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Transculturation in a Changing Arab World: Engaging Contexts in Conversation

Eid Mohamed

Through investigating the manifold bearings of the Arab Spring uprisings on the Arab world, and on Arabs in general, *Cultural Production and Social Movements after the Arab Spring* reflects the multifaced Arab revolutionary prism from different scholarly perspectives and in an interdisciplinary manner that encompasses the broad spectrum of this revolutionary upheaval. Part One blends spatial and temporal investigation of the postrevolutionary processes of Arab identity renegotiation and re-narration in representation of assimilative transcultural practices. The Arab uprisings of 2011 sparked unprecedented waves of change and upheaval and an overwhelming uncertainty for the future of this region. In many cases, the masses that took their grievances to the streets in late 2010 and early 2011 still face the same challenge. This chapter focuses on exploring the questions of how the political transformations since 2011 have affected the construction of a collective Arab identity. How have the recent political, socioeconomic, and cultural upheavals affected the imagining of this identity? And what are the processes that affect the shaping of such a collective Arab transcultural identity? By transcultural identity, we refer to the extent to which a citizen can see himself or herself in the Other beyond the division of national borders. In the context of Arab transcultural identity, we can ask, for example, What makes a peasant farmer in the suburbs of Egypt identify with an unemployed Tunisian graduate protesting in the streets of Tunis? Or asked differently, What was it about the Tunisian masses who were protesting during the Jasmine revolution that inspired the masses in Cairo to protest in Tahrir Square? Can one even imagine that a revolution in Egypt would have been sparked had there not been an uprising in Tunisia that preceded it? In attempting to answer these questions, we aim to explore the processes that contribute to the formation of a collective and transcultural Arab identity that stretches across national borders.

Given the enormous upheavals in the Arab world over the last six years or so, which almost reflect—at least so far—the Arab people's desire to dismantle age-old totalitarianism in the region and probe their way toward a better future, this book, being the fruit of intensive two-day workshop discussions, traces the diverse

manifestations of such upheavals from a transcultural perspective. The critical chapters that the book strings together, diverse in their approaches as they are, mainly address the question of identity transformations in a changing, globalized, and conflictual world. In this sense, the focal point is the interplay of different identitarian and cultural elements in the formation of the ever shape-shifting, border-crossing, multicultural, and hybridized Arab identity, inside and outside the Arab world. This trans-ing perspective, besides reconsidering traditional notions of culture and identity and reconceptualizing transculturality from an interdisciplinary perspective, aims to guide further theoretical and practical studies of Arab identity and cultures as crystallized in a still-revolutionary age.

This chapter explores how the emergent transcultural identities in the Arab world and beyond—as investigated in the rest of the chapters—are multicentered and sometimes even contradictory; in tapping into their collective dimensions and the social and aesthetic cohesive aspects of cultural memory, they redefine our narrow approaches to the question of identity. This perspective, I will argue, is in line with the approaches entrenched in pursuing single imaginaries, states, groups, and so on. Unlike notions of interculturality and multiculturality—where cultural determinants such as homogeneity, uniformity, and fixed cultural boundaries are at work—transculturality better answers to the new sense of cultural fluidity and dynamism that relishes permeation, hybridity, and transmutability. Here, the multi-meshing and inclusivity, embodied in the concept of transculturality and the ensuing lack of internal uniformity within the “transcultural place,” become the objective (Welsch 1999, 200–1). Welsch believes that interculturality and multiculturality, though they carry some sense of tolerance toward other cultures, still involve the problems of homogeneity-premised traditional concepts of culture, implying delimiting and separatist attitudes toward cultures and thus entailing a potential clash. Transculturality, however, promises to overcome cultural essentialism, ghettoization, and fundamentalism, which are embodied in the traditional conception of single cultures as spheres or islands. The current fluidity of the movement of persons and ideas, mostly involving pouring through and crossing over barriers, diminishes cultural homogeneity. Modern cultures are marked for internal complexity involving different ways of life and for transnational “external connectivity and entanglement” with identical lifestyles transcending certain cultures and in a way that renders the own-ness/foreignness binary no more than an “aesthetic” myth (Welsch 1999, 197–8). This macro-cultural connectivity is coupled with a micro-cultural, individual hybridity that lends greater force to transculturality, with individual identities being formed by more than one reference culture. Hence, transculturality induces a shift in focus from culturally delimiting and separatist divergences to the “opportunities to link up” or reach out toward building a collectivist, transcultural, and inclusivist culture that transcends the parochialist and constraining monocultural perspective. Transculturality implies a movement between and across cultural borders that aims not toward a renewed form of homogeneity but rather toward acknowledgment of diversity, both internal and external, and that captures opportunities to “link up” in a constant process of transformation. This transcultural movement is not mono- or bi-directional but rather circular, allowing for a shift in focus from the divergences as delimiting differences to potentials for internal/external

transformative transculturality, with the “transcultural webs” being “woven with different threads, and in a different manner” (Welsch 1999, 203).

It is notable that in the wake of the uprisings referred to as the Arab Spring, the cultural and artistic scene witnessed a relatively surprising boom of production in most disciplines and acquired a fresh approach to artistic creation and expression. Works of art multiplied, and new themes were explored that shed light on the hidden aspects of Arab societies—thus, Arab history—in the past decades. The revolutions had finally eradicated taboos that had long agonized artists. Movies that depicted the violations of human rights under the previous regimes were screened openly and in movie theaters. Books such as Gilbert Naccache’s prison memoir, *Cristal*, were sold in libraries and easily accessed by readers. The newly found freedom functioned as a fuel for artists who attempted to break free from all the restraints formerly imposed by the fallen regime.

The uprisings have been of momentous importance in expressing the popular consciousness of the Middle East and North Africa region with respect to demands for sociopolitical change and with respect to questions of civil agency in realizing the aspirations for political and socioeconomic justice. The expression of this movement has notably taken largely cultural and aesthetic forms across diverse media, and this book constitutes a crucial endeavor for the recognition and understanding of a changing Arab world. Given that some Western commentators have spoken of the Arab Spring as coming out of nowhere, it is epistemologically important to show how this is not the case. Here, the book attempts to evidence awareness of the change in social mood and the coming uprisings. This cultural data in the various chapters in this book provide evidence of a growing revolutionary consciousness.

For example, the Egyptian band Cairokee’s music video *Sout Al Horeya* is a visual and musical interpretation of the demand for freedom that could be placed alongside Tunisian singer Emel Mathlouthi’s song “Kelmti horra (Ma parole est libre),” and these were placed alongside the anti-dictatorship posters. Thus, the Egyptian literary and artistic scene requires us to rethink the key idea of shared ethic (that the transcultural literature situates at the core of transcultural initiatives) by better explaining the persistence of conflicts (which tend to be erased by “transculturalists”).

Also, we need to reconsider the definition of the self. For instance, in recent Arabic literature, the self is redefined no more only vis-à-vis the individual but as more connected with the collective. However, this inclusiveness paradigm often forgets that this collective may also be a dominant one. Situating oneself within the collective may not be enough to get rid of boundaries and hierarchies. There is also the idea that transculturality is a choice. If we have multiple ways of acting, defining our actions according to who we are globally and locally, we should also understand how crisis and social changes push us by redefining who we are and what we would like to do and the kind of influence we want to have in a not always conscious or freely chosen way. Transcultural cultures help to re-narrate identity after traumas such as forced/constrained migrations, wars, colonial experiences, and the ideological imposition of states on minority groups.

But we should rethink the idea of inclusiveness; transculturation can help in redefining and re-narrating identity, cultural loyalty, and feelings of belonging (e.g.,

what citizenship, religious affiliation, or ethnicities mean) when those have been denied or questioned by dominant narratives. It makes it more important to be part of fluid and maybe temporary forms of invented traditions than to be allowed to belong to a national conception of citizenship defined by structural institutions. We must also investigate the unequal access to the transcultural and question why some people can be citizens of the world while others can only ever be refugees or immigrant workers, and what are the consequent efforts to attain legitimacy. We must not presuppose that because those identities are now transcultural, they are automatically inclusive, a disconnect that is exemplified by the Houthis' current attempts to resist the narrative of passive victims of war in Yemen by embedding themselves in the transnational culture of violence that is redefining that country.

The transcultural allows us to better apprehend cultures and identities that seem impossible to be banalized the collective (like being Palestinian, revolutionary, or Islamist, or in the process of Jewish-Muslim interaction) beyond virtual solidarity and identification. But we need to rethink the idea of shared ethics as the core basis of identity sharing. Here, our primary interest is how the transcultural can link specific cultures and identities with the collective by acting as a substitute for fragmented politics. In order to localize this link, we should question who owns the narrative that defines the identity and show how transcultural actors are trying to dissemble it, uncovering in the process the impact that these marginal or specific identities may have on other specific groups' identification as well as on the dominant center. It is important to be aware of using notions of message or hybridity in order to analyze which (political) cultures emerge from transcultural interactions. The reflexivity of these specific cultures toward the collective is not a passive one; it also implies a creativity that gives birth to new cultural repertoires beyond being only countercultural. As such, we should not only focus on what redefinition of centered normative identities bring (although this is crucial) but also analyze what happens to these centered/dominant redefined norms once circulated by specific cultural actors. Understanding the transnational is also about understanding its inner dialogical cultural impact, a dynamic that is marginalized when the effort to understand group interactions is focused on shared ethics only. It is possible that since transcultural actors share the same platform but use it in different ways and with different levels of mobility, flexibility, and willingness to go beyond the group's confinement, a process of negotiation is implied.

The idea of a free, conscious choice at the start of transcultural moves should be tempered by a closer look at the multilayered nature of transnational culture through its multiple spaces and genealogies. With a focus on modern dynamics (colonization, migrations, etc.), the book chapters often present transcultural identities as a new phenomenon, but the literature itself reminds us that it is not, that people have always been mobile and influenced by each other. Methodologically, we should not be lured by the rhythm of circulation and changes (which are real) but also by understanding what persists from the past in these transcultural identities and cultures. Hence, historical contextualization and archaeological work on the sequential/simultaneous spaces visited by the actors are of the first importance.

A Reading of the Cultural and Artistic Scene in the Postrevolutionary Arab World

The so-called Arab Spring has implemented new dynamics of art as a form of expression. The first years following the revolutionary movements witnessed a threefold reconstruction of the art scene: reconstructing the relationship of the artist to the public space, as in the case of thriving street art; reconstructing the identity of the artist as an activist and artist; and reconstructing the subject of artistic creation to place political and social issues at the focal center. Such an investigation of the artistic production utilizes concepts of cultural resistance emphasized by such theorists as Stephen Duncombe. Evidently, the art scene of the postrevolutionary scene has been evolving amid political, social, and economic changes. While many collectives have been born out of the revolution's newfound freedoms, the instability of the region also reflects on the ever-shifting nature of art.

Scholarship across the humanities documents and analyzes the interplay of politics, arts, and culture. A scholarly consensus has emerged indicating that the 2010–11 Arab uprising and its aftermath provided a moment of heightened political liminality that fueled and reflected cultural and political expressions in the arts. Art is political and is used to hasten and reflect ongoing social and political change. Within the context of the Arab uprisings, however, scholars debate exactly how arts both effected and were affected by the liminal space of the revolution itself and the transitional period afterwards. Politics affect the type of art created; traumatic and violent political events can induce artists to rearticulate new identity in art, while repressive environments spark art with double-meanings. Finally, some contend that above all, this political art from the revolutionary context is itself a form of historical narrative.

Cultural production has great potential as a weapon in revolutionary, or even counterrevolutionary, struggle. Music, poetry, theater, graffiti, and visual arts during the Arab Spring were utilized as weapons and heralded the edge of political change. For instance, Brinda Mehta argues in her review of *Staging Tahrir* and other theatrical work by Laila Soliman that theater, too, can be a useful revolutionary tool that both evokes and sustains revolution. Focusing specifically on the work of Laila Soliman's *Revolutionary Theatre*, Mehta agrees that creative dissidence has always been a part of revolutionary movements.¹

According to Mark Levine, after Egypt's revolution and counterrevolution, artists struggled to keep their work revolutionary in order to maintain the movement. Arab Spring revolutionary artwork was almost religiously committed to the intersection of creativity and conflict.² Levine argues further that through the Arab revolutions, there was a return to Walter Benjamin's concept of artistic "aura." Although interesting, this theoretical application does not strengthen his general argument. Levine suggests that revolutionary art demonstrating this aura is not industrialized, commodified, and commercialized as other arts generally are.³ Art is being democratized in the context of these revolutionary movements, as it is no longer something for business but rather something for political activism. This argument is weak, as even if revolutionary art is not commodified in the traditional sense, these artists are still selling their art.

From YouTube monetization to selling buttons, revolution, and revolutionary art, is not automatically more authentic and less of a commodity. Perhaps even revolution itself can be commodified. Levine also concludes that only recently has art become politicized in the Middle East in the wake of the Arab Spring. The information on art and religion seemed contrived and secondary, tacked on at the end. He argues convincingly that even clearly religious, conservative, and fundamentalist groups in the Middle East, like the Islamic State, have been making use of art in their political struggle.

The weaponization of culture is not restricted to fine arts and theater. Other forms of culture, such as media production, also played a role in the battle for hearts and minds during the revolution and postrevolution period. In their article "Framing the Egyptian Uprising in Arabic Language Newspapers and Social Media," Naila Hamdy and Ehab Gomaa examine how state-run, independent, and social media in Egypt all framed the 2011 uprisings differently. The content they studied was all Arabic language, and they engaged with eight hundred documents to categorize how stories were framed in these different media formats. They argue that the state portrayed the uprisings as a conspiracy concocted by outside forces against the Egyptian state, while social media posts stressed the concept of revolution for freedom. They conclude that independent newspapers used both lenses in their analyses.⁴ Each political camp used different narratives to shape public opinion of the revolution through its respective media outlet. This study's careful analysis of such a vast array of primary source data and its utilization of digital humanities tools have been a useful contribution to this exploration of culture as a political force in the context of revolution. According to the analysis of Levine and Mehta especially, the days of Tahrir were a "special period" of political uncertainty that resulted in especially intense production of politically meaningful and effective art. Their work indicates that revolution and cultural production are shaped actively by narratives, which can be spun in a variety of directions. Their work recognizes revolutionary cultural production (specifically media production) as historical narrative, similar to that of Radwa Othman Sharaf. Here, art is both effecting change and being shaped by political goals.

But scholarship also notes how political upheaval itself affects artistic production and even the self-perception of populations. Traumatic and violent political events can induce artists to rearticulate identity through art. Elizabeth A. Zahnd and Thyazyla Dnaz suggest that these sorts of political events can prompt artists to reimagine both identity and community. These scholars examine the connection between politics and culture through treatment of two Québécois novels centered on the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Zahnd and Dnaz argue that the 9/11 attacks changed two Québécois writers' understandings of their individual and national identities.⁵ This massive political event made them question their conception of Americanness. The production of their novels was a way to overcome trauma. Even though what happened was not in their nation (Canada), the proximity and historical relationship with America resulted in their need to examine their relationship with the United States, which resulted in a trend for identifying across borders and boundaries. They argue that this is because the authors translated the traumatic American experience of 9/11 into their own contexts through their novels. This tendency for traumatic political action to affect

a whole region, and to encourage trans-border solidarity, is also perhaps apparent in the context of the Arab Spring uprisings and the art that has come out of them. It encourages deep introspection, which is then shared in cultural production.

John Carlos Rowe and Wdsolrk Nowjs's work indicates that political environments also have effects on academic production. Their analysis is in the field of American studies, but their line of reasoning aligns with those of scholars working on cultural production out of the Arab Spring period and after. They suggest that American studies has become heavily critical of neo-imperialism and American exceptionalism because the American political climate is currently favoring these positions.⁶ Also, the political reality of globalization is sparking a response in the world of academia. These scholars are also activists in their suggestion that the field of American studies needs to respond to America's political action in their writing, mainly to the problem of neo-imperialism, in order to create and circulate more equitable knowledge effectively.⁷ Rowe and Nowjs argue for a post-nationalist American studies. This activist approach to scholarship is also found throughout writings on the Arab Spring.

Mona Abaza's work, like that of Rowe and Nowjs, centers on how the political climate has effects on cultural production. She is convincing in her use of recent graffiti evidence from Egypt's 2011 revolution and its aftermath to demonstrate that urban arts and spaces respond viscerally to political pressures. She suggests in her article that Egypt's new political climate after the revolution is repressive, and thus political dissent is being channeled through street arts like graffiti. Abaza examines how urban Cairo was transformed after the revolution, when violence was unleashed in the city. Tahrir was turned into a war zone, and the graffiti and murals following these violent political events were expressions of political feeling. Furthermore, these art spaces also transformed cities physically as they became spaces of remembrance.⁸ Her work is forthrightly activist. She is ardently anti-Egyptian military, arguing that they are "liars" who claim to have protected the revolution while they actually took steps to repress it. These sorts of claims, which she weaves into her narrative, lacked substantial citation. However, she effectively examines various artistic endeavors and links their creation to specific political circumstances. Her position is filtered through consistent, aggressive distaste for the Egyptian "deep state."⁹

Journalist Gilbert Achar offers thoughts on a topic few of these works delved into—the political Islamic relationship to cultural production and arts. He argues that Arabian Gulf media giants like Qatar's Al Jazeera played a central role in shaping Islamic groups in Egypt. He suggests that Khaliji-style Islamism has played an important role in the development of the postrevolution states.¹⁰ Thus, cultural-political development is transgressing borders, much like Zahnd and Dnaz noted in their work. Achar contends that petrodollars and American influences have also supported this Khaliji-Islamic development in Egypt, which has allowed Islamists to, as Achar puts it, coopt the revolution. He sees the revolutionary struggle as ongoing, and despite Islamic cooption, Egypt's populations have been empowered to rise up for what they want. This, in his estimation, signals hope for the region. His work's strength is its focus on economic and transnational elements underpinning political activities and cultural responses in the Arab Spring. He provides numerous concrete examples of fettered economic development as playing a role in the issues discussed in this

literature review—a perspective overlooked in much of the work focusing on culture’s interplay with politics.¹¹ This is a factor that is missing in numerous other political-cultural narratives, which sidestep the important contextual element of economy.

Political climates affect arts production. In his essay “In Extremis: Literature and Revolution in Contemporary Cairo,” Youssef Rakha agrees that the political establishment often coopts artistic production for its own ends.¹² This assertion is echoed by Naila Hamdy and Ehab Gomaa, whose work showed that the political events of the revolution were spun by different media outlets to support completely different political narratives. Rakha claims that since the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, Egyptian novelists have had to navigate a new climate for their writing in which they are expected by critics to write politically engaged works. But in this essay, Rakha himself appears disdainful of the political engagement of politically engaged writers, suggesting either that they pander to Orientalism or are desperate. He argues that many of Egypt’s revolutionaries and authors are “desperate pedagogues or aspiring martyrs.”¹³ While his analysis is useful, the tone of the essay is elitist and derisive of work he deems popular.

Some scholarship has also focused on the possibility of revolutionary arts being read as historical narrative or document in itself. Radwa Othman Sharaf, for example, argues that the graffiti of the Egyptian Revolution is a set of useful primary sources scholars can read. These art pieces are documents that provide rich detail about individuals’ perceptions of what occurred during and after Tahrir. Sharaf’s photo essay examining images of graffiti on Cairo’s streets between January of 2011 and June of 2013 suggests that Cairo’s graffiti transitioned from largely apolitical to narrating Mubarak’s process of resignation and the process of political transition thereafter. While the apoliticality of previous graffiti is debatable, the documentation of the revolutionary graffiti is convincing. Sharaf shows how artists have offered visual histories of the revolution.¹⁴ These are, for instance, the graffiti pieces that were found along Mohamed Mahmoud Street. Sharaf articulates the political and historical circumstances that elicited these works. She presents graffiti as an important documentary tool for the history of the Egyptian Revolution, as it was able to provide a window into artists’ perceptions. She concludes, echoing those suggesting that political repression affects art, that repression of artistic freedom and expression results in even more creative artistic messages in Egypt. Mona Abaza echoes this sentiment, suggesting that as revolutionary spaces are dynamic, so is the art that accompanies them.¹⁵

Artistic and Literary Expression and a New Political Imagination

The concept of political imagination is essential to understanding the evolution of political identification, which explains how political imagination may change the environment, the formation of a community, and the relationship between the self and the Other. Overall, political imagination is conceived as a real, daily, individualized political practice and aims at replacing a holistic understanding of change through concepts such as ideology, culture, and revolution.

Originally rooted in Anderson's analysis of an idealistic communitarian reimagination of nationalism, political imagination is, however, uprooted in real-life events and interactions and brings back individual agency at the center of the redefinition of the world.¹⁶ This political imagination is, of course, fed by inherited historical definitions of the communities, the space, and the self but also by many fluid (real and virtual, local and global) interactions and identifications and thus does not limit people to reconceptualizing the nation.¹⁷

The notions of hopes and dreams are at the core of how political imagination takes shape. It is not actors' place in the world that delimits their agency but their ability to think differently about—to reimagine politically—that allows them to take action.¹⁸ Some authors consider that the production of images and texts is central to political imagination as a political creative process.¹⁹ Here it is important to understand how various groups in the West and in the Arab world have produced political imaginaries that have had an impact on their people's place in the world. The main question should then be how those have affected those lives and how these two segments are interacting, how they see themselves and the Other.

The question of otherness is central to the field. It is about “building representations of others, their goals and intentions within collective life ... and uses these representations to influence (limit or enhance) the possibility of others achieving their (imagined) aims. These two ‘phases’ are of course cyclical and interdependent.”²⁰

Political imagination as a product of the interactions between the individual and the world influences the meaning that one gives to the community one belongs to, by which I mean the capabilities of resistance, of reform, or on the contrary, the inability to be unified, respected, and so on. It is first and foremost “a tool for critique and change.”²¹ If reimagined communities have been analyzed mainly as a way to correct universalism in its neoliberal understanding, I think we should also explain how the sublimation of the Other—and especially of the United States as pervasive—has built an idea of fragile Arab communities (and, of course, fragile but somehow necessary states and corrupted regimes).²²

Nevertheless, the emerging figure of the “digital citizen” and the consequent possibility to escape inherited self-identifications, thanks to its lack of geographical, social, gendered, and historical localization, seems to make possible new political imaginations that give hope for meaningful agencies, agencies that are capable of influencing how one thinks about one's capacity for action and agency.²³

Political imagination is often thought of as a tool to distance oneself from “neoliberalism paternalism.”²⁴ In the case of post-Arab Spring countries, it has been quite remarkable how some rejected frameworks that neoliberal states, media, and funding agencies, for example, were trying to impose their own imaginative frameworks on what happened (like the Jasmine revolution, the overuse of the Bouazizi's figure, or efforts to promote an ad hoc less-radical postrevolutionary “civil society”). Political imagination, especially in resisting neoliberal globalization, can be shared and commonly nourished by groups that do not need to be part of the same movement, country, religion, and so forth. It is specifically the networking connections and references that give birth to political imagination that allow it to rest on “local subjectivities” that make sense of broader “global justice networks.”²⁵ There is also a

demystification in the Arab world of the United States under Trump that is somehow sustaining new states of political imagination. As an example, an Arab writer sent an open letter to the United States sharing his experience of Western clichés after the election of Trump:

We tried the revolution thing ourselves, and it didn't work out so well. Maybe you should just adapt to living in the new regime. We were always told that having a strongman in charge is the best solution for Arab countries, otherwise there would be chaos. Perhaps the American people are not ready for democracy after all. Let's face it America, you look like an Arab country now.²⁶

This can be traced back to the early role of Al Jazeera, which I believe has been a medium that has allowed Arabs to rethink the West and themselves and has created a new way to critique the West beyond populist and culturalist rhetoric.²⁷

Some authors have also underlined the role of diaspora in shaping critical political imaginaries. They described diasporic groups that can circulate “new forms of global identity politics—politics that are shaped by but also transcend the limits and institutions of states.”²⁸ There has been a deep critique of post-Arab Spring documentaries and their circulation primarily targeting Western audiences. As an example, the problem with these films is that they ignore the interconnectedness of “developed” and “developing” countries, of authoritarianism in the Middle East and liberal democracies in the West, of Islamic fundamentalism and the Cold War, and of metropolitan centers of global capitalism and the dispossession of millions all over the world. The problem gets even more complicated when entitlement and the ability to represent becomes unquestioned. The visibility of those films rests on the certainty of their narratives, a certainty that denies any form of reflexivity. Their visibility rests on making the Arab world screenable, commodifiable, and marketable to a non-implicated audience. These films portray living stereotypes of actual people, focusing on the elements of their lives that are “interesting” only in so much as they tell us something about clichéd versions of Egypt, Tahrir, Islam, women, art, war, conflict, poverty, dispossession, and resistance. To those who live with war, conflict, poverty, and dispossession, those for whom Tahrir was not a spectacle and for whom resistance is a complicated act, these topics are not interesting. But neither the term “Arab Spring” nor the term “Arab world” can be explained through the sum of their parts. They are constructed, time and time again, through the very narratives that eclipse alternative imaginaries, historical renditions, and analyses by foreclosing the realm of imagination altogether.²⁹

There is much more on the topic of literature and political imagination.³⁰ Authors analyze how literature translates transformative periods and consciously provides readers with alternative visions of the self and communities (and also political movements and revolutions). As an example, this chapter shows how America has been thinking about itself, and in particular about white people as good citizens willing to reconcile by producing an alternative literature on the civil rights movement in order not to endanger white supremacy in democratic institutions.³¹ Controlling the narratives (and filtering counternarratives) through literary work can then have a

concrete impact not only on the historical stratification of political imaginaries but also on how they will build public arenas (or spheres) accordingly.

Many authors are seeing revolution as an opportunity for new political imaginaries to emerge (although some disagree on whether these are new ones that have started with the revolts or ones with much deeper roots in historical imaginaries of protest). The key work among Arab writers is a new subjectivity, a subjectivity that beyond the state and other authoritative references (like Asshaab in the Nasserian kind of thought and national television that describes people as a unified political unit) would orientate the actors toward other realities like “new ways of consuming and producing culture.”³² In turn, this culture is also producing “new kinds of Arab subjectivities.” “A revolution of the imagination has pushed people into the streets [That] encourages people to put themselves at the center of political narratives in ways that ultimately lead to defiance of official national narratives.”³³

Advancing the importance of individual subjectivities allows us to escape labels like the “Arab Spring” or “the Facebook Revolution” that do not account for the radical transformation in politics and values that the Arab world is undertaking. Hanafi calls it “reflexive individualism,” which does not reject “existing social structures” as such but rather “their disciplinary power. The political subjectivity is expressed not only by toppling the regime, but also by changing the individual.” He concludes by saying that survival of this individual political subjectivity is contingent on Western efforts to acknowledge or annihilate it, as well as the ability of Arabs to trust their transformative capacity.³⁴

Some link postrevolution political imaginaries to the broader historical context and especially to violence—whether that be the Muslim Brotherhood’s using violence in a Mubarak style, the “anticipation” of the counterrevolutionary violence as illustrated in Cairo graffiti until 2014, or the securitization of Egypt’s urbanistic choices (like Dubai-style compounds) that fit with the return of a neoliberalist imaginary that we have experienced a “failed revolution.”³⁵

Rededicating some space to violence in the construction of political imaginaries also allows some authors like Salwa Ismail to deconstruct the idea of an educated, peaceful, bloggers-led revolution and to show instead the everyday violence (by the police, for example) experienced by “urban subalterns” in Cairo that nourished their political imagination and allowed them to handle their participation in the revolution.³⁶

The urgent social, cultural, political, and economic realities that have unsettled the hegemonic structures of state formations and processes of subjectivation have also strongly revealed how identity is and always has been unstable and mutable. Few works have begun to understand how cultural texts function in the process of social and political change. This book will fill this gap by interrogating the theories of social and political change in cultural theory, integrating cultural studies, and contributing to the prevailing theoretical trends in Arab studies. This methodological approach underlines the commitment to theorizing the “transcultural” as a new phase of citizen engagement that stresses the need for sharing information, ignoring borders, opposing censorship, and adopting common strategies in the fight for social justice. The concept of “transcultural identity” stands at the interface of these large-scale political transformations and their sociocultural articulation. It indexes the multiple

channels through which an Egyptian public now understands and imagines autonomy, agency, and self-representation. The point, it should be stressed, is not to suggest that a transcultural identity now transcends all others. To the contrary, the concept is meant to highlight how cultural identity and political consciousness can no longer be assumed and can be negotiated along various intersecting axes—postcolonial (Arab nationalist, Islamist, state-nationalist), ethno-religious (sectarian and tribal), and class-based, to name just a few.

Conclusion

Here I have tried to think about a preliminary framework of analysis on our understanding of and approach to social, cultural, and political change, transformations, continuities, hopes, and frustrations in the Arab world over the past thirty years. What has become clear is that scholars should focus on change in a multilayered way to avoid the clichés carried by the analysis of “brutal” change after the revolutionary “awakening” or its consequent authoritarian “stagnation,” an approach that considers change only in terms of rupture, transition, and such simplistic binary tensions as modernity versus tradition. Considering change as a multi-influential, multi-scaled, long-term process may help us analyze in a finer way the transformations—both visible and invisible—of Arab identities and social realities.

A variety of art and cultural production has recently become very politicized in the Middle East in the wake of the Arab Spring. Egypt’s revolution resulted in arts both reflecting and encouraging political engagement. Some scholarship, like that of Hamdy and Gomaa, has noted that cultural production itself (for instance, media publications) are political narratives in and of themselves. Abaza and Othman, in their respective articles, note that graffiti art is a political narrative and can be read as a primary source to shed light on the history of the revolution. Other scholarship, such as the work of Mark Levine, has stressed art’s use as a political tool during revolutionary periods and the dangers posed by pressuring and encouraging rapid political change. Scholarship also notes that revolutionary art has had transnational influences. This is echoed in work coming out of the field of American studies, which notes that political upheaval in one nation affects those all around it. Globalization, and intercultural influence, is another strand in the story of this revolution—although perhaps not in the style of conspiracy theories about external orchestration. Political climates affect artistic production, just as artistic production has the ability to influence political climates. However, it seems that scholarship indicates that the political climate has a greater impact on art than art does on political climate. This is especially apparent in view of the counterrevolutionary conclusion to the Tahrir movement.

This introductory chapter tries to draw attention to the corpus and material gathered by individuals themselves to express willingness (or fear) of change. “It is through their humor, satire, images and novels that we can get a sense of the discontent of youth that will inevitably lead the next revolution. The crowd rearticulates history as local, connected, and malleable to the will and desire of political subjects, as opposed

to the will of a corrupt dictator.”³⁷ People are rewriting changes they have experienced through autofictions, biographies, *istishhad* narratives, and the like. It is important to localize change to see how people retranslate and understand the revolutionary “grand schemes”³⁸ in their daily lives and what kind of anxieties and fears may arise from the discrepancy between the revolutions’ promises and local experiences.³⁹ It is important to investigate the Autofictional blog’s style of writing⁴⁰ and social networks on building new artistic and literary communities, as well as the great extent of religious and moral motives in recent writings.⁴¹

Notes

- 1 Brinda Mehta, “Staging Tahrir: Laila Soliman’s Revolutionary Theatre,” *Review of Middle East Studies* 47, no. 1 (2013): 49–55.
- 2 Mark Levine, “When Art Is the Weapon: Culture and Resistance Confronting Violence in the Post-Uprisings Arab World,” *Religions* 6 (2015): 1277.
- 3 Ibid., 1280.
- 4 Naila Hamdy and Ehab Gomaa, “Framing the Egyptian Uprising in Arabic Language Newspapers and Social Media,” *Journal of Communication* 62 (n.d.): 195.
- 5 Elizabeth A. Zahnd and Thyazyla Dnaz, “Redefining American Identity and Overcoming Trauma in Two Post-9/11 Novels of Quebec,” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 31 (2011): 220.
- 6 John Carlos Rowe and روجون كارلوس, “Areas of Concern: Area Studies and the New American Studies / دراسات المنطقة ” والدراسات الأمريكية الجديدة ” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 31 (2011): 12.
- 7 Ibid. and 31, رو.
- 8 Mona Abaza, “Walls, Segregating Downtown Cairo and the Mohammed Mahmud Street Graffiti,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 30, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 122, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276412460062>.
- 9 Ibid., 136.
- 10 Gilbert Achcar, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian. First edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 71.
- 11 Ibid., 7.
- 12 Youssef Rakha, “In Extremis: Literature and Revolution in Contemporary Cairo (An Oriental Essay in Seven Parts),” *The Kenyon Review* 34, no. 3 (2012): 162.
- 13 Ibid., 165.
- 14 Radwa Othman Sharaf, “Graffiti as a Means of Protest and Documentation in the Egyptian Revolution,” *African Conflict & Peacebuilding Review* 5, no. 1 (May 20, 2015): 160.
- 15 Abaza, “Walls, Segregating Downtown Cairo and the Mohammed Mahmud Street Graffiti,” 122.
- 16 Anderson, Benedict. 1991 [1983]. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London and New York: Verso.
- 17 It has also been inspired by the work of Arjun Appadurai. See *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); and *Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 48–65.

- 18 Alessandro Ferrara, "Politics at Its Best: The Reasons that Move the Imagination," in *The Politics of Imagination*, eds. Chiara Bottici and Benoît Challand (Abingdon, UK: Birkbeck Press), 38–54.
- 19 Benoît Challand, "Religion and the Struggle for People's Imagination: The Case of Contemporary Islam," in *The Politics of Imagination*, eds. Chiara Bottici and Benoît Challand (Abingdon, UK: Birkbeck Press), 142–61.
- 20 Vlad Petre and Constance de Saint Laurent, "Political Imagination, Otherness and the European Crisis," *Europe's Journal of Psychology* 11, no. 4 (2015): 557.
- 21 Keally D. McBride, *Collective Dreams: Political Imagination and Community* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2005).
- 22 Seyla Benhabib, *Another Cosmopolitanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- 23 Ruppert Engin Isin and Evelyn Ruppert, *Being Digital Citizens* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).
- 24 Joe Soss, Richard C. Fording, and Sanford Schram, *Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).
- 25 Paul Routledge and Andrew Cumbers, *Global Justice Networks: Geographies of Transnational Solidarity* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2009), 224.
- 26 Karl Sharro, "America, You Look Like an Arab Country Right Now. Welcome to the Club," *Politico*, January 22, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/01/america-you-look-like-an-arab-country-right-now-214678>.
- 27 El Oifi, M. (2005). Influence without power: Al Jazeera and the Arab public sphere. In Zayani, M. (Ed.), *The Al Jazeera phenomenon: Critical perspectives on new Arab media* (pp. 66–79). London, UK: Pluto.
- 28 Fiona B. Adamson, "The Growing Importance of Diaspora Politics," *Current History* 1 November 2016; 115 (784): 291–297. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2016.115.784.291>.
- 29 Alia Ayman, "Three Films, One Spectator and a Polemic: Arab Documentaries and 'Global' Audiences," *Al Jadaliyya*, December 26, 2016, <https://madamasr.com/en/2016/12/26/feature/culture/three-films-one-spectator-and-a-polemic-arab-documentaries-and-global-audiences/>.
- 30 Andrea T. Baumeister and John Horton, eds., *Literature and the Political Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2013).
- 31 Christopher Metress, review of "Literature, Civil Rights, and the Political Imagination," edited by Andrea T. Baumeister and John Horton, *The Southern Literary Journal* 47, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 122–8.
- 32 Tarik Ahmed Elseewi, "A Revolution of the Imagination," *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 1197–206.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Sari Hanafi, "The Arab Revolutions: The Emergence of a New Political Subjectivity," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 5, no. 2: 198–213.
- 35 All these examples are given by Mona Abaza in "Violence, Dramaturgical Repertoires and Neoliberal Imaginaries in Cairo," *Theory, Culture & Society* 33, no. 7–8 (2016): 111–35.
- 36 Salwa Ismail, "Urban Subalterns in the Arab Revolutions: Cairo and Damascus in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 55, no. 4: 865–94.
- 37 Andrea Khalil, "The Political Crowd: Theorizing Popular Revolt in North Africa," *Contemporary Islam* 6, no. 1 (April 2012): 45–65.

- 38 Samuli Schielke, *Egypt in the Future Tense: Hope, Frustration, and Ambivalence before and after 2011* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).
- 39 Naoual Belakhdar et al., eds., "Arab Revolutions and Beyond: Change and Persistence," Working Paper No. 11 (2014), Proceedings of the International Conference, Tunis, November 12–13, 2013, https://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/polwiss/forschung/international/vorderer-orient/publikation/working_papers/wp_11/WP11_Tunis_Conference_FINAL_web.pdf.
- 40 Teresa Pepe, "When Writers Activate Readers: How the Autofictional Blog Transforms Arabic Literature," *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 15 (2015): 73–91, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5617/jais.4652>.
- 41 Sobhi Boustani, Rasheed El-Eneany, and Walid Harmarneh, *La littérature à l'heure du printemps arabe* (Paris: Karthala, 2016).

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