Arab leaders') attempts to lift restrictions on private industry and relax government regulations to reduce the state's involvement in the economy. This involved reducing government spending on social programs (health care and education, for example) and selling state assets to elites allies of the regime.
[66] Ibid.

their demands were part of a larger desire for civil liberties, political freedom, and social justice. Beginning on what was a national police holiday, protesters demonstrated and marched for eighteen straight days, culminating in the overthrow of the Mubarak regime. Tahrir Square, once the site of important administrative buildings "symboliz[ing] Egypt's controlling bureaucratic state," was dominated by nonviolent protest and civil disobedience. Through the occupation of the Square, protesters transformed the major public plaza into a hub of revolutionary activity.

Where Egyptians gathered in protest, art flourished. Take, for example, the following piece of graffiti:

Figure 1: "Have puppets come between your eyes like water? Do not forget my blood-stained robe." The text refers to the ways in which the regime has blinded the population and turned people into puppets.

While this piece of graffiti could have depicted any Egyptian, it *specifically* depicts the outline of Khaled Said. The widespread presence of Said's face reminds us that his story resonated with Egyptians precisely because of his everyman identity. Painted on the one-year anniversary of his death, the graffiti reflects how Said lived on as a martyr and an icon, sustaining the revolution long beyond his own death. This piece shows Said with his

mouth covered by text. The artists' choice to cover Said's mouth suggests how dissidents

are silenced by the government through the use of police violence. As one can tell

aesthetically, this piece was created using a stencil and spray paint. Stencils were crucial

to the proliferation of street art because they made simple designs easily replicable and

could be painted quickly, facilitating an easy escape of the authorities. The fact that

Khalid Said's face was transformed into a stencil further demonstrates just how

widespread his likeness had become. Furthermore, this piece was painted in front of the

Ministry of the Interior. The artist's choice to place a revolutionary icon at a site of state

authority reveals the extent to which the creation of graffiti was a subversive act.

Protesters' cooptation of key public spaces represented a direct affront to the state's

control over public spaces and over the Egyptian people.

On February 11th, 2011, Hosni Mubarak resigned as President of Egypt and the

Supreme Council of Egyptian Armed Forces (SCAF) assumed control of the country. The

Council, comprised of high-ranking military and political officers, promised to transfer

power to the people and establish a democracy. In reality, however, the transition was a

year of "tortuous twists and turns that suggested the SCAF was intent on retaining real

power."[67] Then, despite the people's achievement of overthrowing Mubarak's

authoritarian regime, many questioned the revolution's success when, after the

parliamentary elections of 2011 and the presidential election of 2012, the Muslim

Brotherhood rose to prominence.

In many ways, Egypt was a trendsetter for the Arabic-speaking region. As the

most populous country in the region, it led the Middle East and North Africa in terms of

---

[67] Ibid., 542.

art, media, and public mobilization. In 2010 and 2011, Egyptians' calls for economic reform, social justice, and political freedom were echoed by other Arab protesters—both in solidarity with Egyptians and for their own national causes. Creative elements of the Egyptian uprising, from images to slogans, reverberated around the Middle East and even internationally. Because of Egypt's pioneering role in the region, it is the first case study in this thesis. Egypt's protest art reveals themes that are emblematic of the larger regional shifts. Through an examination of Egyptian protest, we will establish important concepts and frameworks for analysis that are essential to understanding Syrian and Lebanese street art, as well.

Long after his murder, when other Arab states were in the throes of their own revolutions, Khaled Said's face remained a potent visual icon of the revolution. This mural was painted in 2012, two years after the event itself.

Figure 2: A mural depicting Khaled Said's face after he was beaten to death by police. Located near Tahrir Square in Cairo.

The mural's graphic depiction of cuts, bruises, and blood captures the gruesome reality of state violence. The artist's choice to paint only the face and not the body reveals an attempt to convey the *emotional* pain of living under an authoritarian state. The incredible detail of Said's face communicates the deeply personal implications of police brutality and state abuse. The imposing size, as well, contributes to the sense that Said is a looming figure who will live on in the spirit of the revolution until justice is achieved. Even the fact that the artist created the mural in 2012, two years after Said's death,

reveals the extent to which his legacy persisted, continuing to inspire artists and protesters long after his end on earth.

Building on the motifs and provocations for murals of Said, this chapter addresses three ways in which street art illuminates key elements of the Egyptian uprisings of 2011: first, the potential of street art, as an avenue of political participation, to circumvent and subvert state authority; second, the ability for revolutionary art to democratize the process of protest; and third, the capacity of street art to illuminate the gendered dynamics of state violence and reactionary protest.

First, protesters used street art as a nontraditional means of protest to circumvent state authority. By seeking redress through avenues outside of state control, protesters effectively challenged the state's authority to determine what political participation looks like. Furthermore, by creating protest art in key public areas, Egyptians laid claim to the right to occupy and control public space, therefore challenging the state's authority to regulate space. In total, these consequences effectively challenged the state's legitimacy as an institution of power.

Second, the widespread use of street art as a method of protest in the Egyptian uprisings facilitated the democratization of protest. Khaled Said was certainly an iconic figure in the Egyptian revolution, but he wasn't a political leader. He was an ordinary young Egyptian who became an unwitting martyr. He was, as scholar Marwan Kraidy describes, a "floating signifier—a figure whose visibility matches the figure's symbolic pliability."[68] Said's story encapsulates the nature of the Egyptian revolution at large: a

---

[68] Marwan Kraidy, *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 68.

predominately leaderless, truly democratic, popular uprising orchestrated and enacted by the public.

Third, protest art made visible the gendered aspects of state violence and, in turn, the ways in which protest as a process was a gendered phenomenon. The kinds of police brutality that spurred the Egyptian revolution affected both men and women; women, however, particularly faced systematic and institutionalized sexual violence, sanctioned and perpetrated by the state. The specific ways in which women encountered the state apparatus *as women* shaped their participation in the protest movement. Egypt's city walls reflected how women's issues, while explicitly gendered, were also an integral component of the revolutionary movement in totality.

Cultural Production as Political Revolution

Egyptian's use of art in protest was a particularly useful tool to protest the authoritarian state and demand democratic rule by and for the people. First, Egyptians used street art to circumvent traditional political power, as defined by the state. Protesters' use of art asserted that cultural expression—both the product and the process—are valid forms of political participation. Second, Egyptians used protest art to subvert the state's authority through the cooptation of public space. As artists lay claim to public spaces, they undermine the state's authority to control such spaces. Lastly, through the use of art, Egyptians created an ongoing, self-perpetuating clash between the people and the state. The creation of inherently subversive art led government forces to heighten violent security measures—the precise actions against which the people were protesting.

In turn, artists created more protest art, generating a darkly ironic cycle in which art became a physical manifestation of shifting power dynamics between people and state.

Defining the Nation-State

Before examining how protest art subverted state authority through the people's reclamation of public space, we must first establish an understanding of the nation-state as an institution of power. In 1951, political philosopher Hannah Arendt published *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* in which she analyzes the institutions and operations of totalitarian movements. Focusing on the anti-Semitism, imperialism, and rise of totalitarian features within the nation-state paradigm from the early 1800s through World War I, Arendt establishes a framework of the nation-state and how citizens and non-citizens interact with the nation-state as a legal institution. We can use Arendt's theory to understand Mubarak's authoritarian state and the nature of Egyptians' protest against it.

The nation-state is comprised of both a nation—a community of people formed on the basis of a common identity (such as language, ethnicity, etc.)—and a state—a politically organized sovereign body. Arendt's definition of the nation-state inherently critiques the very concept itself. She writes that the "conditions for the rise of nation states" are "homogeneity of population and rootedness in the soil."[69] Because homogeneity is a crucial precondition, the nation-state *must* be intrinsically exclusionary. Territorially-bounded homogeneity must be manufactured through the exclusion and subordination of minority groups. According to Arendt, "minorities within nation-states

---

[69] Hannah Arendt, "The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man," *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Schocken Books, 1951), 270.

must sooner or later be either assimilated or liquidated."[70] Liquidation, of course, serves as a euphemism for state-enacted systemic violence; genocide, ethnic cleansing, and concentration camps are well known to Arendt's readers in the 1950s.

The other option—assimilation—is not as peaceful as it may sound. Arendt bases her discussion on the post-WWI Treaties which established new nations in Eastern Europe. She explains that the treaties "lumped together many peoples in single states," thus encircling many groups within one state. Some of these peoples were entrusted to govern while others were not given equal partnership in the government and still others were deemed 'minorities.'[71] The imposition of the nation-state system upon Eastern European communities via the Treaties was thus "an arbitrary game which handed out rule to some and servitude to others."[72] Arendt thus embeds her definition of the nation-state with an unavoidable critique; the nation-state, as a political structure, is predicated on the exclusion, whether through juridical or violent means, of certain groups.

The apparatus of the nation-state retains the sole power to determine and allocate rights. Citizenship, therefore, is the right to have rights. For those who are denied citizenship on the basis of the nation-state's exclusionary foundation, they are continually deprived of rights. Arendt argues that World War I proved "the constitutional inability of European nation-states to guarantee human rights to those who had lost nationally guaranteed rights."[73] Refugees that left their states became 'stateless,' and thus, "rightless."[74] Because they "had no governments to represent them and to protect them,"

---

[70] Ibid., 273.
[71] Ibid., 270.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid., 269.
[74] Ibid., 267.

stateless people lost even "those rights which had been thought of and even defined as inalienable." Because the nation-state is the *only* avenue through which one can secure rights, there is no international body that can guarantee human rights. Arendt scorns the idea of 'human rights,' calling it "hopeless idealism" and "feeble-minded hypocrisy."[75] To insist on the existence of human rights (not only as a concept but as a reality for stateless peoples) is simply to refuse to acknowledge the nation-state's power— it innately exclusionary and destructive power.

Without international human rights as a safety net, what becomes of stateless people? Arendt argues that the best way for a stateless person to regain the protection of the law is actually to break that law. Arendt states that, in the case of statelessness (and thus, rightlessness), "a criminal offense becomes the best opportunity to regain some kind of human equality."[76] Because the nation-state is based on equality before the law, the stateless person who commits a crime will nonetheless be treated as an equal; he is afforded the same rights as a citizen.

In a totalitarian state, however, the principle of equality before the law breaks down. It is in this moment that Arendt's theory becomes crucial to understanding revolutionary Egypt. Arendt argues that "the nation-state cannot exist once its principle of equality before the law has broken down." If, as Arendt claims, equality before the law is essential to the functioning of the nation-state, then the rise of a totalitarian regime—in which the principle of equality breaks down—is also the collapse of a nation-state. And with that collapse, the state is unable or unwilling to provide the rights and protections

---

[75] Ibid., 269.
[76] Ibid., 286.

afforded to citizens. As Mubarak consolidated his singular rule over Egypt through corruption and authoritarian strategies, he denied the people their rights to political participation, civil liberties, and social justice—including equality and protection under the law. For three decades, Mubarak's government maintained these structures of totalitarian rule that disenfranchised and oppressed Egyptians. The government's violation of citizens' rights represents the disintegration of the nation-state, as described by Arendt.

Furthermore, Arendt argues that the disintegration of the nation-state (via the loss of equality), lends itself to the rise of police rule. According to Arendt, police power and totalitarian regimes are inextricably intertwined—a powerful police force is necessary to execute totalitarian rule. In such circumstances, the people, "regardless of any offenses committed…[find] themselves anyways beyond the pale of the law."[77] As a result, the state becomes, in effect, "arbitrary rule by police decree."[78] Arendt's argument conjures up images of Egyptian life under Mubarak. Take, for example, Khaled Said: an Egyptian, who, aside from some unconfirmed suspicions of petty drug dealing, was an ordinary citizen. Part of the reason his death invoked such rage among the public was precisely because it seemed like his fate could have been any of theirs, if they had only been so unlucky. Protests against Said's murder, along with other instances of police brutality, only exacerbated conflict with the police. As Egyptians quickly encountered, "doing politics outdoors brought citizens face-to-face with the caste that rules the streets: Egypt's ubiquitous police."[79] Thus, widespread public protests spurred further violent retaliation

---

[77] Mona El-Ghobashy, "The Praxis of the Egyptian Revolution," *Middle East Report* no. 258 (2011), 288.
[78] Ibid., 290.
[79] Ibid., 4.

by the state, which in turn, generated more unrest. With Arendt's theory as a foundational understanding of the nation-state, totalitarianism, and policing, we will next investigate the role of street art in circumventing state authority, subverting state legitimacy, and generating an ongoing contest between the people and the state.

Circumventing the State

Since proper political channels had been corrupted by Mubarak's authoritarian practices, Egyptians were unable to use traditional means of political engagement. Enter: street art. Protesting through art was a creative way to express desire for reform because it existed entirely outside the scope of civic participation as dictated by the state. Instead of adhering to established avenues of redress, such as electoral politics or legal recourse, artists hijacked cultural practices for political and social purposes.

This process is what scholar Marwan Kraidy calls *creative insurgency.* He defines creative insurgency as "the sum total process through which revolutionary subjects extricate themselves from the body of the sovereign in order to create a new body politic."[80] Kraidy's choice of the word 'extricate'—literally meaning to free, disentangle, or extract—is *key.* Creative insurgents, including Egyptian street artists, sought to disentangle the public from the government. By declining to participate in state-dictated and state-controlled forms of political participation, artists removed the people from the state and its institutions. Further, the creative insurgents extricate themselves from the "sovereign"—i.e. the state which holds the supreme power or authority. By removing themselves from the "body of the sovereign," artists challenge the state's seemingly

---

[80] Kraidy., 20.

inherent authority to dictate how structures of power are formed, maintained, and reformed.

While appreciating the aesthetic magnificence of the art itself and the pointed political message each piece can embody, it is important not to lose sight of the significance of the *process* of cultural production. According to scholar Rounwah Adly Riyadh Bseiso, we must consider "why and how people make art during the revolutionary moment—as a unique historical process."[81] The use of creative forms of protest demonstrates not only the extent to which the government has excluded the people from traditional political participation, but also that cultural production *is* a form of political participation. By using art as a political weapon, revolutionaries illustrated that culture is political. Cultural expression, therefore, is political expression as well.

This idea has even larger ramifications when it comes to our conceptualizations of politics and the future of scholarship. Bseiso argues that the revolution "affected the very way we perceive not only power and politics, but also art and culture in a Middle Eastern context."[82] Because the Egyptian revolution was as much cultural as it was political, the process of creating street art in reaction to and in service to the revolution was also an important moment for cultural production. Street art in the Egyptian protest movement helped to solidify the idea that art and culture are inherent and essential components of modern political life.

---

[81] Rounwah Adly Riyadh Bseiso, "Art in the Egyptian Revolution: Liberation and Creativity," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 38, no. 2 (2018), 346.
[82] Ibid.

Subverting the State

In addition to circumventing the state by using cultural expression as a form of political expression, protesters also subverted the state. Graffiti itself challenges state authority by defying law; "governments across the region—and indeed, globally—consider it vandalism and sabotage."[83] By vandalizing, artists challenge the state's ability to maintain law and order and, thus, "undermine the state's sense of public security."[84]

Moreover, street art is subversive because it coopts public space. As artists use the walls of the city as their canvases, they lay claim to public space. As established in the introduction to this thesis, power is derived from control over space. Because the organization of public space reflects social hierarchies, the domination of public space becomes a tool for the maintenance of existing structures of power. When artists assert the presence of the people in public spaces, they thus are enacting a form of protest—the protest of the state's jurisdiction over the urban landscape.

Through street art, such as graffiti and murals, the artist literally makes visible the struggles of the people and illustrates their demands in the spaces that the state controls. This reclamation of public space by and for the people is a direct affront to the state's authority to control that space. As Mark LeVine argues, the reason for "graffiti's social power is that it's the most important medium and long-term indicator of who controls physical space—the state or the opposition."[85] Calling this control into question thus "undermines the state's sense of public security."[86] The artists act as agents of change by

---

[83] Mark LeVine, "When Art Is the Weapon: Culture and Resistance Confronting Violence in the Post-Uprisings Arab World," *Religions* no. 6 (2015), 1294.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid., 1296.
[86] Ibid., 1294.

coopting state-dominated public space, thus challenging the state's right to control that public space, and consequentially, challenging the legitimacy of the state apparatus itself.

The following piece of graffiti, for example, undermined the authority of the state to police the people:

https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/revolutionary-road-the-urban-showcase-of-egypts-uprising-8202906.html
Figure 3: A young girl conducts a security search on a police officer. Located on Mohamed Mahmoud Street in Cairo.

In this piece, the artist juxtaposes a young girl and an adult security officer, creating a jarring visual for the viewer. The police officer, with his hands overhead and legs apart, occupies a position of total surrender. The young girl, on the other hand, occupies a position of power as she conducts a pat-down security check. By flipping the expected power dynamic on its head, the artist has created a piece that is both ironic and thought-

provoking. The image raises questions for the viewer: Who *does* have the right to police bodies and why? Thus, by *inverting* the power dynamic, the piece *subverts* the state's authority to control citizens' bodies through violating surveillance measures. The piece asserts a reclamation of power by the people, as they (represented by the child) turn the police officer's own tools and tactics against him.

Furthermore, the location of this piece is particularly important to understanding its significance; it was painted on Mohammed Mahmoud Street in central Cairo, near Tahrir Square. This area of the city saw many of the public demonstrations that led to the ousting of Mubarak and formed the Egyptian revolution. According to Sarah Awad and Brady Wagoner, "occupying central places in the city ensures high visibility and infuses the space with a revolutionary identity, showing it is not under full state control."[87] The street, often called Martyr's Road, became a particularly revolutionary space both literally—through the protests held there—and symbolically—through its association with the opposition movement. Thus, the location was likely an intentional choice by the artist to contribute to the delineation of Mohammed Mahmoud Street as a public space that the people had reclaimed from the state.

The presence of graffiti, especially sharply critical pieces like the one above, marks the space in which it exists as a space that belongs to the people and to their revolution. Through the reclamation of public space, artists subvert the state's authority to control key spaces, thus challenging the state's legitimacy itself. Street art, therefore,

---

[87] Sarah H. Awad and Brady Wagoner, "Introducing the *Street Art of Resistance*," *Street Art of Resistance,* eds. Sarah H. Awad and Brady Wagoner (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 3.

ultimately creates a space for the collective imagining of a new type of political and social structure for the nation.

Fighting a Perpetual Battle

In addition to circumventing and subverting the state, street art also sets up an evolving confrontation between the people and the state. The intermittent government efforts to prevent or erase graffiti represents the state's attempt to reassert control over the populace. These efforts, however, reinforce the people's experiences with the state's restrictions on free speech and political expression. Thus, the state's effort at censorship spurs further frustration and unrest among the people, inspiring them to continue their efforts at resistance and create more art. The state's efforts are both unsuccessful and self-defeating, as the graffiti inevitably returns, appearing sporadically via the clandestine work of nameless individuals and groups. The further proliferation of subversive protest art elicited further violent attempts by security forces to reassert control over the space and the populace.

This back-and-forth between the people and the state serves as a physical manifestation of the constantly shifting power dynamics of revolution. As Hanan Sabea describes, "with every new wall that was erected around Tahrir…creative cultural resistance intensified."[88] As a result, "Egyptian authorities unwittingly provided revolutionary artists with a canvas."[89] The state's attempt to regulate artistic protest

---

[88] Hanan Sabea, "'I Dreamed of Being of a People': Egypt's Revolution, the People and Critical Imagination," *The Political Aesthetics of Global Protest,* ed. Pnina Webner, Martin Webb, Kathryn Spellman-Poots (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 83.
[89] Kraidy, 98.

simply reminded the people *why* they were protesting, reinforcing their commitment to overthrowing the security apparatus that governed their existence. In service to the revolutionary movement, protesters turned the oppressor's own tactics and tools against him. The strategies of these respective actors—the artists and the state—and their reactions to each other's strategies generated an ironic cycle of protest and crackdown.

The following image illustrates this phenomenon:

Figure 4: Security forces beat a protester, revealing her blue bra. Located on Mohamed Mahmoud Street in Cairo.

The piece depicts the skewed power dynamics of Egyptian life under Mubarak's authoritarian regime. Three police officers, equipped with weapons, descend upon a single unarmed protester, communicating the downright unfairness of the conflict.

Protesters, unable to fight back in a literal sense, are forced to turn to symbolic strategies

such as art to enact the revolution.

Additionally, the positioning of the singular protester on the ground with the police

officers looking down on her from above is a physical illustration of the imbalance of

power that plagues the relationship between citizen and state. Furthermore, the police

officers are male and are attacking a female protester, which draws attention to another

axis of power that was present in the revolution (more on this coming later!). The

protester has been stripped of her abaya, a full-body garment that covers the entire body

of a woman, aside from her face, hands, and feet, revealing her undergarments. The

depiction of the protester *literally* stripped illustrates how Egyptians were stripped of

their rights to engage safely and democratically with the political process, thus requiring

the people turn to unconventional means of protest.

While this piece of graffiti certainly elicits anger and fear in the viewer, it also

hints at the power of the people. Just as the first image, this piece was painted on

Mohammed Mahmoud Street near Tahrir Square, exemplifying the reclamation of key

public spaces by protesters. Additionally, the security forces are faceless and identical,

demonstrating a lack of individual identity and humanity. They are simply

representations of the state's authoritarian reach and violent practices. The protester, on

the other hand, has a face, which demonstrates her humanity and elicits sympathy from

the viewer. Her outstretched hand shows that she will continue to resist the state's violent

tyranny, even as she is in a nearly hopeless position. Her small action holds significant

power in this moment. The protester in this piece reflects Egyptian protesters persistent

efforts to assert their demands through whatever means are available to them, regardless of how powerful and all-encompassing the state apparatus may seem.

The Democratization of Protest

Wael Ghonim, one of the creators and administrators of the "We Are All Khalid Said" Facebook page, said: "In revolutions before, there was a Ghandi, there was a Martin Luther King. In our revolution, there wasn't. What there was, were a lot of faceless, nameless individuals who all collaborated and communicated and reached toward their goals—without a leader."[90] Ghonim captures the sentiment of many Egyptians' experiences in what can be described as a leader-less uprising. The Egyptian revolution of 2011 was a revolution made by the masses and an example of the power of collective action. This is a phenomenon I will call *democratization.* Art, in particular, was a central tool in democratizing protest. This section will discuss four main characteristics of street art that facilitated the democratization of protest in the Egyptian Revolution: first, participating in protest through art is a means that is accessible for people excluded from traditional forms of civic participation; second, because street art exists in highly visible public spaces, it serves as mode of communication among the people to generate a public discourse; third, street art exists outside of the 'culture industry' in which art is commodified and valued based on its ability to be bought and sold in capitalist markets; and lastly, modern technology played a crucial role in circulating revolutionary images to a wide audience.

---

[90] Andrea Burzynski, "How One Egyptian Sold a Revolution on the Web," Reuters, January 19, 2012, https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-revolution2o-egypt/how-one-egyptian-sold-a-revolution-on-the-web-idUKTRE80I27220120119.

Defining Democratization

Before delving in to the ways in which street art facilitated the democratization of protest in Egypt, we must first establish a definition of 'democratization.' Democratization in this sense does not refer to democracy as a political philosophy or political structure. Rather, I use the term to describe the process by which protest becomes accessible to the broad masses of the people in a relatively equitable manner. In *The Political Aesthetics of Global Protest,* Hanan Sabea highlight the presence of this theme within many of the Arab uprisings. They use the term "horizontality," which is characterized by "non-privileged, egalitarian listening to others and allowing to speak in turns."[91] The nature of the Egyptian revolution similarly lacked a singular or all that powerful leader and, instead, relied on the inclusion of all Egyptians and the creation of a public discourse among the people.

Moreover, an historical perspective of Egyptian social and political life is necessary in order to establish context for the 2011 uprisings. Scholars Joel Beinin and Marie Duboc investigate how over two million Egyptian workers participated in collective actions, such as strikes or factory occupations between 2004 and 2010. They argue that these demonstrations were able to bring together many sectors of the working class—from private sector to civil service—because they were all acting in response to neoliberal economic restructuring. The imposition of a neoliberal order in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries had harmful ramifications for the livelihoods of working-class Egyptians. Because these changes had to do with the entire structure of the

---

[91] Sabea, 4.

national political economy, they affected a critical mass of the Egyptian population. As workers' felt that their rights and economic security were threatened, they "profoundly transformed Egyptian political culture" by mobilizing in protest.[92] The political mobilization of the worker's movement illustrates the "possibilities for collective action and movement-building in a resource-poor, authoritarian environment."[93] Thus, we can use Beinin and Duboc's examination of the workers' movement as a framework for understanding the democratization of protest.

While the explosive demonstrations took place in early 2011, the popular mobilization that made them possible was years in the making. The earlier workers' efforts contributed to what Beinin and Duboc call a "burgeoning culture of protest in the 2000s."[94] This culture proved that social movements could "successfully [assert their] public presence in an authoritarian state that imposed severe limits on associational life."[95] Whether or not protesters' demands were ultimately met was not guaranteed, but, at the very least, the workers' movements served as an initial glimpse of the potential power of collective action, even within environments where that power is meant to be explicitly neutralized. Thus, the workers' protests essentially provided a framework for successive collective actions that manifested in the 2011 uprisings.

Furthermore, when the 2011 uprisings did occur, workers' associations were quick to lend crucial support. Between January 28th and February 5th of that year,

---

[92] Joel Beinin and Marie Duboc, "A Workers' Social Movement on the Margin of the Global Neoliberal Order, Egypt 2004-2012," *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa,* ed. Joel Beinin and Frederic Vairel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 205.
[93] Ibid., 206.
[94] Ibid., 226.
[95] Ibid.

"production in key industrial zones dropped by 60 percent" due to workplace strikes.[96]

Actions on the part of workers' propagated a climate of unrest, which ultimately put enough pressure on the state to make key concessions. The perspectives of workers' associations and labor activists also helped to communicate the broader message of the revolution; protesters demanded not only the resignation of Mubarak, but also more just social and economic policies.

In fact, according to scholar Mona El-Ghobashy, workers' protests were often explained away as purely economic issues, not political ones. However, in reality, workplace protest formed a crucial component of the political mobilizations in January of 2011. El-Ghobashy argues that the initial success of the Egyptian revolution was due to the unification of the three main protest sectors: workplace protest, neighborhood protest, and associational protest. These three protest subcultures "had been practicing collective action for at least a decade, acquiring organizational experience," which contributed to the protesters' success during the pivotal days of public demonstration from January 25th to 28th.[97] As millions took to the streets to demand Mubarak's resignation, their success in evading the state's domination relied on "diffusion and linkage."[98] The diffusion of protest across all segments of the Egyptian population and the linkage between the three protest sectors were essential in mobilizing the public towards revolution.

The demonstrations of January 2011 were successful in achieving their immediate demands *precisely* because the three protest sectors—encompassing a large portion of the population from different demographics—united in their objective and took to the streets.

---

[96] Ibid., 224.
[97] El-Ghobashy, 3.
[98] Ibid., 9.

As El-Ghobashy aptly summarizes, it was "the one and only time that Egypt's three protest subcultures were able to jointly defeat the coercive apparatus that had existed to keep them apart."[99]

Art's Accessibility

The rich practice of street art facilitated the democratization of protest by providing Egyptians with an opportunity to participate in the uprising in a logistically feasible manner. Because, as discussed previously, art exists outside of traditional state avenues of redress, it serves as a means of political expression particularly available to those that lack political or social power and thus are continually excluded from conventional means of civic participation. As Mark LeVine notes, "art is especially important where civil society has little space for protest or to otherwise challenge the power of repressive regimes."[100] In a political environment such as Egypt, wherein authoritarian regimes have a near exclusive hold on power, huge portions of the populace are marginalized, and thus, must turn to the tools available: street art.

The types of art used as protest are literally accessible to most of the population because they don't require much material, time, or expertise. Graffiti requires only a spray paint bottle and a few minutes. It is not considered a prestigious, or, according to some, even a legitimate art form, and thus does not require much artistic skill or training. In particular, using stencils facilitates the proliferation of iconic images and graphics,

---

[99] Ibid., 12
[100] LeVine, 1278.

which succinctly mark a space as revolutionary. The quick process of stenciling, as well, lends itself to evasion of the authorities.

Furthermore, street art erodes the barrier between creator and viewer. Graffiti is often created anonymously. In this sense, it is distinct from most other art forms in which artists seek recognition and praise. Stencils, in particular, are often hastily and covertly spray painted. Thus, the focus of street art is not on the creator; in fact, it "can take the 'originator' out of the equation" entirely.[101] As a result, street art "undermine[s] the attribution of creativity and genius to a single individual" and resituates it with the people.[102] The people, therefore, are jointly responsible for the revolutionary messages espoused in the artworks. The creation of street art, thus, is a process "reuniting makers and their audiences," defying generational, gendered, or socioeconomic boundaries.[103]

While simple pieces of graffiti and stenciled graffiti illustrate this point most obviously, murals and other, more detailed artworks also facilitate the democratization of protest by involving viewers. In interviews with Egyptian street artists, Rounwah Adly Riyadh Bseiso found that artists intentionally tried to elicit "any reaction and involvement by the public" because it "meant that they were successful in fostering an interactive (versus one-directional) art that embodied collective and popular sentiments."[104]

In Egypt, anonymous and collectively-created street art especially flourished in the initial eighteen days of the revolution. According to Bseiso, this artistic explosion in

---

[101] Thomas Teo, "Subjectivity, Aesthetics, and the Nexus of Injustice: From Traditional to Street Art," *Street Art of Resistance*, eds. Sarah H. Awad and Brady Wagoner, (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 55.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid., 25.
[104] Bseiso, 348.

the streets "served to deconstruct the idea that the political was the realm of the few."[105]

This notion of collective cultural creation enacted through massive public participation

continued to breathe life into the revolution well beyond the resignation of Mubarak,

sustaining the people's spirit for months and years to come.

Public Spaces, Public Discourse

In addition to its literal accessibility, protest art existed in public spaces, thus

transforming the street into an avenue of communication and generating a revolutionary

discourse among the people. In an authoritarian environment where public

communication is limited—through restrictions on assembly, the erection of physical

barricades, and censorship of press and media—the street became the vessel for

communication among revolutionaries and between the people and the state. Protest art

that existed in highly trafficked public spaces, such as Tahrir Square and the surrounding

areas of Cairo, lent visibility to the people's revolutionary sentiments and became the

natural space for the formation of a collective conversation.

From a psychological and sociological perspective, art is a form of

communication that does not rely on linguistic or discursive structures. As Robert E.

Innis notes, art is "made up of multiform symbolic structures functioning as tools of

communication."[106] These symbolic structures create a shared experience among viewers

and between artist and viewer. The result is art as a "universal mode of language."[107]

---

[105] Ibid., 347.
[106] Robert E. Innis, "Resisting Forms: Prolegomena to an Aesthetics of Resistance," *Street Art of Resistance*, eds. Sarah H. Awad and Brady Wagoner, (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 64.
[107] Ibid., 80.

The presence of street art, acting as a form of communication in public spaces, thus facilitates the formation of a collective consciousness. In *Street Art of Resistance*, Vlad Petre Glaveanu argues that "the use of art in social change serves primarily the purpose of fostering wonder, and, through it, cultivating the possibility of creative action."[108] Not only does street art foster wonder for individual viewers, it fosters the critical element of revolutionary movements: *collective* wonder. Because artists use mirroring techniques wherein viewers can see elements of themselves, their communities, and their values in the artwork, street art makes "people experience wonder *together*."[109] Both the art itself and the collaborative process of production, observation, and dissemination generate a collective consciousness for the discussion of present injustices and a collective imagining of a better future. Street art, serving as a public discourse, thus is a way of forming a new, revolutionary collective identity created by and for the people.

The following artwork illustrates Egyptian street art's role in fostering a public discourse.

---

[108] Vlad Petre Glaveanu, "Art and Social Change: The Role of Creativity and Wonder," *Street Art of Resistance*, eds. Sarah H. Awad and Brady Wagoner, (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 29.
[109] Ibid., 32.

Figure 5: 'Women in Mourning' by Alaa Awad depicts an ancient Egyptian funeral tradition. Located on Mohamed Mahmoud Street in Cairo.

Egyptian artist Alaa Awad created this piece in response to the Port Said massacre on February 1, 2012 in which 72 attendees of a football match were killed in a police-aided clash between spectators. It is thus pertinent to note that Awad created this mural on Mohammed Mahmoud Street which leads to the Ministry of Interior where the Egyptian police force resides. The mural depicts an ancient Egyptian funeral tradition. This neo-pharaonic style draws upon the collective history and collective culture of the nation. Women, carrying black flowers as a symbol of their mourning, weep and reach out to the martyr. We can see the door of Osiris, which one passes through on one's way to the afterlife. The goddess of the sky, Nut, welcomes the martyr into heaven. The women,

with hands outstretched towards the deceased, represent the strength in collective sorrow and the power of collective action for healing. By giving visual form to Egyptian's mourning, Awad created a space in which the people can grieve their loss collectively, engage in public discourse about the realities of violence in a police state, and collectively imagine a route to a safer, more peaceful future.

Not for Sale

Street art, especially graffiti, inherently subverts the concept of art itself. Street art raises the question: what is art? How do we define art and assess its value? Conventional art that exists in galleries for aesthetic purposes contributes to an artistic culture that is inaccessible and irrelevant to ordinary people. This kind of 'high culture' art is often distant from the lived experiences of the people. It is not relevant to the political and economic struggles that define their daily lives.

However, street art—often made cheaply, anonymously, and housed on the streets—defies this traditional definition of art. According to Bseiso, it has the potential "to liberate hegemonic narratives of what constitutes cultural production."[110] The use of art as a protest strategy expands the definition of art, moving it from a restricted domain in which only aesthetically impressive art created by professionally trained artists is a valid work of art towards a definition of art that encompasses the contributions of ordinary people expressing their struggles, desires, and demands through artistic avenues. Street art emancipates artists from creating work that only contributes to further defining the rigid boundaries of what art can look like.

---

[110] Bseiso, 349.

Furthermore, street art exists outside of the culture industry in which art is commodified and valued based on its ability to be bought and sold. It is "one of the very few art forms that would be able to maintain (if it wanted) its independence from the market."[111] This form of art is not made to serve capitalist economic structures and the neoliberal political ideologies that often accompany it. Scholar Thomas Teo argues that, in neoliberal environments, there is an inverse relationship between money and resistance: "the less that money is involved in art the higher the resisting affordances."[112] Thus, street art is revolutionary in its political message, but also in its existence as a valid cultural contribution.

This idea is especially important considering Egypt's historical legacy, as previously discussed, of popular protest in response to neoliberal economic restructuring. Art, therefore, offers the people an apt form of protest because, by using street art, they refuse to concede to a type of protest that serves the neoliberal political and economic structures against which they are protesting. It is as feminist activist Audre Lorde wrote: the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.

From the Street to Social Media

In addition to its physical accessibility, street art served as means to participate in protest for a majority of Egyptians through its online presence. In general, technology such as cell phones and social media platforms played a crucial role in the Egyptian uprising. It was, after all, a Facebook page condemning police brutality that gave traction

---

[111] Teo, 55.
[112] Ibid.

58

to anti-regime sentiments. As Said's story went viral, others like his emerged, complete

with cell phone videos of police brutality. These messages helped to ignite a

revolutionary fervor throughout the nation. Most Egyptians had access to the internet and

had social media accounts, and thus, access to the networking potential that comes with

modern technology. When it came time for the protests themselves, "cell phones were

especially important for demonstrators to spread news of protest diffusion in real time,

and to share spot instructions or eleventh-hour location changes."[113] El-Ghobashy argues

that the success of the 2011 protests was explicitly due to the collaboration and

instantaneous communication between the three protest subcultures—a feat made

possible only through the use of technology.

  Technology such as social media allowed people to participate in protest without

engaging in a physical sense. Millions of people shared photos and graphics raising

awareness of the issues and symbolizing their support for the protests. Technology

allowed artists' iconic images to move beyond the street, extending revolutionary

messages nationally, regionally, and globally. Thus, even those who were unable to

participate in the revolution through the creation or viewing of street art in public places

were able to view and circulate images of the art via social media. In *Twitter and*

Teargas, Zeynep Tufekci argues that the internet and social media "acts as a de facto

public sphere," albeit one that can be subject to a degree of state surveillance.[114] Thus,

social media functions as a forum of communication similar to the way in which the

street does—both generating discourse among the people, providing a space (whether

---

[113] El-Ghobashy, 10.
[114] Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Teargas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protests* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 139.

literal or figurative) for collective wonder, and inspiring and coordinating collective action.

A plethora of scholarship created since 2011 has addressed the importance of technology, especially social media, in enacting the Egyptian revolution and other concurrent uprisings throughout the Middle East and North Africa. While technology was certainly a valuable tool for protests, we must not overstate technology's role in facilitating the uprisings. Tufekci notes that the uprising had "cultural and political roots that predate the internet but have found a fuller expression in conjunction with the capabilities provided by technology."[115] The people enacted the Egyptian revolution and used technology as a tool of communication. Technology itself does not have agency; the agency to create revolutions lies with the people. Egyptians used social media to amplify their existing grievances and demands.

The ways in which art in public spaces facilitates the democratization of protest by establishing a space for collective wonder, a people's discourse, and the formation of a collective identity separate from the state is *replicated online.* The internet becomes an additional space where street art's power can be witnessed and felt. The following image reflects how art can quickly expand from the street to social media, as both spaces serve as public forums for revolutionary sentiments:

---

[115] Ibid, xxiii.

Figure 6: The four-fingered Rabia salute.

From July to August of 2013, Egyptian protesters staged a sit-in in Rabaa al-Adawiya

Square in Cairo to protest the military coup that removed President Mohammed Morsi of

the Muslim Brotherhood and stifled the democratic process started in the January 2011

revolution. On august 14th, Egyptian security forces stormed the square, shooting

protesters and spraying teargas, ultimately killing more than 800 unarmed Egyptian

civilians—an event that became known as the Rabaa Massacre. In response, protesters

created the image above. The four fingers refer to the word rabba, meaning 'the fourth,'

and commemorate the name of the square in which the massacre took place. The symbol,

which originated with "Cairene minibus drivers who made the hand gesture to announce

the square as their destination, can be interpreted as "a symbolic defense mechanism

against the all-seeing and tyrannical eye of the Egyptian military state."[116] The 'four-

fingered salute,' as it came to be known, was shared widely on social media platforms by

---

[116] Kraidy, 103.

61

Egyptians to honor the protesters and those who died at the hands of the government. While the event was one that related exclusively to Egyptian politics, the image quickly traveled across the Arab region. The prolific sharing of the image, accompanied by calls "to turn Facebook yellow" throughout the Middle East and North Africa, showed solidarity for the Egyptian people and their fight against violent authoritarianism. The simple design allowed millions to participate in its recreation—which was, in itself, a revolutionary action.

Women's Protest: A Revolution Within the Revolution?

Because politics is a gendered process, an analysis of asymmetries of power would be incomplete without an analysis of gender. If we do not address gender, we thus reinforce the notion of the hegemonic male experience. To omit an analysis of gender would be to assume that the male experience of participation in the Egyptian revolution was universal and all-encompassing, which is not only untrue, but also damaging to women's presence in historical narratives. This section will investigate how Egyptian street art reflected three main aspects of gender and protest. First, Egypt's city walls reflected how women's issues, while explicitly gendered, were an integral component of the revolutionary movement in its whole. The state's unwillingness to adequately address gender-based violence and, oftentimes, the state's complicity in and perpetration of such violence formed a major demand for political and social revolution. Second, regardless of the uprising's origin, protest itself was a gendered process. The specific ways in which women encountered the state apparatus *as women* shaped their participation in the revolution. Last, the use of feminist street art allowed protesters to claim a space for

women as complete political citizens, as valid revolutionary participants, and as equal members of the future collectivity.

Women's Causes as Revolutionary Causes

Abuses against women were a driving force in the initiation of popular protests that formed the Egyptian Revolution. Women's issues were not simply an addendum to the uprisings, opportunely raised amidst social and political upheaval. Rather, women's issues formed an integral part of the reasons for the initial protests themselves. Women's experiences of harassment, inequality, and violence were essential in fomenting the widespread sense of discontent that was a necessary precondition for revolution.

In Egypt, specifically in urban centers such as Cairo, sexual harassment and assault became "a social epidemic."[117] To some extent, the issue had to do with social scripts of sexual behavior and cultural expectations of masculinity and femininity.[118] Women's safety, gender-based violence, and sexual assault was also an explicitly political issue because the ways in which the state was implicated in the phenomenon. Beyond cultural and social messages, Egyptian women faced systematic and institutionalized gender-based violence, sanctioned and perpetrated by the state. Not only did the state fail to protect women citizens from violence, they were complicit in the maintenance of systems and structures that imposed this violence. Furthermore, in many

---

[117] Ibid., 164.

[118] This, however, is the case in all societies and is not unique to Egypt or the Arab region. To be clear, the prevalence of sexual violence in Egypt had nothing to do with race, religion, or culture—such explanations are Orientalist in nature and are too often employed in Western discourse in order to cast Arab societies as 'others' and distract from the fact that patriarchy is deeply engrained in 'Western' social, cultural, and political life as well.

instances, security forces—representatives of the state—enacted sexual violence against women as a political disciplinary measure. It is no surprise then, that "sexual defiance emerged alongside political rebellion" in the 2011 protests.[119]

Sexual violence by the state was largely enacted through virginity examinations carried out by male security forces and police offers. Virginity examinations have no medical basis. These tests are *rapes* protected under the guise of medical jargon and legal doctrine. In 2011, a young Egyptian woman named Samira Ibrahim Mohamed pressed charges against the military officers who violated her via a virginity examination. She was subjected to this violent procedure "for simply showing up in a political march on the street."[120] While Mohamed was successful in obtaining a court order halting the practice of virginity testing in the Egyptian civil court, the perpetrators were exonerated in a military court the following year. The military apparatus had grown so powerful that it had overtaken any semblance of legal justice. Thus, the military, the government administration, and the surveillance state these actors created had become a serious threat to the livelihoods of Egyptian women. Mohamed's case reveals the extent to which the state was involved in the maintenance and execution of a violent system that had explicitly gendered implications. Thus, the safety of Egyptian women was not only a social issue and a human issue, but also a political issue.

As state-controlled avenues of redress achieved only a semblance of justice, some Egyptian women turned to creative methods of protest. On October 23, 2011 a young Egyptian activist named Aliaa al-Mahdy posted a nude photograph of herself on her blog,

---

[119] Kraidy, 164.
[120] Ibid., 176.

A Rebel's Diary. The photo, in which al-Mahdy wears only stockings and a red flower in her hair, received over two million hits, catapulting her to international attention. Al-Mahdy wrote that the photo, and her blog, are "screams against a society of violence, racism, sexism, sexual harassment and hypocrisy."[121] Her pairing of these issues together reveals how gendered issues were inextricably connected to broader revolutionary themes. Her photo thus serves as a critical juncture for several key concepts, whose intersection culminated in the Egyptian uprisings and formed the heart of the revolutionary struggle.

While al-Mahdy's post was heralded as a courageous radical act by some, she also received plenty of criticism from conservatives and liberals, Islamists and secularists alike. Many condemned al-Mahdy for violating the boundaries of decency and morality by exposing her nude body to the world. This criticism itself is rooted in sexism, as nude *male* bodies did not and would not receive the same backlash.[122] Moreover, the criticism assumes that women are symbolic figures representing the moral health of the nation or the culture in question. Others argued that Egyptians should focus on creating political change first, as it was the most imminent concern. Blogger Kodr Salameh called on Egyptian women to "'accept the incremental nature of change,'" arguing that al-Madhy should not attempt to instigate a "'sexual revolution'" in a country "that has been unable to complete a single political revolution.'"[123] However, these critics missed a major component of al-Mahdy's message: that issues of sex and gender were invariably tied to

---

[121] Associated Press, "Egypt Activist Posts Herself Nude, Sparks Outrage," Y Net News, November 17, 2011, https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4149840,00.html

[122] *A Rebel's Diary* also included a photograph of a nude man sitting on a wooden chair, posing with his left arm under his chin (See Kraidy, 157).

[123] Kraidy, 161.

political demands; for example, the state's use of police brutality to enforce military rule often manifested as sexual violence against women. Al-Mahdy's protest demonstrated that gendered issues could not be ignored in pursuit of political revolution. Still others criticized al-Mahdy for mimicking Western feminism, arguing that her form of protest was "inauthentic" to the social and cultural context and simply "too radical for Egypt."[124] This disagreement with al-Mahdy's strategy, rather than message, reveals how feminist protest in the Egyptian revolution came from variable approaches and took many different forms.

While recognizing that women's issues played an integral role in the Egyptian uprising, we must also recognize that feminism was (and is) a diverse, complex, and contested landscape. The term *feminism* is a floating signifier; its meaning shifts based on the context and the observer. Problematically, the term *feminism* often connotes a mainstream, also called 'whitestream,' definition of feminism which prioritizes, defends, and centers whiteness and, thus, excludes and oppresses the voices and interests of women of color. Furthermore, there exists an erroneous yet widespread narrative that Islam itself is inherently anti-feminist. Both of these harmful notions are rooted in the long history of "colonial feminism," a term coined by Islamic feminist scholar Leila Ahmed.[125] Therefore, women in the Middle East and North Africa have constantly negotiated their association with gendered agency and justice against Western definitions of feminism. In *Being Muslim,* Sylvia Chan-Malik notes that some women reject identifying themselves as feminists because of "their wariness with whiteness-invested

---

[124] Ibid.
[125] Sylvia Chan-Malik, *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam* (New York: New York University Press, 2018) 24.

"feminism" and its attendant logics of racism, classism, U.S. exceptionalism, and now, anti-Muslim bias."[126] Nonetheless, such women employ alterative discourses and frameworks such as womanism, socialist feminism, and Third World feminisms. Thus, Egyptian women navigate complex matrices of power in their struggle for gendered justice and deploy "a multilayered discourse that allows them to engage with and criticize various individuals, institutions, and systems that limit and oppress them."[127]

The variable and contested nature of feminism reminds us that one Egyptian woman's experience cannot stand in for the experiences of all Egyptian women. This idea is present in the differences between Mohamed and al-Mahdy's protests. Mohamed sought redress for a specific type of violation, while al-Mahdy's online post refused to be collapsed to a single person, government administration, or political system. Mohamed's target was the individual officers who performed the virginity examination, who represented the military and the security system at large. Al-Mahdy, on the other hand, lacked an explicit target, instead addressing the political systems, social structures, and cultural customs that prevented her from exercising the full extent of her gender and sexual expression. Mohamed engaged with Egyptian legal courts, while al-Mahdy engaged with millions of online viewers across the globe. While al-Mahdy's approach and Samira Ibrahim Mohamed's certainly differed, both actors engaged in a meaningful form of feminist protest—alongside and central to revolutionary protest.

---

[126] Ibid., 27.

[127] miriam cooke, "Multiple Critique: Islamic Feminist Rhetorical Strategies," *L'Homme Et La Société* 4, no. 158 (2005), quoted in S. Chan-Malik, *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam* (New York: New York University Press, 2018) 31.

The following image of street art in Cairo exhibits the multifaceted nature of women's voices in the uprisings:

Figure 7: A woman defends herself, alongside text which reads "no harassment." Located in Cairo.

This piece of street art in Cairo, photographed in 2013, depicts a woman defending herself from sexual harassment or violence. The woman projects power: through her wide stance, outstretched arms, and bold red dress, she symbolizes a celebration of female autonomy. Her target is multiple small stick figures which suggest that there is no one individual or entity that perpetrates this harassment, rather, that it is a widespread phenomenon within her society and the institutions that structure that society. The woman herself is a fascinating study in feminism: while she wears high heels, which are typically associated with "Western" women (albeit sometimes seen as a cruel tool of the

male oppressor by western feminists), her style of dress covers her entire body and head. Yet despite being covered, her dress still allows the viewer to see the contours of her body, eliciting a sense of careful rule-breaking. Perhaps the artist attempts to invoke tropes of "Western" feminism and assumptions about Arab feminism in order to place each in conversation with one another. Because her physical manifestation is ambiguous, the woman represents multiple versions of Egyptian feminism and shows how these multiple versions can exist simultaneously and coexist productively. She defends herself using a can of pepper spray or mace, which, interestingly, looks quite similar to a can of spray paint—the main tool of street art. This subtle yoking of weapon and art (whether intended by the artist or not) highlights the power of street art as a weapon of protest. This image is just one of the multitudes of graffiti and murals that existed in Egypt depicting women's struggles and women's liberation alongside political messages. The use of street art as a tool for political protest, such as anti-regime messages and revolutionary sentiments, *and* the use of street art as a tool for feminist protest communicates the connection between political and gender-based protest—again, echoing the centrality of women's voices to the Egyptian revolution.

Women as Protesters

In addition to the gendered nature of revolutionaries' political demands, the act of protesting itself had gendered implications. The ways in which women encountered the state apparatus *as women* reveals that protest was a gendered process. As protesters sought to reclaim authority over public space through the creation of street art and public demonstrations and occupations, women's experiences in protest demonstrated why these

actions were so revolutionary. Distinct from the contributions and sacrifices of many male protesters, the abuses suffered by female protesters were acutely symbolic and significant.

Because women were already under strict discipline by the state through the restriction of full rights to female citizens and the regulation of female bodies through the enforcement of styles of dress, the presence of women in the public sphere was particularly meaningful to the revolutionary movement. As the state sought to limit women's political participation and sexual expression through these strategies, the public sphere—over which revolutionaries and the state battled for control —was thus "hostile to a woman's sexually and politically provocative body."[128] Furthermore, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, women have often been seen as symbolic representatives of the moral virtue of their culture or nation. As mothers and daughters of the nation, female protesters thus carried an added significance which "made their activism more tenuous and perilous than men's."[129] This kind of dangerous activism put women's bodies, in particular, at risk. Because women's bodies often served as a site for battles of cultural and national identity, instances of abuse against female protesters women's bodies were distinctly harrowing—and thus, readily transformed into further inspiration for the revolution.

Moreover, because women are the marked category while men are the unmarked category, women's involvement in protest movements was always understood as *women's protest,* not just as protest. In other words, female revolutionaries' protest could

---

[128] Kraidy, 160.
[129] Ibid., 163.

never be extracted from the revolutionaries' *femaleness*. To see this phenomenon in action, we look to revolutionary martyrs. Scholar Marwan Kraidy observes that "most revolutionary martyrs-at-large were dead and clothed men, whereas the emergence of women as icons in the Arab uprisings tended to result from their disrobement."[130] Female protesters who suffered disrobement at the hands of state security forces became revolutionary martyrs symbolizing the terror imposed by the state particularly because they were stripped of their clothing, signaling their femaleness. Male protesters, on the other hand, became martyrs symbolizing the very same terror, but because of the violence they endured, not because of a gendered implication of that violence.

The incident of the 'blue bra girl' and the ensuing graffiti, such as pictured blow, illustrate how women's protest was distinct from men's in the Egyptian revolutionary context.

https://www.thecairoreview.com/essays/revolution-to-revolution/
Figure 8: 'No to Stripping the People' by Bahia Shehab depicts the famous blue bra icon. Located in Cairo.

---

[130] Ibid., 13.

This piece of graffiti depicts the blue bra of a protester. On December 17th, 2011, Egyptians gathered in Tahrir Square to protest the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which took control after Mubarak resigned. Among them was an unidentified woman who was severely beaten by security forces as she attempted to flee the square. Video footage revealed that, as the officers dragged the woman, her abaya fell away to reveal her jeans and blue bra underneath. The image of the iconic blue bra proliferated across the streets of Egypt, as artists used stencils to quickly and easily replicate it, transforming it into a symbol of the revolution.

Many male protesters had suffered the same, if not objectively worse, abuses by security forces as the blue bra girl (after all, blue bra girl survived, while many other protesters did not). So why did the blue bra become an iconic symbol of the revolution? The answer lies in the particularly gendered aspect of this woman's protest. The bra, an already symbolic garment of womanhood, became a clear message of the state's depravity, "revealing the depths to which the Egyptian state would go in abusing the bodies of citizens if they dared to rebel."[131] Furthermore, because women had been designated as representatives of the nation's well-being, revolutionaries interpreted the attack on the blue bra protester as "an attack on Egyptian women, on the persons of activists, and on the revolutionary movement as a whole."[132] The courageous protest of the blue bra woman and the violent backlash she suffered came to be understood as a symbol of the revolutionary movement's capacity for action in the face of oppressive discipline by the state, serving to reignite and sustain protesters' revolutionary fervor.

---

[131] Ibid., 179.
[132] Ibid., 180-181.

Women as Citizens

In addition to illustrating the gendered aspects of the revolutionaries' agenda and of the protest process itself, an examination of feminist street art reveals the gendered nature of citizenship in revolutionary Egypt. Just as Egyptians used street art to assert their right to public space, women used feminist street art to assert their right the public sphere. Female artists and art centered on the female experience served as an attempt to claim a space for women as valid revolutionary participants and, thus, as full and equal political citizens.

Herein lies a tension between women as they have unfortunately been traditionally understood as props in national battles versus women as valid revolutionary participants and equal political citizens. According to Marwan Kraidy, women's involvement in the Egyptian uprising raised "the crucial question of whether women, and not only men, can be the neutral, prototypical citizen."[133] Thus, the exclusionary apparatus of citizenship in the nation-state, as articulated by Arendt, is *further* problematized by the addition of gender—a factor which Arendt fails to acknowledge. We can recognize in Egyptian feminist street art the efforts made by female artists and protesters to answer Kraidy's question in the affirmative: that women can be full-fledged citizens, rather than only symbolic national figures, and demand to be included as such in the new collectivities being formed through the revolutionary movement.

---

[133] Ibid., 197.

Conclusion

As a trendsetter in the Arab region, Egypt serves as a rich case study for an examination of street art in protest in the 2011 uprisings. By marrying analysis of specific pieces of street art with the broader historical context, we can understand how Egyptian's use of street art as protest served three primary purposes: circumventing and subverting state authority by laying claim to contested public spaces, democratizing the protest process through widely accessible forms of activism and the creation of public discourse, and giving voice to women-centered issues and experiences and raising broader questions about the role of women as revolutionary citizens.

While these three themes have been discussed separately, it is important to recognize that all took place simultaneously; in the public spaces where one of these phenomena occurred, the others took place as well. Furthermore, the ability of street art to circumvent and subvert the state, democratize protest, and communicate the gendered nature of the revolutionary movement are interrelated concepts. Each component of street art in protest discussed here built off of and depended upon the others. For instance, as Egyptian women used street art to voice gendered revolutionary demands, their actions facilitated the democratization of protest by bringing into the fold members of the nation that had largely been excluded from positions of traditional political power.

While Egypt's revolution was certainly marked by violence, both as a reason for and reaction to protest, next we turn to Syria to examine the relationship between art and violence and the role that humor and satire played in navigating this fraught landscape. In 2011, Syria's revolutionary context appeared similar to Egypt's, yet, in the months and

years to follow, Syrians experienced a uniquely different revolutionary trajectory—one

that remains in flux today.

Chapter II

# Satire Under Surveillance:

Humor, Resistance, and Agency in Syria

"The art I do doesn't stop a bullet, doesn't bring a free democratic secular Syria, it doesn't bring back people who died… it gives us a reason to live."
—Kinan Azmeh, Syrian Musician

"Your Turn Has Come, Doctor"

In March of 2011, a group of young adolescent boys spray painted anti-regime graffiti on the walls of their schoolyard in the town of Daraa, Syria. Less than two days later, security forces stormed their houses, arrested the boys, jailed them for over a month, and subjected them to brutal torture. While detained, the boys' families and supporters gathered after the Friday prayers and took to the streets in protest of the boys' treatment, calling for their release. One week later, as a larger crowd poured out of the mosque denouncing the regime, security forces fired into the crowd and killed four men. Additional protests sprung up in nearby villages and quickly emanated further from Darra. By March 25th, the cities of Homs, Latakiyya, Idlib, and Deir al-Zur had all seen protests of hundreds or thousands. The regime's efforts to quell protests only fueled the people's rage. As non-violent protesters were repeatedly met with swift and immediate force, the regime provided further evidence of the violent repression which protesters

were mobilizing against. This began the Syrian revolution, with Daraa as its nucleus. And

the infamous words that catalyzed the uprisings? "Your Turn Has Come, Doctor."
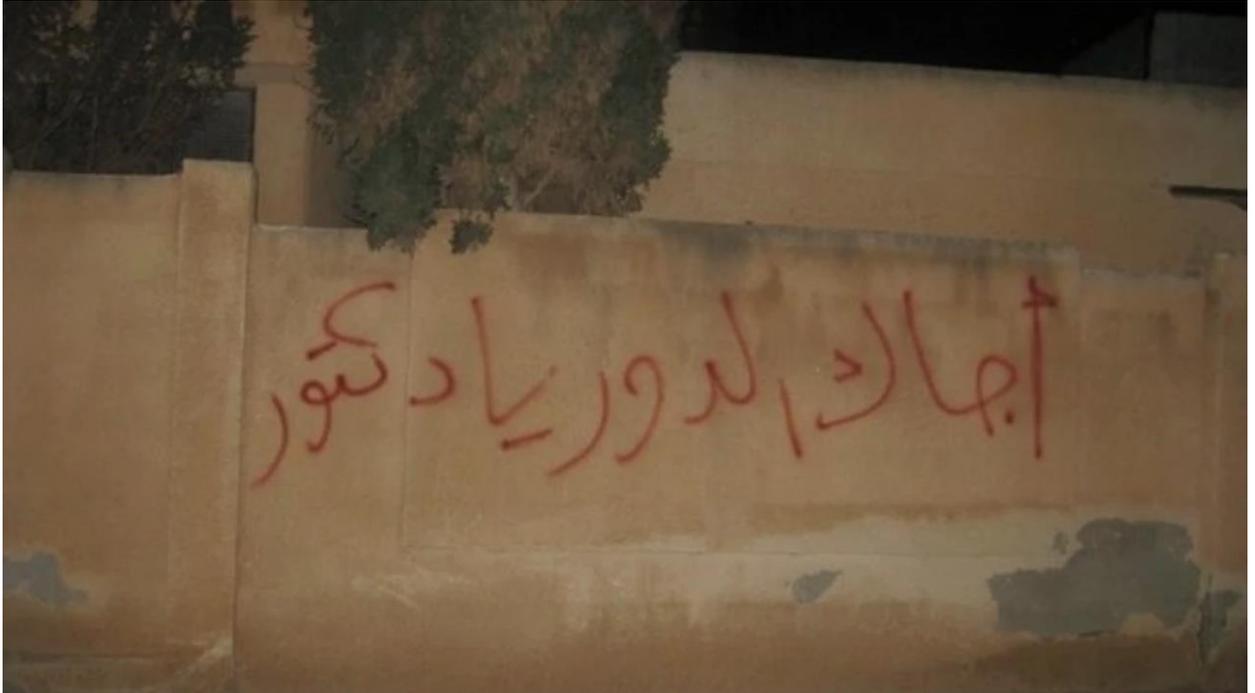
Figure 9: Graffiti painted in March 2011 on a schoolyard wall in Daraa, Syria. The text, which reads "Your Turn Has Come, Doctor," refers to the President of Syria, Bashar al-Assad, who is an ophthalmologist by training.

The text of this inflammatory piece referenced the ongoing uprisings across the

Middle East and North Africa and suggested a trajectory in which Syria would also

partake in this regional shift. To what extent was the Syrian uprising similar and distinct

from other protest movements and eventual revolutions in the region? When protests

erupted in late 2010 and early 2011, primarily in the trendsetter nations of Tunisia and

Egypt, "Syria initially appeared immune" to the trend.[134] Because of the Syrian

government's chronic imposition of restrictions on civic participation, onlookers doubted

---

[134] William L. Cleveland and Martin P. Bunton, "The 2011 Arab Uprisings and Their Aftermath," *A History of the Modern Middle East,* 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 548.

the Syrian public's ability to adequately sustain protest and organize a coordinated revolutionary effort. These theories were, of course, quickly proved wrong, as protest spread beyond the town of Daraa and across the nation. Similar to other nations of the Arab uprisings, Syrians "experienced the same frustrations and expressed the same resentments due to widespread poverty, human rights violations, and the lack of representation that came with inherited presidencies."[135]

On the other hand, Syria offers a unique revolutionary context that cannot and should not be collapsed to fit neatly into a broader regional storyline. Syria stands apart from the other Arab uprisings as a particularly harrowing story of violence, police brutalization, systematic oppression, and warfare. While protesters and bystanders across the MENA certainly experienced danger and violence during the political, economic, and social turmoil beginning in late 2010, the Syrian uprisings offered a distinct experience of protest. Unlike other Arab nations, Syria's uprising devolved into a nine-year civil war which continues to date. The initially non-violent public protests in Syria were met with immediate and swift force by the Assad regime. The regime's violent crackdown only strengthened protesters' resolve, igniting a "cycle of repression and resistance."[136] The relationship between the state and the public became particularly gruesome, devolving into an ongoing civil war in which 300,000 people lost their lives and twelve million were displaced in the first five years alone.[137]

Each nation involved in the Arab uprisings experienced similar revolutionary themes but displayed unique characteristics and followed distinct trajectories. Just as the

---

[135] Ibid.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Ibid., 549.

uprisings were not monolithic, neither was street art. The role of street art and protest was not entirely uniform; rather, it was flexible and adaptable to differing and evolving contexts. Street art is a tool of protest, and therefore, the public harness it in service of their collective goals which may be nationally specific. Syrian street art demonstrates the ways in which art is uniquely able to capture the aesthetics of brutality and communicate the suffering inflicted by violent regimes, serving as a space to hold the public's collective pain. Amidst the literal destruction of the war-torn nation, art flourished— juxtaposing destruction and creation *and* serving as testimony to the resilience of the people. In their art forms, Syrians harnessed the power of humor and satire to wrench power and control from the hands of the oppressors and empower the people.

A Note on Organization

The themes discussed in Chapter One—circumventing and subverting state authority, the democratization of protest, and the gendered nature of revolutionary movements—were and are present in Syria as well. For example, Yassin Al Haj Saleh argues that the Syrian uprising "speaks to a diverse spectrum in Syrian society in terms of orientation, culture, religion and sect," and purports that "it is the closest thing to a Syrian 'common.'"[138] Thus, the Syrian uprising of 2011 and ensuing revolution certainly democratized protest in a way that the country had never previously experienced. While acknowledging the presence and influence of these factors in Syria, this chapter will

---

[138] Yassin Al Haj Saleh, "The Syrian "Common": The Uprising of the Working Society," Jadaliyya, Arab Studies Institute, August 14, 2011, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/24314/The-Syrian-Common-The-Uprising-of-the-Working-Society.

move the analysis of street art in protest forward by examining the themes of art amidst destruction, collective pain, and humorous modes of empowerment.

Nonetheless, the themes explored in this chapter are not exclusive to Syria. Many other nations across the MENA—those that experienced uprisings and those that did not—displayed similar themes through their street art. However, the Syrian uprising offers a context that most aptly elucidates these themes.[139] Specifically, the focus on violence in Syria does not diminish the real, pervasive, and devastating effects of violence in the protest movements of other Arab nations. As we move forward, it is important to remember that the themes addressed in this chapter are not exclusively Syrian but are best illuminated by the Syrian context.

The Syrian Security State

What was the context that made the Syrian uprisings distinct from other Arab uprisings? In large part, the difference was a result of the nature of the state apparatus which dictated not only a political structure, but also played a heavy hand in structuring the entirety of Syrian society. While Syria is formally classified as a presidential republic, the Ba'ath party—controlled by the al-Assad family and select Alawite elites—retains complete control. Furthermore, until the early stages of the uprising, president Bashar al-Assad had broad and unchecked authority under a state of emergency decree which had been in place since the Ba'ath party came to power via a coup in 1963. Then, in 1970, Hafez al-Assad executed another military coup that consolidated leadership among the Alawite community. By appointing relatives and loyal members of the Alawite

---

[139] In Chapter Three, we will address the transnational element of protest in the region.

community to positions of leadership, the Assads created a pervasive intelligence network in which "the army's leadership and the multiple security organizations were more tightly interwoven with the ruling circle in Syria than in Egypt or Tunisia."[140] When Hafez al-Assad died in 2000, his son Bashar al-Assad succeeded him as president of Syria.

We can understand the al-Assad family's monopoly over Syria as a result of their strategic *political instrumentalisation*. Samira Mobaied argues that during the five decades that the Assad family has ruled Syria, they "'instrumentalised' the Ba'ath Party and the army in order to perpetuate their power."[141] According to sociologist Marc Uhalde, instrumentalisation refers to "the diversion of a process or object towards purposes other than those initially conceived, an illegitimate diversion with regard to the values or normative conceptions implicit in the process."[142] Political instrumentalisation then, as defined by sociologist Yannick Barthe, is the "process of gaining access to the political sphere for a particular cause, a technical subject or a social problem which previously had not been treated politically."[143] Essentially, this means that processes, organizations, institutions, etc. are used towards amassing and maintaining political power, even if that purpose is an illegitimate use of the process, organization, institution, etc. or is in conflict with its values or normative use.

In the context of Syria, Mobaied argues that political instrumentalisation is manifested in the instrumentalisation of civil society, education, the constitution,

---

[140] Cleveland and Bunton, 548.
[141] Samira Mobaied, "The Baatho-Assadist System, a System of Political Instrumenalisation," *Open Journal of Political Science* 10, no. 1 (2020): 125.
[142] Ibid., 124.
[143] Ibid., 125.

secularism and religions, the opposition, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, media and culture, and space and cities—all things whose intended purpose is *not* to strengthen and maintain the Assad regime. Hafez and Bashar al-Assad, however, have insidiously infiltrated these spaces and coopted them for the purpose of furthering the regime's agenda. For example, the Syrian Constitution's purpose was to institute a republican form of government consisting of popular elections and a multi-party system. The Assad regime has, however, instrumentalised the Syrian Constitution to create a decidedly unfree and corrupt political system. The People's Assembly, the legislative body, is made up of members that are "elected via lists drawn up by the Ba'ath Party and the National front, under the control of the intelligence services."[144] These elections, therefore, are not free nor fair. In reality, the Ba'ath Party is "the only political party standing for election, and the only one governing the country since 1963."[145] In February of 2012, the country adopted a new constitution in which there is no reference to a political party. However, this new constitution is largely considered a sham, as it grants the President power over the executive, legislative, and judicial branches.[146]

Any opposition to the Ba'ath Party has also been instrumentalised by the regime. Mobaied traces this phenomenon to 1980 when the Ba'ath Party violently repressed the Muslim Brotherhood—a moment that signaled "the beginning of the annihilation of civil society and all independent political life." Since then, both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad

---

[144] Ibid., 127.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Neil MacFarquhar and Alan Cowell, "Syrians Said to Approve Charter as Battles Go On," The New York Times, The New York Times Company, February 27, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/28/world/middleeast/syrian-violence-continues-as-west-dismisses-new-charter.html.

have deliberately constructed enemies out of any and all political opponents. Through this strategy, the regime was able to create a narrative about the 2011 uprisings that discredited and invalidated the revolutionary movement. Mobaied's argument that the regime instrumentalised the opposition is corroborated by Jadaliyya Reports' observations that the regime seeks to justify excessive force "on the pretext that the government is under attack by armed gangs."[147] By casting the protesters as illicit thugs rather than valid political players, the regime was able to villainize the opposition, and thus deny legitimacy to the popular uprisings and further oppress the Syrian people.

Of particular relevance to street art is the regime's instrumentalisation of space and cities. Mobaied echoes David Harvey's assertion that space and power are related. As we recall from the introduction of this thesis, Harvey argued that through the domination of space, which is a source of power, a state can continually reproduce its own authority. Given this relationship, Mobaied purports that the Assad regime structured public spaces in a manner that encouraged spatial fragmentation. This fragmentation facilitated the regime's ability to impose a system of surveillance, which served as "a modality of the territorialisation of dominant groups and political institutions."[148] Just as the Assad family and the Ba'athist party held exclusive control over political life, they too held near-exclusive control over the apportionment of public space. By fragmenting public space, the regime made it difficult for Syrians to physically organize and mobilize, while concurrently making it easy for government security forces to track and regulate the

---

[147] Jadaliyya Reports, "Deadly Detention: Deaths in Custody and Popular Protest in Syria," Jadaliyya, Arab Studies Institute, September 23, 2011, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/24433/Deadly-Detention-Deaths-in-Custody-and-Popular-Protest-in-Syria.
[148] Mobaied, 130.

activities of citizens. From Mobaied's explanation of the regime's instrumentalisation of space, we can see how the regime manipulated space as a tool for surveillance and the creation of a security state.

These various forms of political instrumentalisation reveal how the concept "is a fundamental method of the Syrian political system," in which "it is used systematically and methodically to incorporate and subjugate the whole of Syrian society."[149] Upon the uprising, the regime attempted to shut down any challenges to the existing structure of political instrumentalisation through the use of violence. Despite the fact that the initial protests were largely nonviolent, the regime responded with disproportionate force. Assad deployed heavily armed security forces in an attempt to squash ongoing protests and prevent Syrians from organizing or executing other demonstrations. Examples of these violent crackdowns include "using snipers to shoot into crowds of peaceful protesters," "deploying army tanks to shell residential areas," and targeting "funerals of people killed in earlier protests."[150] According to Amnesty International, over 1,800 people were killed in the first six months of the 2011 uprising. Security forces also made use of widespread arrest and detainment practices. Many of those arrested were "held incommunicado at unknown locations at which torture and other ill-treatment are reported to be rife."[151] As a result, the number of deaths in custody has risen sharply since the Syrian conflict began and, in many of these cases, "there is evidence that torture caused or contributed to the deaths."[152] Amnesty International reports that "some of the

---

[149] Ibid.
[150] Jadaliyya Reports, "Deadly Detention."
[151] Ibid.
[152] Ibid.

dead, who include children, were also mutilated either before or after death in particularly

grotesque ways" before their bodies were returned to the victims' families.[153] In short,

Assad rules through terror—targeting protesters, bystanders, and innocent civilians alike.

The following image illustrates many Syrians' experiences under the Assad

regime:

Figure 10: A body behind bars depicted on a poster as part of the Syrian artists' poster collective 'Alshaab alsori aref tarekh' ('The Syrian People Know Their Way').

---

[153] Ibid.

The poster depicts a body imprisoned behind bars in a tiny cell. The prisoner is hunched over, with the face buried in his or her hands. The feeble position in which the prisoner is made small communicates a sense of defeat. The nakedness, as well, invokes a sense of helplessness in the face of the regime and the security forces' brutal tactics. Furthermore, the close walls seem to squeeze the prisoner in, conveying a sense of suffocation. As the physical walls of the prison tighten around the body, the prison cell serves as a metaphor for the way in which the regime tightens its control over Syrian society. Assad and his security forces confront the people at every angle, continually and increasingly repressing Syrians. The facelessness of the prisoner reflects the anonymity of the individual, and thus, elicits the sense that it could be any ordinary Syrian. The fact that security forces conducted mass arrests and extrajudicial killings with no regard for due process only strengthens the viewer's sense that the body depicted represents the 'everyman.'

The text reads "They struggled for our sake. Let's struggle for their freedom." The line functions on two levels. First, it serves as a call to action for Syrians to continue demanding for the release of political prisoners. Second, it also functions as a call for continued and sustained revolutionary activity. As the person depicted here is imprisoned for dissenting against the regime political hegemony, the piece calls on Syrians to work towards a system wherein individuals have freedoms of expression and assembly and the right to political participation. Even though the poster is devoid of ornamentation or graphic detail, it conveys an emotional weight. The simple design elevates the message of the poster: Syrians can continue resisting Assad's security state by harnessing the power of comradery and community.

The Cult of the Leader

In addition to rampant abuse by security forces, the Syrian regime created a surveillance state by infusing daily life with propaganda praising the Assad family. In the presidencies of both Hafez al-Assad and Bashar al-Assad, the regime projected the president, his image, and his persona as an idealized and heroic leader of the nation. The Assads cultivated a *cult of the leader* wherein the leader himself was equated to the regime, the government, the state, and the entire Syrian nation. In both public and private Syrian schools, for example, students were required to repeat the Ba'ath Party's slogans, were confronted with the Party's logo in textbooks, and were surrounded by photographs of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad. The infiltration of the education system and the manipulation of curriculum attempted to "unify society under the control of the Ba'athist and Assad system."[154] The Assads tried to inculcate even the youngest members of the nation into the cult of the leader by saturating their early lives with propaganda.

Belal A. M. Salaymeh conceptualizes the Assad regime as a form of *patrimonialism*.[155] According to sociologist Max Weber, patrimonialism is a system wherein "an administration and a military force…are purely personal instruments of the master."[156] The military, the Ba'ath Party, security forces, the justice system, and economic policies became Assad's personal tools of power. As the state apparatus became entirely dominated by Assad, there became a consequent association between the

---

[154] Mobaied, 127.
[155] Belal A. M. Salaymeh, "Impact of Neopatrimonialism on the Trajectory of the Conflict in Syria," (Master's thesis, The Graduate School of Social Sciences of Middle East Technical University, 2018).
[156] Max Weber, *Economy and Society; An outline of Interpretive Sociology,* ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 215.

state and Assad. In other words, the state begins to be equated with Assad himself. According to Salaymeh, this "personalization of the regime" functioned "in such a way that the patrimonial role of Assad started to be unquestionable."[157] Assad was no longer a symbol of the state, he *was* the state.

In a literal sense, Bashar al-Assad staged himself as the embodiment of the Syrian nation-state. The regime plastered images of Assad throughout public spaces. His likeness was pervasive, all-encompassing, and omnipresent. Assad's face and watchful eyes permeated cities and towns across the country, reinforcing the system of surveillance that controlled Syrian life. As Amal Hanano wrote in October of 2011, "In the end, after the terror, torture and murder, the tyrant rules with his face. The people cannot escape it, his image is all-consuming, devouring our streets, our walls, our shops, our screens."[158] Again, we are reminded of the relationship between control of public space and power, as purported by Jürgen Habermas and David Harvey. From Harvey's essential question— "In whose image and to whose benefit is space to be shaped?"—to Edward Soja's theory of the spatiality of injustice, we can see how the physical presence of Bashar al-Assad's likeness throughout public spaces serves to reproduce and maintain the regime's structures of power. As Bashar al-Assad constructed his image as equivalent to the regime, the state, and Syria, he sought personal power over all three.

However, the cult of the leader did not go unchallenged. The following image shows one way Syrians resisted Assad's personalization of the regime:

---

[157] Salaymeh, 103.
[158] Amal Hanano, "Portraits of a People," Jadaliyya, Arab Studies Institute, October 31, 2011, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/24567/Portraits-of-a-People.

Figure 11: A defaced and bloodied poster of Bashar al-Assad which was spray-painted over with the words "We are coming, duck face."

In a city street, a larger-than-life poster of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad stands

defaced. We can imagine that protesters removed the poster from its designated location

and placed it in the middle of the street amid heaps of garbage and abandoned furniture.

Even that action in itself is highly subversive; "in a harshly authoritarian environment

like Syria's, each publicly and collectively expressed view or frame of noncompliance

becomes an act of protest."[159] Thus, this relocating of the poster reflects a shift from

Assad as a prestigious national figure to a dirtied remnant of an urban street.

---

[159] Reinoud Leenders, "'Oh Buthaina, Oh Sha'ban—the Hawrani Is Not Hungry, We Want Freedom!': Revolutionary Framing and Mobilization at the Onset of the Syrian Uprising" in *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa* ed. Joel Beinin and Frederic Variel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 255.

Furthermore, the words spray-painted across Assad's photograph— "We are coming"—

reveal the protesters' intention to continue challenging the presidents' governing

authority, his surveillance tactics, and the cult of the leader. The phrase suggest that this

symbolic act is just the beginning of their efforts to resist Assad. Furthermore, the

protesters have painted devil ears atop Assad's head and covered his mouth with dripping

red paint resembling blood. By adding these details, protesters portray Assad as a flesh-

eating monster capable of brutal violence and *literally* show that Bashar al-Assad's image

is tainted with the blood of the Syrian people.

In addition to defacing official images of the President, protesters generated new,

alternative images of the leader:

https://suzeeinthecity.wordpress.com/2011/08/11/protest-graffiti-solidarity-with-syria-spreads-from-cairo/

Figure 12: A stenciled piece of graffiti of Bashar al-Assad with the slogan "The People Want the Downfall of the Regime." Sighted in July, 2011. The graffiti has since been painted over.

This image shows a simple black and white stencil of the figure of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Typically, the Syrian people are confronted with official images of the leader created, distributed, and posted by the regime. In this case, however, the Syrian people created their own images of the leader, inverting the traditional flow of power imposed by the state down upon the populace. By creating their own images, the people challenged the state's power to dictate what forms of the President would be displayed, essentially unsettling the regime's attempt to create a cult of the leader. Furthermore, this piece of graffiti is accompanied by the text "The People Want the Downfall of the Regime." This phrase originated in Egypt during the protests in Tahrir Square and quickly spread throughout the region, becoming the universal slogan for the Arab uprisings of 2011. By pairing Assad's image with this slogan, protesters infuse Assad's likeness with revolutionary meaning. The presence of Assad's figure in public places no longer symbolizes his reified status and ultimate power but rather marks localities of resistance.

Covert Mobilization

To outside observers, it may have seemed that the Syrian uprising appeared suddenly and without warning. In reality, however, the Syrian uprising of 2011 stems from a long undercurrent of dissatisfaction and oppression, dating back to the leadership of Hafez al-Assad. While the graffiti in Daraa provided the immediate impetus for

Syrians en masse to act, the protests had been long brewing beneath the surface. For decades, the Syrian regime's totalitarian grip over civic and political life prevented the public expression of a robust opposition. Nonetheless, Syrian citizens were discussing politics, organizing the public, and mobilizing an opposition in covert and private ways. Reinoud Leenders argues that "the Syrian case can give us important clues to how acts and modes of effective revolutionary protest and claim-making develop without strong and consequential prior repertoires of contention."[160] Thus, the protest movement in Syria did not look the same as it did other Arab countries because Syria lacked the public, visible "repertories of contention" that we saw in places like Egypt.

In the face of a regime that was deliberately designed to prevent collective dissent, how did Syrians quickly and explosively capitalize on the momentum of Daraa? Leenders argues that Syrians relied on the "'hidden transcript' of the subordinated."[161] This "hidden transcript" refers to the experiences, grievances, desires, and demands that had existed collectively among Syrians for years. The hidden transcript formed the framework for the revolutionary movement when these covert, private ideas exploded publicly in the spring of 2011. Upon the protests in Daraa, many Syrians "expressed profound delight in instantly recognizing their own long-standing grievances in what was now displayed and shared publicly for the very first time."[162] As a result, the airing of the hidden transcript fostered "an extraordinary level of group solidarity, camaraderie, and sense of collective purpose."[163]

---

[160] Leenders, 248.
[161] Ibid., 250.
[162] Ibid., 251.
[163] Ibid.

The evolution of the Syrian uprising reminds us of the extent to which the Arab uprisings were nationally specific. In Egypt, we saw the development of a healthy protest culture through the mobilization of the working class. In the Syrian context, however, the regime's near-exclusive hold over public space and civic and political life forced Syrians to organize their opposition in less visible ways. This covert mobilization, which Syrians had been practicing for decades, laid the groundwork for the explosive public uprising which began in Daraa in the spring of 2011.

Art Under Surveillance

Bashar al-Assad's surveillance state dictated strict requirements for artistic content and produced serious repercussions for artists who dared to express dissatisfaction or criticism of the regime in their work. According to official policies, the regime censors artistic production through the preapproval of exhibitions and events in order to maintain a "firm grip on virtually every aspect of local visual culture."[164] The regime enforced censorship through violent force as well. In June of 2015, the Syrian Network for Human Rights documented the extrajudicial killing of 22 artists (14 of whom were killed by government forces, including four who were tortured to death) and the arrest and kidnapping of 57 artists (50 of whom were kidnapped by government

---

[164] Maymanah Farhat, "After Daraa: Syrian Art Today," Jadaliyya, Arab Studies Institute, April 29, 2012, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/25710/After-Daraa;-Syrian-Art-Today=.

forces, including nine who were still under arrest or forcibly disappeared at the time of the report's publication).[165]

The regime's violent crackdown against artists terrorized the artistic community and successfully silenced some artists. According to Maymanah Farhat, the regime's intimidation tactics, such as the murder, torture, and imprisoning of artists and the ransacking of their studios, "have created a pervasive climate of fear."[166] As a result, many prominent artists, curators, and gallery owners fled the country and sought refuge in neighboring states during the uprising. In April of 2012, Maymanah Farhat wrote that "much of the Damascus art scene has been brought to a standstill."[167] However, some artists saw art as an apt form of protest and were further motivated by the regime's violent backlash against subversive art. It was, after all, an artistic act of defiance that sparked the protests in Daraa and paved the way for the nation's uprising. This spirit of subversive artistic agency "inspired countless Syrian artists to take further steps toward breaking through the ominous system of policing that has long hindered creative production."[168] As galleries closed and professionally trained artists fled, others turned to nontraditional creative pursuits. Thus, even as the formal art scene in Syria collapsed, the uprising unlocked "a powerful counter-culture" and "imbued daily life with an unprecedented outburst of creative expression" in which street art emerged as a vibrant revolutionary practice.[169]

---

[165] "Syrian Artists: Between Freedom and Oppression," Syrian Network for Human Rights, June 28, 2015, http://sn4hr.org/blog/2015/06/28/8474/, 3.

[166] Farhat, "After Daraa."

[167] Ibid.

[168] Ibid.

[169] Layla Al-Subaidi, "Syria's Creative Resistance," Jadaliyya, Arab Studies Institute, June 8, 2012, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/26190/Syria%60s-Creative-Resistance.

Satirizing the Leader

Syrian creatives used humor as a primary tool in protest art in order to wrench power from the hands of the oppressor. In *Street Art of Resistance,* Mohamed M. Helmy and Sabine Frerichs argue that humor in the Arab uprisings "flipped the balance of power on the street, and helped sustain the spirit of resistance."[170] In the case of Syria, humor was successful because it evaded the fear that the regime intentionally created. In fact, Helmy and Frerichs note that authoritarian environments produced the most active stream of humorous art. Through the use of humor and satire, the artists assume the roles of "both analysts and activists."[171] As analysts, artists succinctly portray their circumstances, condensing reality and "reducing it to absurdity."[172] As activists, artists use satire to question the origins of authority. Through satire, Syrians desecrated symbols of power—particularly the image of Bashar al-Assad. By visually portraying the president in a disrespectful manner, Syrians mocked his authority. In other words, humor resisted the bounds of Assad's strategies of terror.

A common form of satire for Syrians was the use of caricature. According to Awad and Wagoner, the Arabic word for caricature "etymologically connects the symbolical activity of 'joking' or 'criticizing' with the much more physical activity of hammering or upsetting."[173] Thus, the process of caricaturizing is similar to "'poking'

---

[170] Mohamed M. Helmy and Sabine Frerichs, "Sheherazade Says No: Artful Resistance in Contemporary Egyptian Political Cartoon," *Street Art of Resistance,* eds. Sarah H. Awad & Brady Wagoner (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 349.
[171] Helmy and Frerichs, 371.
[172] Ibid., 366.
[173] Ibid., 351.

sensitive zones with many insolent and intrusive fingers."[174] In caricaturizing the

President, Syrian artists took aim at characteristics of Assad, his regime, or his state that

were "sensitive zones" in order to maximize the effect of the artwork. For example,

Syrian artists often portrayed Assad as a duck after an email exchange between Assad

and his wife was leaked, in which she referred to him as "duck" as an affectionate

nickname:

https://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-03-30/assads-nickname-duck-goes-viral/3923064
Figure 13: A poster displaying Bashar al-Assad as Donald Duck at a gathering in Hasaka, Syria.

This poster depicts Assad as Donald Duck, the cartoon character created by Walt Disney

Productions and made popular by children's television programs. Donald Duck is an

---

[174] Ibid., 351.

intentionally goofy character who talks with a marked lisp and waddles comically. The artist creates three layers of satirical analysis here: first, Assad's depiction as an animal dehumanizes him; second, Assad is analogized to a duck—a small, relatively weak animal which strips him of his power; third, Assad is portrayed as Donald Duck, a laughable sidekick who is often exceptionally unlucky and hot-tempered. All three levels of satire serve to defile the heroic image Assad has created for himself and expose Assad as the people truly see him. Furthermore, Assad's assertive posture, communicated via the position of his arms on his hips, is entirely betrayed by the dejected look on his face. The sad frown and gentle slope of Assad's eyes communicates a glum emotion that appears pathetic. Assad seems to resemble a despondent teacher or parent who has been disrespected by his pupils. Through this portrayal, the artist invokes a faux-paternalism that reinforces Syrians' understanding of what Assad is *not*—a respected father of the nation.

Likewise, the following mural makes use of the nickname:

Figure 14: A mural depicting Bashar al-Assad and others as ducks being fed by a human.

In this mural, Assad, along with other members of the Assad family and surveillance state officials, is shown with the body of a duck. A human stands next to Assad and feeds him seeds or grains. The artists' choice to show Assad being fed paints Assad as dependent and helpless. Furthermore, the distinction between Assad's duck body and human head symbolizes Assad's position as a symbolic figure of the regime, rather than a true leader of the nation. In this artistic depiction, Assad appears more threatening than he actually his—perhaps reflecting the Syrian people's growing willingness to confront Assad's rule head-on.

Syrian artists' depiction of Assad as a duck is especially ironic because the family name "al-Assad" means "the lion"—a nickname that the al-Assad family has often exploited in the media. Thus, artists also mock Bashar al-Assad's official epithet which

projects strength and ferocity by replacing it with a humorous new nickname with a silly association. The transition from lion to duck represents Assad's fall from grace in the eyes of the people. Whereas sullying official portraits of Assad was a form of resistance to the regime's attempt to create a cult of the leader, satirizing Assad worked as a covert tactic under the surveillance state to generate group consensus.

Fragmented Public Spaces in a Violent Reality

How did Syria, a country ravaged by years of regime brutality, indiscriminate violence, and persistent warfare, become a hotbed of revolutionary imagery? This warfare destroyed many key public spaces and created a fractured urban landscape. As the uprising emanated from Daraa and swept across the country in the spring of 2011, protests moved increasingly closer to the capital of Damascus but were unable to occupy the city's major squares. In April, peaceful protesters at Abbasiyeen Square just east of Damascus were met with heavy gunfire by the regime. Likewise, demonstrations in the central squares of Homs and Hama were dispersed by the regime's swift and violent backlash. In the case of the Egyptian revolution, protesters asserted agency through the cooptation of key public spaces; as Egyptians occupied Tahrir Square for weeks, they confronted the heart of state apparatus and staked their claim to the city. In Syria, however, protesters were unable to reach central Damascus—home to the political and security establishment. Syrians were prevented from protesting in centralized, urban public spaces in the same manner as Egyptians.

Protesters' inability to occupy key public spaces—both as a result of physical destruction and surveillance by the regime's security forces—pushed Syrians to seek

alternative spaces for protest. Of this phenomenon Hassan Abbas wrote, "Because this public space was destroyed early on, it was transmuted from the physical to the cultural and spiritual sphere and dispersed all over Syria like droplets of water." Syrians used hand-held posters in demonstrations and marches, produced original video content and distributed it via the internet, and made ample use of remaining spaces for street art— forming new collective spaces for the revolutionary movement to flourish. For example, scholar Stephennie Mulder argues that poster art and photographs of the posters online "becomes a kind of permanent global wall for 'street' art."[175] Likewise, Donatella Della Ratta bolsters Mulder's claim by highlighting the central role of modern technology in the production of revolutionary imagery. Syrians used the internet and social media as accessible tools that allowed for a mass of creators and viewers alike. Here, the context in which the content is produced becomes equally if not more important than the content itself—reminding us of Henri Lefebvre's assertion in *The Production of Space* that the process of production and the product itself are two inseparable aspects of space. Syrian art of this kind not only symbolizes creativity, but also "a new relationship with power and authority."[176] Thus, the context in which this art is produced reinforces the significance of the very act of producing such art. In fact, these alternative tactics acted as another element of resistance; as they worked to "help undo the social fragmentation and re-connect people," these tactics thus defied the very fragmentation that the regime had

---

[175] Stephennie Mulder, "Beeshu's Laugh: The Arts of Satire in the Syrian Uprising," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 11, no. 2 (2018): 191.
[176] Donatella Della Ratta, "Syrian Hands Raised: User-Generated Creativity Between Citizenship and Dissent," Jadaliyya, Arab Studies Institute, October 31, 2012, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/27307/Syrian-Hands-Raised-User-Generated-Creativity-Between-Citizenship-and-Dissent.

strategically engineered to maintain the cult of the leader, the public's obedience, and absolute power.[177]

Thus, the Syrian context reveals that robust, intact public spaces are *not*, in fact, necessary for the successful production of creative protest such as street art. Syrian protest art shows us that street art, as a form of public discourse and revolutionary messaging, transcends the street. In exposing the hidden transcript, "the distance between artists and audiences, between producers and consumers, between one citizen and another, fades away," revealing how art can facilitate connection *even* in fragmented public spaces and under a surveillance state.[178] Take the following image, for example:

https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/syrians-are-leaving-graffiti-all-over-aleppo-messages-assad
Figure 15: A wall of a bombed building in Aleppo reads "We'll Come Back, My Love."

---

[177] Ibid.
[178] Ibid.

This piece of graffiti was spray-painted on the crumbling wall of a bombed-out building in Aleppo, Syria. The city of Aleppo, a key battleground area in the Syrian civil war, was caught in a four-year deadlock that caused massive destruction to the infrastructure and forced millions to flee their homes. The physical location of the graffiti on the crumbling wall infuses even lost spaces with a revolutionary message and serves to sustain the spirit of resistance. The message of the graffiti exists in direct conversation with the devastation of the war; it is an example of the creation that stems from destruction. The choice of the word "back," illustrates the artist's strong feelings of home and his or her pride for the city. Furthermore, the plural pronoun "we" asserts a *collective* ownership of the space. As the graffiti addresses the viewer as "my love," it communicates a message of humanity, community, and comradery between an anonymous artist and each individual onlooker.

Likewise, the following mural embellishes the remains of fractured a public space with a message of collective revolutionary hope:

Figure 16: In this mural, painted by rebel fighter and artist Abu Malik al-Shami, a young girl offers flowers to a grave. The text reads: "Our roses are for those who watered them with their blood." Located in Darayya.

This mural depicts a young child standing in front of a grave with outstretched arms, offering a single flower. In terms of physical location, the crumbling wall echoes the collective hardships experienced by the Syrian people, while the vibrant painting asserts a sense of collective resistance—surviving in even the most destructive of places. More specifically, the grave is simple and unornamented, communicating that it could be the grave of any ordinary, unknown Syrian. In this mural, the grave functions as a symbol of the deaths of thousands of Syrian combatants and civilians alike who have lost their lives to the ongoing conflict. A child, shoeless and disheveled, stands facing this grave. The child is small in stature, while the grave is large and imposing. The physical layout of the mural, wherein the grave is on an equal plane as the child, portrays it as force equal to, if not exceeding, life. The mural illustrates the constant battle between life and death that

103

Syrians must fight each day. However, the text interjects a sense of hope and forward progress. The phrase reads, "Our roses are for those who watered them with their blood." Here, the artist suggests that something positive, beautiful even, can come from such suffering. Death is not wasted, for it serves as a means to life for the next generation. Thus, despite its grim and solemn appearance, the mural offers a message of hope for the future of the Syrian people.

Self-Satire

In addition to satirizing the leader and his regime, Syrian artists engaged in a unique form of self-satire. According to Stephennie Mulder, self-satire is defined as "a form of visual critique directed simultaneously at the regime and the self."[179] Mulder distinguishes between humor that "punches up" to mock the leader, the regime, or those in power and humor that "punches down" to reveal the position of ordinary people.[180] While self-satire "punches down" to addresses the role of the people, it carefully distinguishes between agency and circumstances. In other words, it does not blame Syrians for their role in conflict, but rather illuminates how Syrians are victims of circumstances beyond their control. Mulder explains that self-satire shows "ordinary people inexorably entangled, against their will, in the realm of the terrifying and the ridiculous" and that these circumstances were "*created* by the regime."[181]

Furthermore, Mulder concludes that self-satire was a uniquely Syrian phenomenon. While creative protest exploded in nearly every part of the Middle East and

---

[179] Mulder, 174.
[180] Ibid., 183.
[181] Ibid., 177.

North Africa during the political and social upheavals of the spring of 2011 and beyond, most of these regions generated traditional political satire directed at government regimes, state policies, and national leaders. In other words, they only punched *up.* Self-satire, on the other hand, was "a notable characteristic" of the Syrian context.[182] Mulder argues that this phenomenon of self-satire stems from Syria's "long tradition of black humor" that artists cultivated during decades of consistent repression enforced by the Assad family's uninterrupted rule since the 1970s.[183]

As the 2011 uprising escalated to become the Syrian civil war, artists drew upon this practice of dark humor to reflect the complicated nature of the conflict. Through satire, they highlighted the reality that the Syrian people were, in select ways, complicit in the perpetuation of violence. Take the following image, for example:

https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-37523340

---

[182] Ibid.
[183] Ibid., 182.

Figure 17: In a school destroyed by bombing, a cartoon of a student writes "We used to joke and say, 'God please destroy the school'… and he did." Created by Abu Malik al-Shami.

In this image, we see a mural on the chalkboard of a bombed-out classroom. The mural depicts a student writing on the chalkboard: "We used to joke and say, 'God please destroy the school'… and he did." Through this phrase, the artist critiques the Syrian education system wherein the school is simply a space for the propaganda of the regime. The student here wishes for the destruction of the school in order to avoid his or her inculcation into a state defined by the power of its leader. The destruction of the school, which is evident by the crumbling walls and disarray of furniture, exists in direct conversation with the artwork. As the painted phrase draws attention to the destruction surrounding the subject and viewer alike, it demonstrates the entrenched presence of violence as a part of Syrians' new reality. The artist's choice to show the effects of violence on children—who are among the most vulnerable populations and traditionally represent innocence—evokes an emotional response in the viewer. As children were unwittingly caught in the crossfire of the Syrian civil war, the phrase begs the question: did Syrians initiate something more than they bargained for? Through this mural the artist speaks to his or her fellow countrymen, asking: did *we* create this devastation? This bloodshed? This horror? The artist engages in the practice of self-satire by reflecting on the role of ordinary Syrians and grappling with their complicity.

While the mural above illustrates the ways in which the Syrian revolution has upended children's lives, the mural below suggests a redemptive quality of children:

Figure 18: In this mural, painted by Abu Malik al-Shami, a young child instructs a soldier to act with love. Located in Darayya.

In this mural, the artist conjures up the image of a classroom through reference to an easel, a chalkboard, and a pointer stick. Ironically, a young child is instructing an adult: the child occupies the position of power as she stands and lectures the soldier who remains sitting dutifully. Despite the reality in which both live, the child instructs the soldier to use love as the antidote to violence. The mural's physical location is relevant as well. Because the mural stands amidst the rubble and crumbling walls of a Syrian city, the mural's presence juxtaposes creation and destruction. As the mural preaches a message of nonviolence amid the ruinous consequences of a violent conflict, it commands the attention of the viewer by capitalizing on the visual incongruity of loving versus fighting. Furthermore, the solider is simply a vague outline; in fact, his weapon is the most detailed part of the figure. Thus, the focus is on the weapon and the capacity for violence that the weapon represents. Through these artistic choices, the artist uses the

soldier as a stand-in for all armed participants. The mural does not implicate one specific armed force, such as the regime's military or the Free Syrian Army, but rather, criticizes all militaristic actors in the conflict. Rather than communicate a pro-regime or pro-opposition message, the artist takes aim at a larger issue at play: the use of brutal force by all combatants. Thus, this mural is a form of self-satire because it highlights the complicity of even the revolutionary forces in enacting violence upon Syrian communities and perpetuating warfare.

Empowering the Disempowered

What effect did grim and dark artwork have on a populace? Did the reproduction of horrific scenes of violence work to reinforce a sense of victimization, cynicism, and defeat? This may appear true on the surface, but in actuality, dark humor and satire functioned as a form of collective empowerment for the Syrian people. First, the act of creation in itself is a powerful affront to the state's totalitarian system of control over the creation and dissemination of media and its intentional fragmentation of public space. In the traditional state and citizen dynamic, citizens are "on the receiving end of political communication messages."[184] But by creating their own political messages, Syrian artists inverted this dynamic and unsettled the hierarchy wherein the state apparatus dominates the populace. Artists and activists generated imagery that reflected their "pro-active citizenship" despite the political and structural circumstances in which such activity was severely restrained.[185] Furthermore, artists created imagery that explicitly challenged the

---

[184] Lina Khatib, *Image Politics in the Middle East: The Role of the Visual in Political Struggle* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 2012), 6.
[185] Della Ratta.

state and its authority by "manipulate[ing] regime-backed messages and re-inject[ing] them into public space."[186] This art allowed the Syrian people to assert themselves as a collectivity separate from and positioned against the state. According to scholar Lina Khatib, the result is that "political communication theory has now moved beyond…one-way communication to include non-linear exchanges."[187]

In addition to sending revolutionary messages to the state, Syrians also used art to communicate with and among the public. Because of its shocking and darkly ironic nature, Syrian street art produced an arresting emotional and psychological response in the viewer. Mulder argues that the artwork became "an intermediate space for the deeper communication of ideas and emotions" between the creator and viewer.[188] Likewise, Khatib concurs that the visual imagery of the Arab uprisings "was simultaneously watched and emulated," amounting to a form of social interaction.[189] In fact, the process of witnessing this art (as well as re-creating and disseminating it) elicited "intra-communal and public empathy with the suffering of the Syrian people." [190] This empathy facilitated identification between creator and viewer, thus building unity around the idea of a Syrian public, and in turn, serving as a means of collective agency and empowerment. By displaying the despair and horror of the Syrian situation, the artists did not perpetuate victimization; rather, they insisted that "their circumstances must be revealed, witnessed and radically identified with."[191] The Syrian uprising and ensuing

---

[186] Ibid.
[187] Khatib, 6-7.
[188] Mulder, 193.
[189] Khatib, 117.
[190] Mulder, 174.
[191] Ibid.

civil war was a political struggle in which the Syrian people proclaimed their collective voice through visual means. Syrians, who for decades had been shut out of civil society, harnessed the power of imagery to create agency.

Conclusion

Today, Syria remains embroiled in conflict. The uprising of 2011 evolved into a civil war between the Ba'athist Syrian Arab Republic, led by Bashar al-Assad, and the opposition. Initially, the Free Syrian Army emerged as a leading force for the opposition, but rebel groups quickly splintered into various armed militias. The complexity of the situation has allowed for the rise of terrorist acts and extremist organizations, further compounded by the involvement of several foreign allies—none of whom have tangibly contributed to establishing peace in Syria. The nine-year long civil war has claimed over 400,000 lives and displaced roughly 11.8 million people. In the midst of disaster, how do we evaluate the role of art? This context makes this chapter's effort to understand the origins and effects of Syrian street art ever more urgent.

By rooting our examination of Syrian street art in the country's political and historical context, we come to understand the *magnitude* of art's role in challenging the Assad regime. Through the production and proliferation of street art, Syrians defied the very validity of the state's structure and function; artists confronted security measures, resisted the cult of the leader, disempowered the dictator, mobilized under surveillance, created beauty amid destruction, formed collective identity in a fractured landscape, and asserted agency—all through visual means. The unique political context and revolutionary trajectory of Syria demonstrates that protest art throughout the Middle East

and North Africa was not monolithic, but rather, nationally-specific. The duality of both nationally-specific contexts and regional trends within the visual production of the Arab uprisings will be further explored in the next chapter. Through an examination of street art in Lebanon, we will recognize the value of adopting a transnational lens through which to view the political, social, and cultural ruptures that occurred in 2011.

Chapter III

Transcending Borders:

Anti-Sectarianism and Transnationalism in Lebanon

"I'm embellishing my city… It is about art. It's not about gunshots."

–Omar Kabbani, Lebanese street artist

"Tomorrow is a Better Day"

After fifteen years living on Beirut's Bliss Street, Ali Abdallah had become a fixture of the neighborhood. Nonetheless, he was literally left out in the cold by his community and tragically passed on the coldest night of the year in 2013. Shortly after his death, street artist Yazan Halwani created this mural:

http://www.lebanontraveler.com/en/magazine/yazan_halwani_colors_beirut/
Figure 19: "Ali Abdallah" by Yazan Halwani in Beirut, Lebanon.

Halwani pays tribute to Abdallah by communicating his importance to the neighborhood through the mural's large scale, hyper-realistic portrait, aesthetic design, and bold use of text and color. The mural makes visible the presence of unsheltered people, serving as a constant reminder that the city must care for all members of the urban community. Halwani sends a message of community responsibility, calling for empathy and humanity

across stigmatized socioeconomic divides. In addition to the face of Abdallah, Halwani painted the phrase "tomorrow is a better day" to display a message of hope for the future, inspire Beirut residents to improve their community, and wish a peaceful afterlife upon Abdallah. Furthermore, without next of kin, Halwani's mural serves as an attempt to give Abdallah a makeshift burial. Located on the wall of the street where he lived and died, the mural memorializes Abdallah as an integral part of the urban landscape and reaffirms his right to the city. The city is Abdallah's final resting place.

Yazan Halwani's mural of Ali Abdallah exemplifies the predominant style and function of Lebanese street art. In subsequent examples, we will continue to encounter the deployment of Arabic calligraphy, bright colors, and exceptional detail similar to Halwani's style seen in this mural. Likewise, other Lebanese street artists echo Halwani's goals to encourage collective ownership of the city and responsibility for its residents, build consensus across sectarian divides, and beautify the city to move forward from a violent and destructive past. In Lebanon, street art is typically received positively. It is tolerated by authorities and often welcomed by the community. Police usually turn a blind eye to the practice and rarely reprimand artists. Thus, unlike the Syrian context, artists are much more likely to sign their name to their work. In general, street art is perceived as a practice of beautifying the city, rather than as an act of vandalism.

In her dissertation "Writing on the Walls: Conversations with Beirut's Street Artists," Zeina Najjar interviews five leading figures in the Lebanese street art scene to investigate the driving motivations of their work. She finds that artists create in response to the socio-political situation of Lebanon. More specifically, they seek to improve the city through the beautification of public spaces, to "cultivate a sense of ownership" and

community identity, and to counter sectarian discourse by using art as a form of "honest expression."[192] Katelyn M. Bronell's analysis of the work of young Lebanese street artists corroborates Najjar's findings. Bronell argues that Lebanese youth use street art as a means of publishing narratives of *reconciliation*. Reconciliation can be understood as the implementation of productive communication about sensitive topics across difference. The art reveals three primary elements of reconciliation: first, "acceptance and acknowledgement of a collective past"; "reparation of destroyed relationships through similar cultural symbols"; and "commitment to a future of coexistence and peace."[193]

While their particular language differs, both Najjar's and Bronell's findings offer insight into the nature of Lebanese street art as a positive and constructive mechanism for community development. In this chapter, I argue that Lebanese street art reveals art's capability to communicate and build consensus across borders. Art transcends spatial boundaries, shaping new public spaces in which communication across divisions can take place. This phenomenon takes place on both small and large scales—defying urban borders, national borders, and regional borders to build transnational solidarity.

Political History is Artistic History

The nature of public art in Lebanon has been undeniably shaped by the country's political history. Much of the messaging espoused in street art is in response to historical events, experiences, and legacies. Therefore, in order to analyze Lebanese street art, we

---

[192] Zeina Najjar, "Writing on the Wall: Conversations with Beirut's Street Artists" (Master's thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014), 31.
[193] Katelyn M. Bronell, "Murals for Hope: Lebanese Reconciliation through Youth Graffiti Art" (Master's thesis, University of Kansas, 2015), 35.

must first establish an understanding of key moments in the nation's history. This brief review of historical transitions history will contextualize the street art produced in the last twenty years, allowing us to better understand the artists' choices and the larger significance of their work.

The Lebanese state—born out of the post-WWI British and French mandate system and steeped in a colonial legacy—is structured on the basis of perceived sectarian differences. [194] Since achieving independence from French colonial rule and establishing a multiconfessional state through the National Pact of 1943, the nation-building project remained a turbulent on-going process, lending itself to fraught sectarian tensions and alternating periods of peace and violence. In 1975, such sectarian tensions sparked a fifteen-year-long civil war. It began as a conflict primarily between the Phalange party (primarily Maronite Christian) and the Lebanese National Movement, but quickly became increasingly complex with the involvement of other groups, such as the Palestinian Liberation Organization (mixed membership but with key Muslim leaders), and the intervention of foreign governments and their armies—Syria and Israel, most notably. On December 6th of 1975, infamously called Black Saturday, roadblocks were set up throughout Beirut where identification cards were inspected for religious affiliation. Measures such as these transformed Beirut into a divided city—a Christian

---

[194] From 1923 to 1943, the region encompassing present-day Lebanon and Syria was administered by French authorities via the Mandate for Syria established by the League of Nations. In the summer of 1943, Lebanon held its first elections and established the National Pact. On November 8, 1943, the new government abolished the Mandate for Syria. The National Pact established shared power between Shii, Sunni, and Maronite groups. It required that the President always be Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister always be Sunni Muslim, the Speaker of the Parliament a member of the Shi'i Muslim community, the Deputy Speaker of the Parliament and Deputy Prime Minister must be Greek Orthodox Christian, and the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces is always Druze. Furthermore, there must always be a 6 to 5 ratio of Christians to Muslims in the Lebanese Parliament.

East and a Muslim West partitioned by the neutral Green Line. This divide now served as a structural embodiment of the confessional differences deployed as a method of rule first in the colonial mandate system and then in the emergent nation.

The divided city also entailed the emergence of militia groups, most notably Hizbullah, which continued to play commanding political roles long after the civil war ended. As militias took control over what they considered to be 'their territory,' Beirut—at one point a locale for political, economic, and administrative centralization—became a city of roughly ten districts "carved out and cloistered by violence."[195] The borders between these districts were marked by armed checkpoints signaling the exit from one militia's zone of control and entry into another. Thus, sectarianism tangibly reconfigured public space, creating a patchwork geography that reflected the various religious, ethnic, and political identities of Lebanese citizens—a geography that was constantly re-asserted through the policing of movement. Furthermore, street art played a crucial role in demarcating the bounds of this new geography. According to Zeina Najjar, Lebanese graffiti first appeared in the 1970s as a means of marking territory for warring militias.[196] Throughout the civil war, militias intentionally weaponized visual materials such as graffiti, posters, billboards, and banners to make visible their claim to power. As boundaries shifted, the walls of the city quite literally *illustrated* the ebb and flow of militia control. From this phenomenon, we can once again see how the struggle for political power is also a struggle for spatial visibility and representation; and, as the

---

[195] Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon,* (London: Pluto Press, 2012), 238.
[196] Najjar, 6.

nature of political and social relations change, so too does the nature of the space in which these relations are enacted.

Fawwaz Traboulsi argues that, because space was inextricably linked to sectarian identity, the consolidation of territory under various militias was the moment in which "pressure on the individual to define himself/herself in terms of a unique social and cultural sectarian identity reached its climax."[197] In fact, one of the primary reasons for the immense bloodshed of the civil war was the various militias' practices of ethnic, sectarian, and political 'cleansing' to create religiously homogeneous regions within Lebanon. In *A History of Modern Lebanon,* Traboulsi estimates that 71, 328 people were killed, 97, 184 injured, and 894,717 displaced over the course of fifteen years. In addition to 'cleansing' and ghettoizing populations based off perceived sectarian differences, militias also perpetrated "memoricide"—"the eradication of all memories of coexistence and common interests among the Lebanese."[198] The violent exclusion of groups of different religious and ethnic associations, both from militias' physical space and collective psyche, served to further entrench the sectarian organization of Lebanese society.

This physical and cultural violence, however, failed to assuage sectarian conflict nor institute any semblance of national unity. Instead, the war became "the crucible in which those sects were reproduced."[199] On October 22, 1989, Lebanon's Parliament signed the Ta'if Agreements to end the Civil War and subsequently, in 1991, voted to include the Agreements in a new constitution. While it dictated an equal ratio of

---

[197] Traboulsi, 240.
[198] Ibid.
[199] Ibid., 193.

Parliament seats between Christians and Muslims and abolished quotas for civil service posts, "in practical terms, the Ta'if regime reproduced the sectarian system."[200] The rule requiring a Maronite President, a Sunni Prime Minister, and a Shi'i Speaker of the Parliament endured; however, the president's executive powers were diminished, thus creating "one of the most unstable power relations imaginable" and making "conflicts among the holders of the three top posts…endemic."[201] Such precarious power dynamics and deeply engrained sectarian divides have continued to shape Lebanon's political system long after the war's end.

Public life, as well, continues to reflect the legacy of war and factional social and political dynamics. With the city still split along largely sectarian lines and media outlets dominated by sectarian leaders, "very few avenues for expression are left untouched by sectarian rhetoric."[202] Street art, however, offers a counterpoint to the constant barrage of divisive narratives. While political posters are still used, they now share space on the walls of the city with anti-sectarian slogans, intricate murals celebrating cultural figures, revolutionary stencils from Lebanon's neighbors, and colorful expressions that beautify the city. Through art—an accessible form of engagement for most residents—"Beirut's streets can come to serve as a public sphere of sorts."[203] The streets, by virtue of their publicness, generate a new discourse among the people and serve as a method of participatory politics. Furthermore, Lebanese street art is some of the most aesthetically beautiful in the entire MENA region; it is intentionally and painstakingly designed and

---

[200] Ibid., 250.
[201] Ibid., 251.
[202] Najjar, 24.
[203] Ibid., 25.

crafted. Rather than quickly spraying a space to mark territory, this new generation of artists invests significant time and talent in the process of producing their art. By focusing on beautifying the city, these artists attempt to move beyond warfare and violence towards peace. Take, for example, the following piece by Hayat Chaaban:

https://www.behance.net/HayatChaaban/projects
Figure 20: "I Faced Death and Rose from the Ashes" by Hayat Chaaban in Tripoli, Lebanon.

This piece is an artistic representation of the phrase "I Faced Death and Rose from the Ashes." Rather than simply scribbling the words on the wall, Chaaban communicates the phrase in an entrancing visual manner. Chaaban's choice to express the sentiment aesthetically, through the use of elegant calligraffiti and bold color, reflects the artist's

desire to beautify the city.[204] When we consider the physical location of the artwork, the

message of resilience becomes all the more salient. By painting the artwork upon a

visibly crumbling wall, Chaaban pairs the seemingly contradictory forces of destruction

and creation to show viewers how growth can emerge *out of* decay, the future can

supersede the past, and hope can spring forth from the remnants of suffering. Thus, the

physical elements of the street in which the art exists provide new meaning to the phrase.

The people of Lebanon *quite literally* faced death—whether that was threats to physical

safety, the destruction of homes, or the disintegration of communities—and rose from the

ashes by creating a future out of the ruins of war. In this singular piece, the artist offers a

symbolic rebirth of the city and shares a message of resiliency and hope for a new

generation of Lebanese youth. The message of Chaaban's phrase is likewise echoed by

the following piece:

---

[204] Calligraffiti is a unique art form combining Arabic calligraphy (reminiscent of the artwork used in illuminated Qur'ans) and graffiti.

Figure 21: A custodian sweeps up discarded bullets. Located in Beirut.

In this piece, a young male custodian sweeps up bullets which symbolize the remnants of warfare. He is accompanied by two large birds, perhaps representing a return to the natural state of the city. Again, the physical location of the artwork plays a role in emphasizing the message. The artist strategically places the figure on a damaged wall to further communicate his survival of past tragedy and his continued optimism. As the custodian sweeps away the symbolic bullets, he reflects the people's desire to reconcile with the harsh realities of the past and make way for a new future.

Transgressing Spatial Boundaries

As Lebanon grapples with the legacy of civil war, its cities bear a consequential geography. On one hand, sectarianism still structures much of political and social life;

cities are informally divided along sectarian lines, political posters claim space on the

walls, and the public domain remains limited to politically affiliated mainstream media.

On the other hand, urban revival projects initiated after the war created a sterilized,

impersonal, and contrived look and feel to areas of high market value. According to Saree

Makdisi, "there has been a concerted effort to wipe clean the surface of central Beirut,

purity it of all historical associations…to render it pure space, pure commodity, pure real

estate."[205] For example, the Company for the Development and Reconstruction of

Beirut's Central District expropriated most of the land in the ancient city center to create

a shopping mall out of what once was a souk (a traditional marketplace or bazaar).

Meanwhile, areas of lower market value were not deemed worthy of rehabilitation and

were largely abandoned by the government. The result is an alienating effect akin to

gentrification.

In the midst of these complex urban dynamics, what is the role of street art? Street

art—an art form brought into existence precisely by the physical environment of the

city—is inextricably related to the structure and nature of public space. We see this

relationship at work in Lebanese street artists' goals and finished products. For

neighborhoods sterilized by postwar revival projects, street art attempts to "reflect or

honor the Lebanese people's struggles, local talents, or unique history" in order to bring

forth elements of humanity[206] For neighborhoods abandoned by the government, street art

attempts "to protect public spaces and save them from disrepair" by beautifying the space

---

[205] Saree Makdisi, "Reconstructing History in Central Beirut," *Middle East Report* 203 (1997): 25.
[206] Nadine Sinno, "A War of Colors: Beirut Street Art and the Reclamation of Public Space," *ASAP/Journal* 2, no. 1 (2017): 73.

and facilitating community[207] Nevertheless, in every neighborhood, street art presents counter narratives to mainstream media's factionalism, builds consensus across sectarian divides, and creates community identity centered around a future of peace. Whereas street art was once used to 'tag' spaces for rival militias, it now primarily operates as a form of communication that stands apart from, and often even transcends, sectarian divides. In other words, street art—once a mechanism for enforcing and regulating borders—becomes the *very practice* by which borders are reexamined, challenged, and transcended. This practice is what Nadine Sinno calls "an aesthetic intervention."[208]

Because borders govern individual and communal lives in such totalizing ways (bullet holes and bombed-out buildings serve as a haunting reminder, after all), street artists must confront their presence. Among Lebanese artists, we see that they work within the realities of their situation by recognizing the existence of such borders, offering a counter-oint, and providing an opportunity to transcend them. Take, for example, the following image:

---

[207] Najjar, 23.
[208] Sinno, 71.

Figure 22: "Salam – Peace" by Hayat Chaaban in Tripoli.

In this piece by Hayat Chaaban, a single hand making the symbol of peace extends upwards valiantly. As the hand breaks through an enclosure of sorts—represented by the dark blue rectangular line—Chaaban shows that peace is a force that cannot be restrained by borders or barriers. In particular, the barbed wire illustrates the capacity of peace to free us from the 'prison' of violence, war, and sectarianism. Furthermore, there are many ways to represent the concept of peace; Chaaban's choice to use a human hand reflects the capacity for peace that lies within humankind. Likewise, the *solitary* hand serves as a reminder that peace is a unifying force; people of all identities and sects are united in their desire for and struggle to create peace.

The artistic duo known as ASHEKMAN, composed of twin brothers Omar and Mohamed Kabbani, project the same message of peace on a larger scale:

Figure 23: A collection of green-painted rooftops form the word "Salam," meaning "Peace." Designed by ASHEKMAN (Omar and Mohammed Kabbani). Located in Tripoli.

This innovative project comprised of eighty-five rooftops in Tripoli, Lebanon spells out the Arabic word "Salam," which means "Peace." The vast expanse of the project communicates the idea that peace spans geographic and urban divides, working as a unifying force. More specifically, the artists intentionally put this piece on 'Syria Street' in the northern city of Tripoli which bisects the neighborhoods of Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen—two areas which have historically been at odds. Fighting between the neighborhoods began in 1975 with the start of the civil war, as Bab al-Tabbaneh is a

Sunni neighborhood and Jabal Mohsen is an Alawite neighborhood. Skirmishes between the neighborhoods persisted on and off until 2015, as the former supported the Syrian opposition and the later supported the Assad regime. The ASHEKMAN brothers cleverly engineered the project to defy this sectarian border, thus *physically* illustrating how art serves as a mechanism to transcend boundaries. Furthermore, the artists employed men from each neighborhood—fifty-two in total—to help them paint the roofs. Because these were the very same men who, just shortly before, had probably been fighting each other on behalf of their respective militias, the project also served to unite the two groups in a common goal. ASHEKMAN's intentional design of both the piece of art and the process of creation reminds us of Henri Lefebvre's assertion that the process of production and the product itself are two inseparable aspects of space. Thus, both the act of creating the art and the art itself are dually significant.

Defining Transnationalism

In addition to transcending sectarian boundaries within Lebanese society, Lebanon's street art also transcends national and regional borders by exhibiting *transnationalism* through the use of shared cultural symbols and the expression of solidarity with popular movements. In order to see how transnationalism functions in the Middle East and North Africa, we must first establish an appropriate definition of transnationalism. In academic and scholarly contexts, transnationalism is generally defined as economic and/or political integration. This definition leads scholars to focus on the role of political leaders, regimes, and the state. Because the Middle East has not

achieved significant political and economic integration, this definition leads us to conclude that little or no transnationalism exists in the region.

This perspective, however, obscures meaningful forms of transnational exchange that took place historically and still continue to exist today. The type of transnationalism among Arab nations has been that of a *cultural economy* in which the people, not state leaders or administrations, drive transnationalism through the exchange of shared cultural elements. Two crucial facets emerge here: the role of culture and the role of the public. First, cultural integration, rather than political or economic integration, form the basis of this alternative definition of transnationalism. Mark LeVine argues that "culture is inherently transnational," and thus "has been the driving force behind contemporary globalization far more so than in previous eras."[209] This phenomenon is reflected in the ways in which citizens of the MENA exchange shared cultural elements, such as language, phrases, images, popular figures, art, literature, music, etc. Secondly, this definition of transnationalism is driven by the public; it is a ground-up, rather than a top-down approach to regionalization. This ground-up phenomenon—what Alain Tarrius called "globalization from below"— "allows for a better understanding of the ways in which the Middle East takes part in global transformations."[210] While political and economic factors tend to dominate scholarly and popular understandings of transnational integration, we should not let these factors "mask more informal forms of regionalization,

---

[209] Mark LeVine, "When Art is the Weapon: Culture and Resistance Confronting Violence in the Post-Uprisings Arab World," *Religions* 6, no. 4 (2015), 1278.
[210] Leila Vignal, "Introduction: Transforming Geographies of the Middle East in Times of Globalisation and Uprisings," in *The Transnational Middle East: Peoples, Places, Borders,* ed. Leila Vignal (New York: Routledge, 2017), 6.

which are initiated by non-state and local actors."[211] In other words, the transnational

exchanges taking place via ordinary people in popular social movements—albeit in non-

institutionalized ways—contribute to the "intensification of transnational relations."[212]

Therefore, evaluating transnationalism in the MENA demands that we initiate a

conceptual shift in which we properly weigh the significance of the people as actors.

Street art serves as a visible way in which transnationalism takes place via the

exchange of cultural elements. Specifically, it allows communities to forge connections

"in a way that is not political or religious but cultural in a sense of…shared

symbolism."[213] We see this in the following mural, for example:

http://www.lebanontraveler.com/en/magazine/yazan_halwani_colors_beirut/
Figure 24: "1ˢᵗ Fairuz Mural" by Yazan Halwani in Beirut, Lebanon.

[211] Ibid., 5.
[212] Ibid.
[213] Bronell, 26.

128

This mural by Yazan Halwani depicts Fairuz, a renowned Lebanese singer whose music is popular throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Her singing profile, accompanied by calligraffiti, embellishes an otherwise ordinary alleyway. Halwani's mural is just one of many that celebrate beloved cultural figures. By covering the walls with the faces of notable cultural icons, artists celebrate their "intellectual and artistic contributions to society rather than their sectarian affiliation."[214] Fairuz is an especially apt choice for this purpose because she often sings of a unified Lebanon. For example, one of her most famous songs is "Behebak Ya Libnan" ("I Love You, Lebanon"). In fact, during the Lebanese civil war of 1975 to 1990, Fairuz refused to side with any one group. She did not perform in Lebanon during the war, only overseas. Furthermore, she sings in Arabic—a language which transcends national and sectarian borders—and is regarded as an icon in modern Arabic music. Due to the Maronite Christian affiliation with French mandate policies, elite education is usually conducted in French. Thus, by singing in Arabic, Fairuz's music refuses the legacies of colonialism and transcends elitist barriers. Arabic refuses the legacies of the French language as the language of the elite Halwani's choice to showcase a *cultural* figure, rather than a political one, offers an alternative narrative to contentious politics and reflects an attempt to transcend sectarian divides. By creating portraits of cultural icons, street artists disrupt the barrage of political posters that dominate the walls and challenge expectations about which faces adorn the city's walls. Furthermore, Hawlani's choice to showcase a figure recognizable and meaningful to people all over the Arab region reflects an attempt to transcend

---

[214] Sinno, 82.

Lebanon's national borders. As Lebanese street artists look beyond the confines of borders—both sectarian and national—and draw upon shared cultural symbols, they form new collectivities, and with it, a new capacity for collective action.

Regional Solidarity

In 2011, when protests erupted in several Arab nations including Egypt and Syria, street art in Lebanon reflected solidarity with the popular movements. The cultural transnationalism already in existence throughout the Middle East and North Africa was further accentuated by the introduction of these popular movements; in fact, Leila Vignal argues that conflict can facilitate new transnational interactions, thus "leading to the creation of a transnational space that did not exist previously."[215] We can see the formation of these new transnational spaces reflected in Lebanese street art. Although Lebanon did not experience a concurrent revolution during the Arab uprisings, much of Lebanese public art expressed solidarity with the revolutions and captured the sentiments and demands of the revolutionaries. Take, for example, the following stencil:

---

[215] Vignal, 15.

Figure 25: A stencil in Beirut which reads "Be with the Revolution."

This piece combines the street art techniques of stenciling and caligraffiti. In Beirut, where the middle and upper classes increasingly use English and French, the use of Arabic calligraphy is significant because it serves a symbolic function. According to Basma Hamdy, the symbolic function of language "makes it a marker of group boundary."[216] While the dialects of Arabic spoken across the MENA certainly vary, the communicative aspect is less significant than the way in which the shared Arabic language "contributes to the imagined bond between individuals, uniting them

---

[216] Basma Hamdy, "The Arabic Language as Creative Resistance," *Street Art of Resistance,* eds. Sarah H. Awad and Brady Wagoner, (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 157.

symbolically with a community across borders and nations."[217] Thus, the artist's use of a

shared language to communicate solidarity with the revolutions compounds the sense of a

regional cultural identity that transcends national borders. Furthermore, this stencil was

originally made by Mohamed Gaber in Egypt. Because stencils are easily replicated, the

form of this piece was able to migrate across national borders to reach Beirut. The

structure of the phrase "Be with the Revolution" serves as a call to action for the

Lebanese public, yet, is broad enough to apply to any revolution. Rather than denouncing

a specific regime or dictator, the piece advocates for the support of the people in their

struggles against authoritarian systems. This broad phrasing creates a sense of 'the

people' as a transnational collective united in revolution.

This piece, like many of the others that appeared in 2011 and in following years,

draws attention to larger regional themes, rather than national specifics. Graffiti and

murals echoed the repudiation of established systems, the frustration with the constant

presence of violence in daily life, and the desire for abstract concepts such as freedom,

self-determination, and popular representation. In *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative

Insurgency in the Arab World,* Marwan Kraidy notes how the popular slogans of the

revolutions reflect this regional solidarity. The slogan that dominated protests throughout

the Middle East and North Africa was "ash-shab yurid isqat an-nizam," or, "the people

want to topple the regime." Kraidy, however, notes that "nizam" also translates to

"system." This dual meaning reveals that "revolutionaries had in their crosshairs a bigger

---

217 Hamdy, 155.

target than Ben Ali, Mubarak, and Assad, who, they realized, were but cruel faces of a system experienced locally but sustained by global geopolitics and economics."[218]

Global Solidarity

In addition to transcending national borders, Lebanese street art reflects an engagement with global trends that reach beyond the confines of the MENA region and, consequently, the forging of a cosmopolitan identity. This phenomenon is best understood through an analysis of following piece of street art:

https://suzeeinthecity.wordpress.com/2012/08/28/beirut-graffiti-quirky-colourful-street-art-in-lebanon/
Figure 26: Graffiti in Beirut, Lebanon references the global Occupy Movement.

---

[218] Marwan Kraidy, *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 6.

While this stencil appears simple in design, it is a powerful reflection of transnationalism in Lebanese street art. First, the stenciled phrase is in English. Because English is a popular language worldwide and the language in which many global conversations take place, artists often created stencils in English "in the hopes of appealing to the international community."[219] The proliferation of English-language pieces helped Lebanese artists gain traction among global media outlets. Global media, in turn, helped to transmit the artists' messages to larger audiences. Simon Hawkins argues that this "recognition by the global audience helped confer legitimacy on the movement[s]" reflected in the artwork—whether that be regional or global protests.[220]

Furthermore, the piece makes reference, both via words and images, to global movements taking place far from Beirut. Specifically, the phrase "Occupy Beirut" directly references the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States and shows solidarity with the goals and strategies of that movement. In their workshop exploring the transnational dimension of protest, Donatella della Porta and Alice Mattoni found that the Arab uprisings were intimately linked to the European Indignados and the American Occupy Wall Street protests; all three movements utilized similar practices and images of democracy and similar communication and mediation processes. More specifically, each movement "developed demands around the idea of democracy and, at the same time,

---

[219] Rana Jarbou, "The Resistance Passed Through Here: Arabic Graffiti of Resistance, Before and After the Arab Uprisings," *Street Art of Resistance,* eds. Sarah H. Awad and Brady Wagoner, (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 140.

[220] Simon Hawkins, "Teargas, Flags and the Harlem Shake: Images of and for Revolution in Tunisia and the Dialectics of the Local in the Global," *The Political Aesthetics of Global Protest: The Arab Spring and Beyond,* eds. Pnina Werbner, Martin Webb, and Kathryn Spellman-Poots, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 43.

engaged thousands of people in participatory democratic practices."[221] This piece of

street art in Lebanon, along with many others, demonstrates support for the Occupy

movement's mobilization of the public and demands for democratic methods of

governance. Additionally, in cleverly appropriating the slogan for their own use, the artist

raises the question: how might the goals and strategies of global movements work to

improve the Lebanese political and economic systems?

By borrowing these ideas, images, and phrases from a global context and situating

them locally, the artist demonstrates what Pnina Werbner, Martin Webb, and Kathryn

Spellman-Poots call "citation." Citation refers to the practice of using "aesthetic

allusions"—such as the Occupy movement's green and red design—and "inter-textual

citations"—such as the call to occupy a city or location.[222] Importantly, Werbner and

others note that citations can be "geographical," meaning that they move across

borders.[223] Artists in Beirut use geographical citation by referencing the Occupy

movement in New York City and, thus, defy national and regional constraints and forge

global connections. These global connections work to cultivate a sense of shared

experiences, collective history, and a global identity among distant communities.

The result of this use of citation is a burgeoning sense of cosmopolitanism,

reflected here in this stencil and among much of Lebanese street art (especially pieces

created by Lebanese youth). In considering the significance of their theory, Werbner and

---

[221] Donnatella della Porta and Alice Mattoni, "The Transnational Dimension of Protest: From the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street" (workshop, Standing Group on Participation and Mobilization, Mainz, Germany, March 11, 2013).

[222] Pnina Werbner, Martin Webb, and Kathryn Spellman-Poots, "Introduction," *The Political Aesthetics of Global Protest: The Arab Spring and Beyond,* eds. Pnina Werbner, Martin Webb, and Kathryn Spellman-Poots (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 14.

[223] Ibid.

others argue that the global spread of citations have led "to a newly forged 'vernacular cosmopolitanism.'"[224] Cosmopolitanism, as defined by Zeina Najjar, is comprised of four main elements; first, it "goes beyond the nation-state model"; second, "it can negotiate actions and ideals simultaneously oriented towards the global and the local"; third, it "is opposed to forms of cultural essentialism"; and fourth, it "can represent a complex range of identities and allegiances."[225] A significant portion of street art in Lebanon demonstrates cosmopolitanism by exhibiting regional and global solidarity, using global citations for local purposes, celebrating shared cultural figures and traditions among many separate national groups, and representing the stories of community members with widely divergent lived experiences. In illustrating a sense of cosmopolitanism, Lebanese street artists forge ties among communities across sectarian, national, and regional boundaries, thus alluding to the ideal of the 'global citizen.'

Finally, we must recognize that demonstrating global solidarity through the practice of citation (and thus, alluding to cosmopolitanism) is made possible through the tools of technology. The exchange of images, slogans, and ideas among various protesters, activists, and visual artists happens overwhelmingly through the internet and social media. In her analysis of digital technologies in protest, Zeynep Tufekci presents the idea of the "digitally networked public sphere," arguing that the online spaces created through the use of the internet and social media create a new public sphere where social movements can flourish. Tufekci notes that, in the twenty-first century, the public sphere—as a result of its digitally networked nature—is "also transnational and

---

[224] Ibid., 16.
[225] Najjar, 11.

global."[226] By harnessing the power of new digital technologies, street artists can incorporate global citations into their work, therefore expressing solidarity with transnational popular movements and exploring a cosmopolitan collective identity.

Conclusion

When protests erupted in neighboring nations in 2011, Lebanon did not undergo a revolution. It did not, however, remain insulated from regional and global events. Lebanese street artists showed solidarity for revolutionaries and activists across the world through the use of citation. This chapter demonstrates the value of studying history from outside the dominant nation-state framework and the benefits of adopting a transnational lens. Furthermore, the case of Lebanon reveals how art can function as a transformative mechanism even in times of relative peace and stability. A new generation of Lebanese street artists, many of whom did not personally experience the Civil War, retain the collective memory of the war while desiring to use art to put forth narratives of reconciliation, peace, and hope. Lebanese street art demonstrates the capacity for art to communicate across borders and build consensus across sectarian, national, and regional borders. In doing so, these efforts to use art as a narrative of reconciliation contributed, in part, to laying the groundwork for the waves of protest in 2011—protests in which, for the first time, old sectarian divides gave way to calls for new representative governmental systems.

Conclusion:

---

[226] Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Teargas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protests* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 6.

The Image Endures

"Any form of art is a form of power."

—Ossie Davis, American artist and civil rights activist

When protests broke out in the Middle East and North Africa in late 2010 and early 2011, a flourish of creative activism irrevocably shaped the political, social, and cultural histories of the region. Arab activists combined traditional tactics of protest—such as legal recourse, legislative reform, and regime changes—with visual forms of protest that encompassed a wide variety of artistic processes and products. From the street to social media, artists harnessed the power of public space to inspire a collective imagining of social change and assert a diverse range of communal identities. Through art, the people demanded both immediate and long-term goals: the resignation of dictators currently in power and the transformation of oppressive political and economic systems.

In analyzing street art in Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon, four main themes emerge: first, street art co-opts public space, thus challenging the state's authority over space and subverting the state's legitimacy; second, street art serves as an accessible and unifying form of political engagement which facilitates the democratization of the protest process; third, street art empowers communities caught in ceaseless violence through the use of cynical humor and satire, which inverts the balance of power between the people and the state; fourth, street art transcends both literal borders (urban, national, and regional) and

metaphorical boundaries (spatial, political, cultural, and social), promoting reconciliation and solidarity.

In this thesis, I attempted to balance the nuanced combination of street art's nationally-specific characteristics and transnational patterns. The three cases studies presented illuminate how street art functions in divergent political contexts rooted in distinctive histories: Egypt in revolution, Syria at war, and Lebanon amidst persistent sectarianism. Common among each locale, however, were the central roles of *the people* and of *the image*. The creation, alteration, and dissemination of visual materials gave voice to the citizen collectivity in their struggle against the state—reinforcing the premise that politics is art, as both enact the struggle for visibility and representation.

Much of the existing scholarship on the Arab Uprisings, and on revolutionary movements in general, focuses exclusively on traditional forms of leadership in protest and on the resulting political transformations of the state structure. An analysis of the visual material produced through creative protest, however, serves as an alternative lens through which to study the Arab Uprisings—a lens that reveals the complexity of power relations in moments of crisis. This thesis assesses how art speaks during transitions of power and social mobilizations and explores the intersection between the political, social, and cultural forces at play in a given historical moment. Furthermore, this thesis contributes to the existing body of scholarship on protest and revolution by considering space and geography as critical elements of a society, a locus for the apportionment of authority, and a battleground for the struggle over power.

The findings of this thesis are important because they demonstrate the value of art as a form of political participation. Participatory politics take many forms, not all of

which are sanctioned by the state. It is crucial that we conceptualize resistance as more than just the actions of those with political and social power, and recognize the agency of those who pursue resistance in less traditional forms. Examining political transitions through the lens of art suggests an alternative way of understanding collective action.

These revolutions were as much social and cultural as they were political, so it is also important to acknowledge the role of creativity as a force for change. We must recognize art as a legitimate form of communication that generates discourse among the people, between the citizenry and the state, within the larger MENA region, and even towards an international audience. Furthermore, as protesters and revolutionaries echoed each other across urban, national, and regional borders, the struggle against the state became a collective enterprise of even larger proportions. The people saw, through art, their own struggles reflected in global structures that sustained asymmetries of power—politically, economically, and socially. History is made by the masses; studying public artistic demonstrations is one way to capture this collective agency. Furthermore, art is a form of participatory politics that does not require the prerequisite of citizenship, and thus, operates outside the bounds of the nation-state framework. Artists used creative methods to critique not only the regimes they lived under, but also the nature of the state system itself and the larger societal patterns that serve to uphold both. By calling for change that surpasses the replacement of one leader with the next and instead addresses systemic, multifaceted issues, movements driven by creative protest were truly revolutionary.

In a moment of historical irony, I completed this thesis in yet another period of volatility, shaped by the flow of continuities and ruptures that historians analyze as a key

component of their academic discipline. The novel coronavirus continues to engulf communities worldwide, having spread to 212 countries and territories with 3.9 million confirmed cases to date.[227] Even as much of the medical, economic, and societal ramifications of the virus remain unknown, it is clear that the pandemic will have significant and long-term effects on our world. The crisis will have particularly devastating repercussions in certain parts of the Middle East and North Africa. In Syria, for example, the civil war has displaced more than 12 million people—half the nation's population—both internally and externally. Nearly 1.5 million of these people have sought refuge in Lebanon, making it the country with the highest number of refugees per capita. A large proportion of these displaced individuals, especially those in refugee camps and temporary housing, lack access to basic needs such as sanitation and clean drinking water. Healthcare services are lacking, as hospitals and medical facilities have been direct targets of the Assad Regime and Russian forces. The effects of the pandemic have been and will continue to be severely exacerbated by widespread poverty, insufficient infrastructure, and a lack of clear leadership. In Syria alone, the United Nations has allotted 3.3 billion dollars to aid 11 million Syrians in 2020.[228] The populations discussed in this thesis—the ordinary millions, the working class, the true 'public'—are bearing the brunt of the COVID-19 crisis in a way that political and social elites simply are not.

---

[227] "Locations with Confirmed COVID-19 Cases, by WHO Region," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last modified May 7, 2020, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/global-covid-19/world-map.html.

[228] "A record number of people will need help worldwide during 2020: UN Humanitarian Overview," UN News, United Nations, December 4, 2019, https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/12/1052731.

Furthermore, the pandemic will likely prolong ongoing conflicts in the MENA region. According to Ranj Alaaldin, the crisis will be "a conflict-multiplier as belligerents move to intensify contestation over territories and resources, which will now include an expanded focus on securing access to vital medical supplies."[229] In Libya, Yemen, and Iraq, militias such as ISIS have exploited the needs of the population by controlling medical aid and supplies in order to reinforce patronage networks. In Syria, existing humanitarian issues are becoming increasingly problematic given the added factor of COVID-19. While the World Health Organization offers support to Syrians from Damascus, the Assad regime refuses to distribute this aid to any areas not under regime control. In the northwest province of Idlib, one of the last areas still held by the opposition, there are only 1.4 doctors for every 10,000 people and only 100 ventilators.[230] In the northeast Kurdish-held region, Turkish forces have cut off water supplies. Political and military factors are paralyzing the flow of medical aid to Syrians, further endangering already vulnerable populations. The grim circumstances will likely spur another wave of refugee migration which will, in turn, strain the resources of neighboring nations such as Lebanon and Turkey.

In the midst of this disaster, how do we evaluate the role of art? Given this upheaval, what is the value of the creative history presented in this thesis? How can we understand the significance of the artistic element of the Arab Uprisings in light of our present-day context? Art has long flourished in times of crisis. When words fail, the

---

[229] Ranj Alaaldin, "COVID-19 will prolong conflict in the Middle East," Brookings, April 24, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/04/24/covid-19-will-prolong-conflict-in-the-middle-east/.
[230] Ibid.

visual has a unique ability to capture the aesthetics of suffering. Street art is especially

equipped for such circumstances because it is an inherently public and community-

oriented art form. Its very existence relies on public spaces and the community's

engagement with those spaces. We must remember that it was the *visual* process that

empowered ordinary people to affect tangible change in their communities, their nations,

and the world—and, more specifically, it was street art that gave the people the tools to

do so. In times of upheaval, we turn to art for emotional expression, communication,

hope, community, and solidarity. The people of Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon did so in 2011

and many are doing so now. In fact, the art being created now bears many similarities to

the art created in the Middle East and North Africa nearly ten years ago.

  Similar to the ways in which Syrians used satire as a weapon, artist Darion

Fleming is finding humor in the absurdity of the situation.

https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/01/travel/coronavirus-street-art.html
Figure 27: "Pure'll Gold" by Darion Fleming in Charlotte, North Carolina, USA.

After he could not find hand sanitizer at his local grocery store, Fleming realized it would soon be out of stock everywhere. In response, he spent eight days creating this mural which depicts hand sanitizer as liquid gold. Fleming even titled the piece accordingly, inserting an apostrophe into the brand name 'Purell' to create a play on words which compares the product to 'pure gold.' Of the piece, Fleming said "I wanted to do something for the community to enjoy in serious times."[231] In both this piece and the Syrian artwork studied in this thesis, artists reflect on the absurd ways in which daily life

---

[231] Charu Suri, "Street Art Confronts the Pandemic," The New York Times, The New York Times Company, May 1, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/01/travel/coronavirus-street-art.html.

has shifted profoundly. While in reference to different events, both contexts insert pointed humor in dark and tragic times as a way to cope with suffering.

In both Syria and Egypt, artists used their craft as a form of critique: critique of dictators, political systems, economic structures, and even the citizens' own complicity in perpetuating the crisis. Likewise, Berlin-based artist Eme Freethinker used street art to comment on greed during the pandemic.

https://www.instagram.com/p/B97V9EmIL7a/
Figure 28: Gollum, from the "Lord of the Rings" films, holds a roll of toilet paper and says "Mein Schatz" ("My Precious"). Created by Eme Freethinker in Berlin, Germany.

As the pandemic worsens, communities face shortages of essential items as individuals buy more than they need in an effort to 'stock up.' This phenomenon happened most famously with toilet paper. In response, Eme Freethinker created this mural in a public park in Berlin to critique hoarders' greed. The mural depicts Gollum, a character in the "Lord of the Rings" films, who becomes corrupted by his all-consuming desire for a magical ring, which he refers to as "my precious." By equating ordinary citizens to this

character, Freethinker hyperbolizes the negative effects of our desire for toilet paper. He offers a cautionary tale: if we do not curb our self-centered greed, we will devolve into a Gollum-like being. As Gollum cradles the toilet paper roll and calls it "my precious," Freethinker satirizes the way in which we inflate the value of the product, thinking of it as a 'precious' object and losing sight of what it actually is. In poking fun at the toilet paper shortage, Freethinker makes a valid critique of our complicity in perpetuating the panic, chaos, and suffering of the pandemic.

In addition to using art to critique their circumstances and their own role, Arab artists facilitated a sense of community identity and responsibility through their work. In Santa Monica, California, Ruben Rojas is using his talents to send similar messages during the pandemic.

Figure 29: Two murals read "LOVE IS STANDING SIX-FEET APART" and "TOGETHER WE CAN." Created by Ruben Rojas in Santa Monica, California, USA.

On the left side, Rojas has painted the words "Love is Standing Six-Feet Apart,"

referencing the guidelines set by health officials to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This

claim reminds viewers that following such guidelines protects not only ourselves, but

also our community members. On the right side, the phrase "Together We Can"

encourages residents to lean on the strength of the community during these challenging

times. The bright colors and cheerful design embellish the city, imbuing the space with

beauty—a welcome counterpoint to the devastation of the disease. This piece is part of a campaign called "Back to the Streets" created by the non-profit Beautify. The campaign aims to produce one thousand murals by one thousand different artists in one hundred cities across the United States. The project and Rojas' mural are both attempts to maintain the vibrancy of public spaces as community-centered spaces during this period of social distancing.

Lastly, Arab artists across the region and especially those in Lebanon used art to inspire hope for a better future. California artist Corie Mattie is doing the same.

Figure 30: A mural reads "AFTER THE PLAGUE CAME THE RENAISSANCE."
Created by Corie Mattie in Santa Monica, California, USA.

This mural depicts a simplified version of the hands of Adam and God in "The Creation of Adam," a fresco painting by Michelangelo and a quintessential work of the

Renaissance. On the left side of the mural, it reads: "After the plague." This eerily refers to the COVID-19 pandemic, a new sort of plague. Yet on the other side, it reads: "Came the Renaissance." By invoking the current crisis, Mattie suggests that our own Renaissance is coming. Mattie both acknowledges the severity of the present situation and reassures viewers that a better future is sure to come.

As we can see from these images, artists today are using street art in many of the same ways as Egyptian, Syrian, and Lebanese artists did in 2011: to claim power, to reckon with our suffering, to create community solidarity, and to inspire hope in hopeless times. This parallel reveals that creative acts can and will continue to flourish amidst destruction. The image will endure. The global nature of the present crisis in particular highlights the extent to which art can be a unifying force, linking communities worldwide in this shared visual process. Especially in times of crisis, when words seem to fail us, it is the *visual* form that gives voice to the people.

Bibliography

"A record number of people will need help worldwide during 2020: UN Humanitarian Overview." UN News. United Nations, December 4, 2019. https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/12/1052731.

Al Haj Saleh, Yassin. "The Syrian 'Common': The Uprising of the Working Society." Jadaliyya. Arab Studies Institute, August 14, 2011. https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/24314/The-Syrian-Common-The-Uprising-of-the-Working-Society.

Alaaldin, Ranj. "COVID-19 will prolong conflict in the Middle East." Brookings. April 24, 2020. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/04/24/covid-19-will-prolong-conflict-in-the-middle-east/.

Al-Subaidi, Layla. "Syria's Creative Resistance." Jadaliyya. Arab Studies Institute, June 8, 2012. https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/26190/Syria%60s-Creative-Resistance.

Arendt, Hannah. "The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man." In *The Origins of Totalitarianism.* London: Schocken Books, 1951.

Associated Press. "Egypt Activist Posts Herself Nude, Sparks Outrage." Y Net News. November 17, 2011. https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4149840,00.html.

Awad, Sarah H. and Brady Wagoner. "Introducing the *Street Art of Resistance.*" In *Street Art of Resistance,* edited by Sarah H. Awad and Brady Wagoner, 1-16. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Baron, Beth. *Egypt as Woman: Nationalism, Gender, & Politics.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

Batuman, Bülent. "Political Encampment and the Architecture of Public Space: TEKEL Resistance in Ankara." *International Journal of Islamic Architecture* 2, no. 1 (2013): 77-100.

Beinin, Joel and Marie Duboc. "A Workers' Social Movement on the Margin of the Global Neoliberal Order, Egypt 2004-2012." In *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa,* edited by Joel Beinin and Frederic Vairel, 205-227. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013.

Bronell, Katelyn M. "Murals for Hope: Lebanese Reconciliation through Youth Graffiti Art." Master's thesis, University of Kansas, 2015.

Bseiso, Rounwah Adly Riyadh. "Art in the Egyptian Revolution: Liberation and Creativity." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 38, no. 2 (2018): 344-353.

Burzynski, Andrea. "How One Egyptian Sold a Revolution on the Web." Reuters. January 19, 2012. https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-revolution2o-egypt/how-one-egyptian-sold-a-revolution-on-the-web-idUKTRE80I27220120119.

Chan-Malik, Sylvia. *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam*. New York: New York University Press, 2018.

Cleveland William L., and Martin P. Bunton. "The 2011 Arab Uprisings and Their Aftermath." In *A History of the Modern Middle East*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

Davidson, Lawrence and Arthur Goldschmidt. *A Concise History of the Middle East.* Boulder: Westview Press, 2010.

Deeb, Lara. *An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi'I Lebanon.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

Della Ratta, Donatella. "Syrian Hands Raised: User-Generated Creativity Between Citizenship and Dissent." Jadaliyya. Arab Studies Institute, October 31, 2012. https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/27307/Syrian-Hands-Raised-User-Generated-Creativity-Between-Citizenship-and-Dissent.

El-Ghobashy, Mona. "The Praxis of the Egyptian Revolution." *Middle East Report* no. 258 (2011): 2-13.

Farhat, Maymanah. "After Daraa: Syrian Art Today." Jadaliyya. Arab Studies Institute, April 29, 2012. https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/25710/After-Daraa;-Syrian-Art-Today=.

Glaveanu, Vlad Petre. "Art and Social Change: The Role of Creativity and Wonder." In *Street Art of Resistance*, edited by Sarah H. Awad and Brady Wagoner, 19-38. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017.

Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society.* Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989.

Hamdy, Basma. "The Arabic Language as Creative Resistance." In *Street Art of Resistance,* edited by Sarah H. Awad & Brady Wagoner, 155-176. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Hanano, Amal. "Portraits of a People." Jadaliyya. Arab Studies Institute, October 31, 2011. https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/24567/Portraits-of-a-People.

Harvey, David. *Consciousness and the Urban Experience.* Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1985.

Hawkins, Simon. "Teargas, Flags and the Harlem Shake: Images of and for Revolution in Tunisia and the Dialects of the Local in the Global." In *The Political Aesthetics of Global Protest,* edited by Pnina Werbner, Martin Webb, and Kathryn Spellman-Poots, 31-52. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

Helmy, Mohamed M. and Sabine Frerichs. "Sheherazade Says No: Artful Resistance in Contemporary Egyptian Political Cartoon." In *Street Art of Resistance,* edited by Sarah H. Awad & Brady Wagoner, 349-376. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Innis, Robert E. "Resisting Forms: Prolegomena to an Aesthetics of Resistance." In *Street Art of Resistance*, edited by Sarah H. Awad and Brady Wagoner, 63-84. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017.

Jadaliyya Reports. "Deadly Detention: Deaths in Custody and Popular Protest in Syria." Jadaliyya. Arab Studies Institute, September 23, 2011. https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/24433/Deadly-Detention-Deaths-in-Custody-and-Popular-Protest-in-Syria.

Jarbou, Rana. "The Resistance Passed Through Here: Arabic Graffiti of Resistance, Before and After the Arab Uprisings." In *Street Art of Resistance,* edited by Sarah H. Awad & Brady Wagoner, 113-154. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Khatib, Lina. "Introduction: The Visual in Political Struggle." In *Image Politics in the Middle East.* London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 2013.

Kraidy, Marwan. *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016.

Leenders, Reinoud. "'Oh Buthaina, Oh Sha'ban—the Hawrani Is Not Hungry, We Want Freedom!': Revolutionary Framing and Mobilization at the Onset of the Syrian Uprising." In *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa,* edited by Joel Beinin and Frederic Variel, 246-261. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013.

Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space.* Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 1991.

LeVine, Mark. "When Art Is the Weapon: Culture and Resistance Confronting Violence in the Post-Uprisings Arab World." *Religions* no. 6 (2015): 1277-1313.

"Locations with Confirmed COVID-19 Cases, by WHO Region." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Last modified May 7, 2020. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/global-covid-19/world-map.html.

Lorber, Judith. "'Night to his Day': The Social Construction of Gender." In *Paradoxes of Gender*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.

MacFarquhar, Neil and Alan Cowell. "Syrians Said to Approve Charter as Battles Go On." The New York Times. The New York Times Company, February 27, 2012. https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/28/world/middleeast/syrian-violence-continues-as-west-dismisses-new-charter.html.

Makdisi, Saree. "Reconstructing History in Central Beirut." *Middle East Report* 203 (1997): 23-25.

miriam cooke. "Multiple Critique: Islamic Feminist Rhetorical Strategies." *L'Homme Et La Société* 4, no. 158 (2005): 169-188. Quoted in S. Chan-Malik, *Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam*. New York: New York University Press, 2018.

Mobaied, Samira. "The Baatho-Assadist System, a System of Political Instrumenalisation." *Open Journal of Political Science* 10, no. 1 (2020): 124-133.

Mikdashi, Maya. "How Not to Study Gender in the Middle East." Jadaliyya. Arab Studies Institute, March 12, 2012. https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/25434.

Mulder, Stephennie. "Beeshu's Laugh: The Arts of Satire in the Syrian Uprising." *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 11, no. 2 (2018): 174-195.

Najjar, Zeina. "Writing on the Wall: Conversations with Beirut's Street Artists." Master's thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014.

Porta, Donatella della, and Alice Mattoni. "The Transnational Dimension of Protest: From the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street." *European Consortium for Political Research* (2017).

Sabea, Hanan. "'I Dreamed of Being of a People': Egypt's Revolution, the People and Critical Imagination." In *The Political Aesthetics of Global Protest,* edited by Pnina Werbner, Martin Webb, and Kathryn Spellman-Poots, 67-92. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

Salaymeh, Belal A. M. "Impact of Neopatrimonialism on the Trajectory of the Conflict in Syria." Master's thesis, The Graduate School of Social Sciences of Middle East Technical University, 2018.

Sartwell, Crispin. "Introduction: The Idea of Political Aesthetics." In *Political Aesthetics.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010.

Sinno, Nadine. "A War of Colors: Beirut Street Art and the Reclamation of Public Space." *ASAP/Journal* 2, no. 1 (2017): 71-104.

Soja, Edward. *Seeking Spatial Justice*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

Suri, Charu. "Street Art Confronts the Pandemic." The New York Times. The New York Times Company, May 1, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/01/travel/coronavirus-street-art.html.

"Syrian Artists: Between Freedom and Oppression." Syrian Network for Human Rights, June 28, 2015. http://sn4hr.org/blog/2015/06/28/8474/.

Teo, Thomas. "Subjectivity, Aesthetics, and the Nexus of Injustice: From Traditional to Street Art." In *Street Art of Resistance*, edited by Sarah H. Awad and Brady Wagoner, 39-62. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017.

Traboulsi, Fawwaz. *A History of Modern Lebanon.* London: Pluto Press, 2012.

Tufekci, Zeynep. *Twitter and Teargas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protests*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017.

Vignal, Leila. "Transforming Geographies of the Middle East in Times of Globalization and Uprisings." In *The Transnational Middle East: Peoples, Places, Borders*, edited by Leila Vignal, 1-18. New York: Routledge, 2017.

Weber, Max. *Economy and Society; An outline of Interpretive Sociology.* Edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.

Werbner, Pina, Webb, Martin, and Kathryn Spellman-Poots. "Introduction." In *The Political Aesthetics of Global Protest,* edited by Pnina Werbner, Martin Webb, and Kathryn Spellman-Poots, 1-27. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014.