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Following the ground-breaking Performance and the City, this new volume explores what it means to create and experience urban performance – as both an aesthetic and a political practice – in the burgeoning world cities built by globalization and neoliberal capital. Featuring work by artists as well as scholars, written from multiple disciplinary perspectives, and including dozens of photographs as well as a photo essay by Nicholas Whybrow, Performance and the Global City will appeal to readers interested in urban studies, theatre and performance, geography, sociology, and globalization studies.

D. J. Hopkins is Associate Professor in the School of Theatre, Television, and Film at San Diego State University, USA. Previous publications include City / Stage / Globe: Performance and Space in Shakespeare's London and the co-edited collection Performance and the City (Palgrave 2009). He is editor of the journal Theatre Topics.

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Performance and the Global City

edited by D. J. Hopkins and Kim Solga

performance interventions
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Series Editors: Elaine Aston, University of Lancaster, and Bryan Reynolds, University of California, Irvine

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For twenty years I have shied away from writing about Cairo. It hurt too much. But the city was there, close to me, looking over my shoulder, holding up the prism through which I understood the world, inserting herself into everything I wrote. It hurt. And now, miraculously, it doesn’t. Because my city is mine again.

(Soueif: 9)

Like Ahdaf Soueif, I am from Cairo, but I watched and lived the beginnings of the Egyptian revolution through my presence in a different ‘global’ city, proud, inspired, deeply moved, and extremely engaged. My thoughts and feelings extended to the brave people who have put their lives on the line in a persistent pursuit of freedom, justice, and dignity. How I wished to be physically there. On the eve of 25 January 2011, in London, I started to receive news through Facebook, one of the portals connecting me to home, about people pouring into the streets of Suez, Alexandria, and Cairo in marches and demonstrations, at first by tens and hundreds, then quickly filling the streets in streams of thousands. Watching pixilated fragments of scenes on the Internet – live-streaming transmissions from Cairo or short footage filmed on mobile phone cameras – I struggled to comprehend the extent of the situation and to absorb its reality. My city, Cairo, appearing through the jerky scenes, seemed transformed. Its dusty streets, its exhausted buildings, its trees that fill spaces between concrete blocks, all came to life. They stood as witnesses: watching over, sympathizing with, and being defended. The people captured in those early images looked determined, powerful, fearless, confident, together, but most of all knowing. Somehow they ‘knew’, somehow they collectively agreed on the moment of rising when the barrier of fear was to be shattered.
What seemed like small and dispersed groups of marching people soon grew into solid blocks filling streets and bridges in the heart of Cairo. The people were forcefully chanting in unison, with astonishing rhythmicality and precision: ‘Al-shaab... yureed... esqat al-nizam!’ (‘The people demand the fall of the regime!’). This particular chant, which started in Tunisia before moving to Egypt, quickly became the vocal heart of the Arab revolutions, echoed globally, recited by millions. Importantly, nizam (‘regime’) means not just the ruling regime of tyranny, represented by Mubarak, Gaddafi, Al-Assad, or Ben Ali, but also the dominant regimes of knowledge production that the people across the Arab world are currently dismantling. ‘The isqat, dismantling, of a political regime and the regime of knowledge must go hand in hand’, Hamid Dabashi argues (47). To date, this specific chant remains the one with the strongest echoes in my memory, perhaps due to its association with this striking moment of beginning when I realized that Egypt was transforming, and that its people were changing the course of history.

My position toward the unfolding revolution in Egypt has been marked by the tension, unease, and frustration caused by my failure physically to be where I believe I should. My position has become one of in-betweenness – being both from the inside and on the outside; present and absent; participating and observing – an ambiguous state that evokes a sense of melancholy. ‘Melancholy, for all its links to real and metaphysical death, is a desire, a yearning that refuses to conclude, that is always impelled past conclusion’, writes Peter Schwenger (175). In The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects, Schwenger argues, after Maurice Merleau-Ponty, that the phenomenological sense of one’s body as an entity ‘in the world’ depends on the body’s being situated among that world’s objects. Identity, according to Schwenger, involves a sense of corporeal unity that must precede the psychological unity that is identification; at the same time, that corporeal unity is founded on a separation from the object and a consequent sense of loss that remains at the level of the unconscious. Schwenger argues that this separation and sense of loss are the source of a version of melancholia (9), a subtle sense of impoverishment suffered by the subject’s alienation from the objects that are the very coordinates of that subject’s being in the world (10).

My urge to participate, my melancholic yearning to be among the people on the streets of my home city in those early days – and perhaps my attempt to heal the ever-present rift caused by my sense of loss – was symbolically and virtually countered through the mediated metaphysical presence I subconsciously constructed for myself on the streets of
London. On those streets, I performed my own ‘alternative’ occupation in a Tahrir Square projected onto the map of an-other urban landscape. My experience of the unfolding events was shaped by the juxtaposed, and sometimes overlapping, images and sounds transmitted across the Web in late January and early February 2011. Those images spilled into scenes from my life in London, one that seemed so distant from what was occurring in Cairo. The stratigraphy of interlaced visual, aural, and textual components that structured my experience of the unfolding events produced a kind of ‘deep map’, a multilayered urban and personal experience that in turn created a challenging act of urban per-formativity.  

It made space for a personal, ‘invisible’ performance of my own, one that intervened in my habitual routes of action and alternated between the digitally mediated and the physically ‘present’, while also questioning the demarcation between those two states. Jen Harvie argues that communication technologies potentially intensify social alienation, but they also create more contexts for performative intervention, for coordinating communication in the planning of resistant performative practices and for new digital psycho-geographies, ‘where we can follow hyperlink desire paths of our choice as cyber-flâneurs’ (56). Paradoxically, my reliance on communication technology to follow the events unfolding in Cairo emphasized my closeness as well as my distance.

Walking was one act that destabilized my sense of my surroundings, breaking the fixity of physical location and displacing my experience of my immediate urban environment. The streets of London became uncanny. The foreignness of the act of walking along them was heightened by my mediated experience; walking became somehow ‘unreal’. My feet may have been stepping on the pavements of Salusbury Road in North London, but they were taking me to Talaat Harb Street in downtown Cairo, leading to Tahrir Square. I remember once getting on a train at Richmond Station on my way to work and momentarily not knowing why I did so or where the train was heading. My engagement with place became an act of self-authorship, dissolving the binary between presence and absence. In those early days, when I was first getting acquainted with a new community-in-the-making in Egypt, I chose to be in Cairo while physically remaining in London.

Expatriate Soueif recalls a similar experience of displacement in *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* (2012). In this autobiographical work, she weaves an intimate story that laces the private and public histories of Cairo through her rich, personal journey through the revolution. Soueif poetically depicts her urban longing, describing Cairo’s constant
presence in her consciousness to the extent that she ‘would wake up in [her] London bed convinced that as [her] front door opened on to Wimbledon, [her] garden door opened on to Zamalek’ (46). A dialectic interplay between ‘place’ and ‘space’ travels through both Soueif’s experience and my own. According to Yi-Fu Tuan’s understanding of space and place, from the security and stability of place we become aware of the openness, freedom and threat of space – particularly, I add, if this awareness is triggered by a situation of dislocation. If we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is ‘pause’; further, ‘each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place’ (Tuan: 6). Thus, an-‘other’ place – Cairo in this case – was recalled for Soueif as well as for me while both of us were in London, manifesting itself within the spaces of our yearning selves.

My attempt to carry on with my everyday life in London in the early days of the revolution was dramatically disrupted by my spatial reorientation. Conducting research at the British Library, for example, was interspersed with watching footage of key moments – such as the ‘Friday of Anger’ protests on 28 January, when hundreds of thousands gathered in Cairo and other Egyptian cities in large-scale marches urging everyone to participate (Figure 11.1). ‘Enzel!’ (‘Come down!’) echoed forcefully. Tahrir Square had already become the media’s focal point at this stage, and events there were observed around the world with a mix of awe, astonishment, and uneasy anticipation. The Square was gradually taking shape as the site of a community of resistance, and on my way home from the library that day my fellow commuters seemed to have been complicit in this courageous and noble uprising. Present within the sphere of my distant revolutionary participation, they were there unknowingly to share my excitement and pride. In my walk from the library, I echoed the rhythm of the chant ‘Al-shaab... yureed... esqat al-nizam!* faintly repeating it to myself. The private and the public intermingled for me in a flowing, dialogic process.

Access to the Internet was blocked in Egypt on 26 January 2011; mobile phone carriers were shut down and worry escalated. On the following Sunday, I managed to reach the phone of a friend in Cairo, and through the line I could hear the buzzing sound of a jet aircraft, an alien sound for me in the city. Later, we learned that the Egyptian Air Force had flown F-16 aircraft over Tahrir in a show of force, and in that moment my presence in the Square among the huge crowds, looking up at the circling aircraft, was mediated through the phone line. The following week I was back in the British Library, this time with disturbing images of the ‘Battle of the Camel’ transmitting live from Tahrir Square
on 2 February. In this battle, waves of Mubarak supporters met anti-government protesters, with many of the former riding camels and horses into the Square while wielding swords and sticks. The clashes, orchestrated by the ousted government, ended with hundreds of casualties. On that day, Mubarak reiterated his refusal to step down, aggravating the situation. The dramatic, surreal ‘spectacle’ was broadcast around the globe as it unfolded. Watching, with disbelief, footage streaming live through the screen of the computer resting on my lap in one of the public areas of the library, I realized, along with millions of other viewers, that the aging system that had governed Egypt for three decades was failing before my eyes against a wave of well-informed, present-day, peaceful protesters. The regime was accustomed to the outmoded, brutal forces of coercion, and it had underestimated the power and resilience of today’s protesters and their radical ‘new’ tools of activism. The government’s display of power failed to project or sustain its potency; its fragility was exposed as the strategy of the ‘Battle of the Camel’ backfired, adding to the series of events that led to the fall of Mubarak as it produced the image of his government desperately trying to survive.
Re-claiming the city

Degraded and bruised and robbed and exploited and mocked and slapped about: my city. I was ashamed of myself for not saving her. Every one of us was. All I could do was look and listen and stay and march and insist that I loved her. And she acted like she didn’t care. (Soueif: 45)

The culture of activism and the networks of oppositional publics that made the revolution happen have been gradually gaining power and momentum in Egypt over the past decade, paving the way for the scenes of force and bravery that constituted the biggest popular uprising in the history of the ‘Arab region’. Recent political life in Egypt has been marked by street unrest in its major cities: independent political movements and opposition groups have been actively mobilizing since around 2000, following the start of the Second Palestinian Intifada in October of that year. An anti-war protest on 20 March 2003, in response to the US-led invasion of Iraq, was one of the biggest demonstrations in Egypt’s history. Together, these protests developed into the first public demonstrations against Mubarak since he took office in 1981. Some of the resulting movements evolved into organized political groups, such as the ‘Egyptian Movement for Change’ (or, Kefaya ['Enough']), which played an important role in galvanizing opposition activists and intellectuals, spurring them to issue petitions and manifestos that called for democracy and reform. In one striking scene on 12 December 2004, activists surrounded by riot police gathered silently on the steps of the High Court in downtown Cairo, their mouths covered with large yellow stickers printed with the word Kefaya. In 2004 the ‘9 March Movement’, formed by a group of academics, demanded the independence of Egypt’s universities from the daily interventions of the government and state security. Another key movement, ‘6 April’, started in 2008 to support the workers’ action in the city of El Mahalla El-Kubra; their protests were crushed in a day that remains ingrained in Egyptian people’s memories. Using social media networks, blogs, and online video-sharing, members of the ‘6 April Movement’ played leading roles in urging people to protest on 25 January 2011.²

Independent activists in Egypt operated under the radar during the 2000s, using social media and other web technologies in ways that surpassed the expectations and the control of an institutionalized authority more accustomed to conventional forms of activism. More important, activists turned to the streets rather than to established
institutions for support (in fact, they were often rising against those institutions). Past protests that approached the street as a stage of struggle took place in a climate where people’s access to public space had been severely limited: emergency laws in place from the time Mubarak first came to power criminalized public gatherings of more than a few people. His government actively promoted the development of gated communities for the middle and upper classes, along with exclusive parks, shopping malls, and golf courses, actions that together constituted a clear privatization of public space (Antoun). Under Mubarak, Cairo’s city center was ignored as the government worked to dismantle and depopulate Cairo’s much-admired public squares and parks, including Tahrir Square, Ramses Square, and Azbakiiyya Gardens. For decades, Egyptian public policy and urban planning, like most governmental matters, were filtered through the harsh lens of state security. Urban open spaces were systematically subdivided, fenced off, or given over to endless road works and flyovers, and thus made increasingly challenging and intimidating for pedestrians and congregations. According to Mohamed Elshahed, ‘[c]ollectively such policies have led not only to the decline of public space but also to the inexorable deterioration of cities and the erosion of civic pride’.

Staging street protests and demonstrations under these conditions, no matter how small or limited in scope, thus constituted a significant intervention into the authoritarian practices of a state whose panoptic power was tailored to discipline citizen movement and suppress political deviation. The activists who dared to stage spectacles of defiance within the boundaries of such ‘closed’ public spaces hinted at the promise of change that lay in the power to challenge spatial hegemony. Their actions were ‘performative’ in that they ‘practic[ed] non-conventional behaviour in order to interrupt, defamiliarise and transform conventional, repetitive – and oppressive – social behaviours’ (Harvie: 63). The 25 January revolution demonstrated dramatically and rapidly how Egypt’s publics reappropriated Cairo’s own urban spaces, acting as social agents – as ‘individuals with the freedom and ability to act performatively to change our lives, destinies and urban society in an age of global capitalism’ (Harvie: 66).

I use the term ‘performance’ here as a conceptual framework, understanding it as a vital mode of social practice interpreted broadly to include popular protest. Baz Kershaw defines extra-theatrical performances as ‘cultural presentations that have recognisable theatrical components: namely, framing devices that alert the audience, spectators or participants to the reflexive structure of what is staged,
Figure 11.2 ‘The blood of the martyrs’ (written on the garment). The Martyrs’ Hospital, Tahrir Square. The ‘Friday of Anger’ (28 January 2011). Photo by Hesham Atef
drawing attention to its constructed nature, and more or less to the assumptions – social and/or political and/or cultural and/or philosophical, etc. – through which that construction is achieved’ (15). Public protest, however, does not always imply such a reflexive alertness toward its theatrical or aesthetic dimensions: it is often an immediate, spontaneous, urgent act, one that carries potentially adverse implications, including the risk to human life. The hundreds of protesters and other citizens killed and the thousands injured since the start of the revolution in Egypt likely did not think of their actions as ‘performance’ in the moment of their participation. Nor, I imagine, did those who were trying to escape the bullets and tear gas during their confrontations with the security police particularly intend the kinds of dramatic ‘spectacles’ their actions would create as they were distributed globally. I therefore use ‘performance’ here in relation to protest with caution, and with an awareness both of the importance of context and of the limitations of the term in framing different kinds of public incidents.

**Midan El-Tahrir: between the symbol and the ‘real’**

Oh *El-Midan* that embraced the idea ... and tempered it  
Oh *El-Midan* that fascinated humanity ... and mesmerized it  
Oh *El-Midan* whose name was long lost  
And that endured it between the adoring and abhoring.  
(El-Abnudi, ‘El-Midan’: 17)

Tahrir is a major downtown square and the central point of Greater Cairo. Surrounded by key government headquarters and cultural institutions, the space hardly serves as a civic square; mostly, it is a huge, busy crossroads crammed with heavy congestion. Through its central position, however, it connects downtown and older Cairo to the east with the River Nile, Giza, and the newer districts to the west. It also connects modern Egypt to its past, and to its future. Isma’īl Pasha, Khedive of Egypt and Sudan from 1863–79, stationed the Egyptian army and the Ministry of Defense there, and when the British occupied Egypt in 1882 their army took over the barracks and the Ministry and located their embassy there. The fortresslike American embassy was later built next to the British embassy on the Square, while a statue of Simon Bolívar was placed between the two embassies at the time of Nasser’s 1952 revolution. The Arab League building and the headquarters of
the Arab Socialist Union eventually went up in place of the British bar-
racks, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs faced them across Tahrir. The
People’s Assembly building is located a short distance away. Tahrir is also
home to the civic heart of Egypt – manifest in the Egyptian Antiquities
Museum at the northern end of the Square, and the campus of the
American University in Cairo at the other. In 1951, all governmental
administrative departments were consolidated in one central building
when the Mugammaa El-Tahrir (‘Tahrir Compound’) was built. Near it
is Omar Makram mosque, named after the popular leader who opposed
Napoleon’s French Expedition of 1798, the British Expedition of 1807,
and later Muhammed Ali (Soueif: 10–12).

Central Cairo has long been the ground for battles over urban space
that are deeply linked to questions of modernity and its legacy, as well
as to questions of national identity in Egypt. Mara Naaman traces
the transformation of Cairo’s historic downtown from its spectacular
beginning as a French-inspired Belle Époque marvel to a site of contest
and contradiction caught between tradition and modernization. She
argues that ‘the contested nature of the downtown – as a spectacu-
lar imitation of European modernity, as Egyptian public sphere, as a
site for the staging of a revolution, and as a modernist ruin – was and
continues to be central to the notion of what it means to be Egyptian’
(xxii). The area around Tahrir serves as an allegory for the political,
social, and economic transformations Cairo – and Egypt – have under-
gone from the period of colonial modernity, through Nasser’s nation-
alist-socialist modernization, to Anwar al-Sadat’s open-door policies in
the 1970s, to Hosni Mubarak’s ‘liberalized authoritarian state’ of the
last few decades (xxii).

Cairo’s urban history has been significantly shaped by the utopian
fantasies and expansion projects of French and Ottoman colonial rulers
as they have taken part in weaving the city’s social fabric, permanently
changing its urban geography. In the mid-nineteenth century, Khedive
Isma’il developed plans for a ‘modern’ and ‘Western’ city center, one
that was modeled on Paris and meant to impress foreign dignitaries vis-
iting Egypt’s capital for the inauguration ceremonies of the Suez Canal
(Naaman: 1–2). While Isma’il did achieve a series of successful, useful
public works in Egypt during his reign, his urban development plans for
the center of Cairo focused on its façade, and functioned as ‘theatre’:
as a representation of an imagined ‘real modernity’ existing in Europe
(29). They privileged the visual and the spectacular over more substan-
tive, infrastructural change; the heart of Cairo was redesigned under
his rule to serve the gaze of the Western elite and the consumption
habits of the upper classes. As a result, two separate aesthetic and social zones emerged: the modern city and the premodern one; one city for ‘foreigners’ to the west (the ‘colonial’ city, with its faster pace, wheeled traffic, steam-powered technology, and European identification) and another city (preindustrial) for ‘natives’ to the east (Abu-Lughod: 430). Janet Abu-Lughod describes Cairo at this time as a ‘dual city’, as

two distinct physical communities, divided one from the other by barriers much broader than the single street that marked their borders. The discontinuity between Egypt’s past and future, which appeared as a small crack in the early nineteenth century had, by the end of that century, widened into a gaping fissure. The city’s physical duality was but a manifestation of the cultural cleavage.

(430)

The French-inspired reconstruction of Cairo enacted a colonial vision, erecting an urban stage on which ‘Oriental Egypt’ could be performed back to the orientalizing gaze. Not surprisingly, transforming Cairo’s city center into an image of a ‘real’ elsewhere contributed to its status as a palimpsest of multiple histories and identities. At the same time, this transformation also helped give birth to oppositional movements mobilized by those disadvantaged by its spectacles of colonial power and Western modernity. As Naaman points out, Egyptian subjects exposed by the modernization project to a Western-style education, social and cultural practices, and knowledge of the colonial administration system, often used this knowledge fiercely to critique systemic hegemony in the country (15). These ‘Westernized’ subjects might initially have been thought of as mimicking European dress and submitting to Western frames of thought and habits, but it was this class of citizens that would eventually become the most active proponents of the anti-colonial nationalist movement in Egypt. They gradually shifted away from their identification with Western models and became aligned to nationalist views, asserting Egyptian authenticity and the right to an emancipated society. As they became clearer in their aims and their sense of self, this class of modern Egyptians transformed their shared identity from consumers and spectators of the performance of European modernity into participants and makers of their own vision of a modern Egypt, increasingly putting the symbols of colonial hegemony under attack.

Against this thick historical backdrop surrounding ‘Midan El-Tahrir’ – Arabic for ‘Liberation Square’ – the people who started the revolution in
2011 extended the resisting impulses of their urban ancestors by asserting their identities as owners of this public place. By occupying Tahrir Square peacefully for 18 days between January and February 2011, and again for various periods in the subsequent months throughout the revolution, protesters performed an intervention that profoundly disrupted expectations about who controls public space in Cairo, and about how it can be used. Protesters and activists in Egypt commonly describe Tahrir as a ‘symbol’ – but one that is vital for the continuation and success of the real revolution.

Kershaw argues that

the synecdochic spectacle of protest challenges a system of authority in its own terms, because in such societies the display of power – its symbolic representation in multifarious forms of public custom, ceremony and ritual, and then their reproduction throughout the media – has become in some sense more important to the maintenance of law and order than authority’s actual powers of coercion and control.

(92–3)

The ‘synecdochic spectacle’ of Tahrir’s occupation disrupted the simulated spectacle of colonial and state powers ingrained in Cairo’s public spaces as based on nothing more than a presumption to violence, as in the theatricalized ‘Battle of the Camel’ of February 2011. By confronting that act of violence with the symbolic act of insistently keeping hold of a strategic piece of public space, the protesters destabilized Mubarak’s spectacles of power, challenging them on levels both symbolic and material. ‘Tahrir has been symbolic from day one and acts as a focal pressure point’, claims activist Gigi Ibrahim. ‘What comes out of it is what matters’ (qtd in Murray and Stevens). Further, the Tahrir occupation offered striking images that could be easily captured, reproduced, and transmitted globally with unprecedented impact; the spread of the many Tahrir-style uprisings that took place in cities from Athens to Madrid, to Moscow, to London and New York is evidence of the Cairo occupation’s global influence. World leaders, caught off-guard, could not help but display support and admiration for the extraordinary accomplishment of the Tahrir demonstrators. On 11 February 2011, responding to the resignation of Mubarak, US president Barack Obama singled out the Square and its occupants at the climactic moment in his speech: ‘The word “Tahrir” means liberation. It is a word that speaks to that something in our
souls that cries out for freedom. And forevermore it will remind us of the Egyptian people – of what they did, of the things that they stood for, and how they changed their country, and in doing so changed the world.’

When protests erupted in Egypt on 25 January in response to nationwide calls to use National Police Day to protest against police abuses and state corruption, demonstrators from around Cairo started marching toward Tahrir, some simply in an attempt to escape the attacks of Central Security Forces. The Square attracted protesters partly because of its central location and partly because of its history as a site of dissent. Demonstrators decided to occupy and hold the Square, symbolically reclaiming it, until Mubarak’s departure, with the chant ‘Erhal!’ (‘Leave!’) echoing collectively and inscribed on banners and placards all around the Square. That quintessential moment when Egyptian revolutionaries took over Tahrir and did not let go became symbolic of a people holding onto their destinies and their dreams of a new history. It was a collective choice full of creative force and insight. Beyond symbolism, it was also a moment that gave people a shared purpose and promise, as well as a moment that gave shape and potency to the course and outcomes of the subsequent events.

Violence instigated by the security forces broke out on the same evening, driving protesters to disperse, but the violence made them even more determined to regroup in Tahrir. The crowd of protesters grew in size in the following days, reaching around 30,000 by 28 January (Elshahad). State security recognized the growing potency of the Square and took stronger measures to fortify the area, using water cannons, tear gas, rubber bullets, and live ammunition against a group of people who were equipped with no more than mobile phones and cameras. The battle took on a new dimension: now, the goal was not only to challenge state security forces and overthrow the regime, but also to claim Tahrir Square as the stage of the people (Elshahad). The government’s act of cutting off Internet and mobile phone access across the country during those early days was another catalyst that drove more people to step out into the streets, dramatically adding to the numbers of protesters and emphasizing the material force exerted by a physical occupation of public space. A large cross-section of Egyptian society was engaged: protesters – many of them apparently participating politically for the first time – were of varied classes, genders, ages, ethnicities, and religions. During the next few days, as they started to gain firmer control over the Square, the ‘Battle of the Camel’ broke out, ending with casualties but also with more determined protesters,
greater crowds, and a renewed ownership of the Square. By now Tahrir had established its status as more than a demonstration; it constituted a dynamic and resourceful community of citizens brought together by a shared objective.

Tahrir Square during the occupation – particularly after the ‘Battle of the Camel’ and until 11 February, when Mubarak finally stepped down – was a fully self-sustaining, inclusive, self-organized, highly creative, and democratic community, living each day in clear defiance of what much of the surrounding architecture signified. The Square was cordoned off for protection from state security attacks by sheets of corrugated iron and barbed wire (protesters took these materials from a fence surrounding one of the areas of the Square that had been blocked by the government without apparent reason). Entry points were patrolled by volunteers who checked for weapons and identification. Long queues of people waited to gain entry through the checkpoints; young boys and girls greeted the arrivals with big smiles, beating on oil drums, and rhythmically chanting: ‘Welcome, welcome, revolutionaries! Welcome, welcome, free ones!’ Once inside, the Square heaved with activities and huge crowds of people of all ages, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds; all were engaged in chanting, marching, debating, making speeches, singing, playing music, painting, joking, creating and watching performances, attending to the injured, and sharing food and shelter. The spirit of the occupation and the dynamics of the revolution broke social barriers and fostered a strong sense of solidarity; further, and perhaps more importantly, as Gigi Ibrahim notes, they shattered the ‘fear barrier’ that had long kept Egyptians from claiming their shared spaces, and with them their human rights (qtd in Murray and Stevens). Soueif describes images from those moments:

We look happy. We look dazed. We turn to each other to question, to reassure …. People have put up tents in the central garden. In one tent young women are collecting footage of Dakhleyya torture. In another, people are stacking bottles of water and dry biscuits …. We all become instant friends …. All the ills which plagued our society in the last decades have vanished overnight. Young men, who a month ago could have been thought a menace to any woman on the street, were chivalry itself. People offer each other biscuits, dates, water. People chat, people pick up litter. We revel in the inclusiveness, the generosity, the humor that come so easily to us. Students, businessmen, waiters, academics, farmers, civil servants, unemployed – we
are all here together, all doing what we’ve not been able to do for decades: each and every one is speaking, acting, expressing themselves and insisting on being counted.

(55–6)

The occupation had crucial material effects, but it played out largely in the realm of the sign. Never did protesters engage in direct violence, but an effigy of Mubarak hung from a lamppost throughout the 18 days, symbolizing the urge to put him on trial for his crimes of brutality and corruption against the people (some protesters believed that, collectively, his crimes qualified him for a death sentence). A symbolic trial was staged for Mubarak and his cabinet, which saw a makeshift prison placed on a stage erected in the Square with effigies of the convicted inside. Signs of mourning and various creative forms of commemoration were strongly present, dominating the visual field of the Square: photographs of martyrs (killed during the preceding events) were placed everywhere, often printed on huge banners or painted skillfully on walls with vibrant colors or as stencil prints. Graffiti emerged as one of the most powerful expressive forms during the revolution, offering persistent, bold, witty, and sophisticated commentary on the shifting events, and enduring through the authorities’ recurrent attempts to erase it (Figure 11.5). A makeshift monument was created in the middle of the Square with photographs of all the martyrs; it was protected by a human chain of volunteers, and often surrounded by a crowd of mourners and others paying their respects. Protesters took turns enacting ‘martyrdom’: witnessed by large crowds of spectators, performers would lie silently on the ground in the center of a chalk circle, holding a banner and placing used tear gas canisters and bullets over their bodies (see Figures 11.3 and 11.4). Christian mass and Muslim prayers took place inside the Square; Friday prayers were often held before the start of the weekly ‘million man’ protests. During those moments, the space of the Square and the surrounding areas would be filled with thousands in prayer, in striking scenes of unison and solemnity. As a form of respect, solidarity, and protection, others would form a human chain around those praying.

Observations that the occupation had a carnivalesque quality are common. Activist Mahmoud Salem, who helped organize the Tahrir School for homeless children, claims that ‘while some outsiders may view the atmosphere in Tahrir Square as festival-like, I believe it is there to prove a point .... It becomes a social experiment which can prove that, since our demands are not being met, in the meantime, we can create a
more utopian microcosm of Egypt’ (qtd in Doss). While the occupation did indeed display aspects of the carnivalesque, particularly in its festive atmosphere, moments of high drama, and parodic mockery, the context of the occupation, as Salem points out, pushed its performative dimension well beyond carnival. Kershaw argues in the context of the occupation of the White House lawn by thousands of demonstrators on 9 May 1970 that ‘[t]he protest represents more than just time out from the mundane and everyday, framed by the law and the State. Rather, it fashions new or, perhaps, stolen time – time (and space) taken on the terms of the demonstrators, not contained by the law but beyond the law (at least until the police and troops move in)’ (101). In addition to being a transgression of the everyday not conditioned by state authority, the occupation in Tahrir demonstrated the enormous power of the symbolic to intervene in the real, causing radical political change and provoking profound self-reflection. Farha Ghannam notes that ‘the Midan has become the symbolic as well as the physical anchor that represents right vs. wrong, change vs. stability, and the nation (el-Sha’b) vs. the system (nizam). The way in which this space has been managed and regulated by the protesters is becoming central to how they see themselves as a group.’

Figure 11.3 Enacting ‘martyrdom’. The ‘Friday of the Martyr’ (1 July 2011). Photo by Nesreen Hussein
As Salem implies above, the experience in Tahrir held a mirror up to the contemporary Egyptian subject, revealing the image of a self that had been distorted and oppressed by decades of state corruption and abuse, but demonstrating, too, a regenerated sense of identity and belonging when that self was momentarily liberated from the constraints of the abusive system in the alternative community formed in Tahrir. Activist Gameela Ismail states that ‘[w]alking in the streets now is completely different to before, the feeling that for the first time the street is yours, the neighbourhood is yours, the country is yours’ (qtd in Law). The revolution – Tahrir – is, then, not just about the transformative impact of social media, or even about claiming public space:

Tahrir is about dignity and image as much as it is about the economy and corruption. It hurts how much this regime has messed with our heads, divided us, maligned us to the world. ‘They say we only care about a loaf of bread,’ a young labourer says. ‘We care about bread. But we also care about our dignity.’ Together, in the Midan, over the last four days, we have rediscovered how much we like ourselves and each other, corny as it may sound, how ‘good’ we are. ... I look
around and I know this won’t stop. No one, nobody, not one of us, is going to step back into the nightmare.

(Souieif: 59)

The beginning of the journey

When the first opportunity arose, when my participation-at-a-distance ran out of potency, I flew to Cairo. I did not know that I would arrive one day before the end of the first phase of Tahrir’s occupation: the day before Mubarak’s resignation. Looking out the window of the taxi I took from the airport, I needed some time to readjust my sense of physical and spatial awareness and to fully realize that I was actually on the roads of my city. I searched in anticipation for signs of change: in the streets, in the buildings, and in people’s faces. I hoped to see in reality what I had already captured through my earlier, mediated experiences. Faces seemed brighter, steps seemed firmer, perhaps as a projection of my perception, my hope. Rows of military tanks were parked on both sides of the road, halting traffic; signs of change were indeed manifest, I thought. I overheard the driver’s phone conversation about ongoing preparations for a football match later in the
Square between protesters and state security police – the latter role to be played by the protesters themselves. I asked him if he ever went to Tahrir to join the protesters; of course he did, after finishing his shift, suggesting that the protesters are there to stay, for there is nothing to lose. Tahrir has everything one needs, he claimed, and I was soon to understand what he meant.

Later that evening Mubarak addressed the nation, stating that he would continue as Egypt’s head of state. The angry public reactions that followed his address raised concerns about violence, particularly as the numbers and intensity of demonstrations escalated in various cities in response to Mubarak’s adamancy. On the following day, the ‘Friday of Departure’, I made my way to Tahrir Square. The map of my personal performance, my version of the revolution that I had superimposed on the streets of London, had found its home, the place where it finally made sense. When I arrived near the Square, the rituals of access were explained to me. I was confronted by growing crowds of people as I walked towards Tahrir: men, women, and children, holding banners and flags, glowing with excitement. The sounds of chants, speeches, and songs echoed from a distance, enticing me forward. While waiting in the long entry queue, I heard conversations, analyses, predictions, and passionate debates crisscross from all directions. As the makeshift entrance cut out in the corrugated iron gate drew nearer, I was greeted by the gleeful boys and girls: ‘Welcome, welcome free ones! Welcome, welcome revolutionaries!’ they chanted as they beat their oil drums.

I was getting close. The festive, inclusive atmosphere did not suggest violence, but it spoke to me of a revolutionary vision of subjectivity, community, agency, and citizenship in a precise manifestation of civic public engagement and real political action as they have been imagined from Hannah Arendt to Jürgen Habermas.

Finally, I walked through the makeshift gate, and stepped into a space that seemed intimately familiar yet infinitely strange. As I write this conclusion, nearly two years after the start of the revolution, Egypt’s transformation continues. Today – Friday 23 November, 2012 – may mark the beginning of a second wave of the revolution. Protesters have been battling the state police for the past few days over the inadequacy of the post-revolution government; young activist
Gabber Salah was shot in the head three days ago during a peaceful protest in now iconic Mohamed Mahmoud Street, just off Tahrir Square. Meanwhile, Muhamed Morsi, Egypt’s first elected president, has issued a constitutional declaration granting himself broad powers, above the influence of any court, as ‘the guardian of Egypt’s revolution’ (Kirkpatrick and El Sheikh). Dynamics of state oppression and appropriation reappear, and the determined protesters are back in the streets and squares amid plans for a renewed Tahrir occupation.

The experience in Tahrir Square in January 2011 is often described as utopic, as a romantic, transient ideal that was born of the moment. I respond to this perspective by borrowing from Paul Ricoeur:

May we not say that imagination itself – through its utopian function – has a constitutive role in helping us rethink the nature of our social life? Is not utopia – this leap outside – the way in which we radically rethink what is family, what is consumption, what is authority, what is religion, and so on? Does not the fantasy of an alternative society and its exteriorization ‘nowhere’ work as one of the most formidable contestations of what is?

(16)

The ‘nowhere’ of utopia puts political and cultural systems at a critical distance, helping us to see them from the outside, and to expose their credibility gaps (17). What I have been tracing here as Tahrir’s paradoxical pivot between the symbolic and the ‘real’, between the utopian and the actual, makes it a new, urgent tool of grassroots democracy. Activist and blogger Alaa Abd El-Fattah sums this up when he argues that ‘[t]he people know that Tahrir was simply spectacle …. But they also know that the spectacle is important in the battle of ideas, and if Tahrir falls, the dream falls. Tahrir is a myth that creates a reality in which we’ve long believed’ (Soueif: 190). Today, the promise of change in Egypt is still being declared; Tahrir Square stands, again and again, as a stage for, and a testament of, such declaration. My revolution, our revolution, continues.

Notes

1. Stratigraphy is ‘a foundation of archaeological analysis and interpretation’ (Pearson and Shanks: 28) that is concerned with the analysis of the order and position of the layers of archaeological remains. For a definition of ‘deep map’, see Pearson and Shanks (64–6, and 162).
2. One of the founders of ‘The 6 April Youth Movement’, Asmaa Mahfouz has been credited with helping to initiate a mass uprising through a video blog
posted to Facebook on 18 January 2011. Mahfouz called on Egyptians to demand their human rights and to voice their disapproval of the Mubarak regime; the post quickly went viral.

3. The details of the demonstrations and the scenes from Tahrir’s occupation I offer below mainly derive from my personal observations and experiences; I also draw on myriad web and social media sources.

4. Egyptian poet El-Abnudi wrote ‘El-Midan’ during the revolution’s Tahrir occupation in 2011. This translation from the Arabic (in Egyptian dialect) is mine.

5. Protests against colonialism in Egypt have taken the form of a series of revolts, including: the Urabi Revolution in 1879–82 against Khedive Tawfik Pasha and European influence in the country; the Revolution of 1919 against the British occupation of Egypt and Sudan; and the Revolution of July 1952, which led to abolishing the constitutional monarchy in Egypt and Sudan, the end of the British occupation, and the establishment of an Egyptian republic. Urabi’s revolt began in 1879 with riots around Khedive Isma’il’s Abdín Palace in eastern downtown Cairo. Today, Abdín Square has become the site of a series of free, monthly art and performance events under the title ‘El Fan Midan’ (‘Art is a Square’), launched by the Independent Culture Coalition two months after the fall of Hosni Mubarak with the aim of bringing art and culture out into the streets of Egypt (Montasser).

6. The Arabic word ‘midan’ is not tied to a shape, but ‘describes an urban open space in a central position in a city’ (Soueif: 10). Midan El-Tahrir is neither a square, nor a circle, but more like a large, curved rectangle.


8. The numbers of protesters was estimated to have reached 2,000,000 on 6 February (Ghannam).

9. The walls along both sides of Mohamed Mahmoud Street off Tahrir Square have been used as a record for, a commemoration of, and a testimony to the violence that has been taking place on that street since intense battles between protesters and state police broke out there in November 2011. As part of public ‘cleaning’ measures, Egyptian authorities, amidst public outcry, erased the majority of the street’s murals on 19 September 2012. A few hours later, however, the artists returned with their paints, brushes, and spray cans. One of the first new drawings was of a head sticking out its bright green tongue, surrounded by the slogan: ‘Erase once more, you cowardly regime!’ (El-Sharnoubi).

10. This expression, used in a different context, is inspired by Pearson and Shanks (159).

Works cited


