

## **Revolutionary Graffiti and Cairene Women: Performing Agency through Gaze Aversion**

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**Abstract:**

This study offers a rhetorical analysis of the female-centered graffiti displayed in Cairo's public spaces in post-Mubarak Egypt. We examine the various possibilities of the "gaze" the graffiti texts construct, each of which has a bearing on the subject position of the women depicted in the texts and on those doing the viewing. The purpose was to discover what is constructed in the graffiti about the evolving role of women in Cairene society. These graffiti show Egyptian women performing agency as they create their own depiction of the role of women in post-Mubarak Cairo. We argue that this perspective challenges the impression outsiders have of Arab/Egyptian women and allows them, as spectators, to comprehend women's dynamics in Cairene society as agents rather than victims; graffiti, the language of art, facilitates comprehension and constructs a position the spectator must occupy. By looking at the rhetorical possibilities of the spectator position in Cairene women's revolutionary graffiti, we offer a new way of viewing women's agency in contemporary Cairo.

## **Revolutionary Graffiti and Cairene Women: Performing Agency through Gaze Aversion**

Through an unparalleled explosion of street art and graffiti campaigns during and after the 25 January 2011 revolution, many public spaces in Cairo, Egypt became symbols of people's revolt against the state. Lindsey has claimed: "Graffiti – fleet, anonymous, contextual and irreverent – has emerged as the signature art form of the [Egyptian] revolution ... Graffiti... being, all at once, an act of defiance, an appropriation of public space and a running political counter-narrative" (Lindsey 2012, para. 25). These spaces resemble open-air galleries showcasing street art on a wide range of social issues, including graffiti that encourage women to resist societal pressures and daily humiliation, to reclaim public spaces, and confront existing power and gender dynamics. Graffiti artists such as Aya Tarek, Hend Kheera, Hanaa El Degham, Bahia Shehab, Laila Magued, Mira Shihadeh, and Ammar Abo Bakr have made noteworthy contributions to the revolution in general and to encouraging women's resistance. They have sparked a "revolution through art" and so have numerous campaigns representing women's voices like *Noon El-Neswa* (Her) and *Women on Walls* (El Kady 2012; Suzeeinthecity 2013).

In this essay, we perform a rhetorical analysis of the female-centered graffiti displayed in Cairo's public spaces in post-Mubarak Egypt. We analyze street art and graffiti by prominent graffiti artists, significant graffiti campaigns, and our own photographs of graffiti taken at the sites. We are interested in the various possibilities of the "gaze" the graffiti texts construct (Foss and Foss 1994; Kaplan 1988; Mulvey 1989), each of which has a bearing on the subject position of the women depicted in the texts and on those doing the viewing. In other words, we are interested in what is constructed in the graffiti about the evolving role of women in Cairene society. These graffiti show Egyptian women performing agency as they create their own depiction of the role of women in post-Mubarak Cairo. We argue that this perspective challenges

the impression outsiders have of Arab/Egyptian women and allows them, as spectators, to comprehend women's dynamics in Cairene society as agents rather than victims; graffiti, the language of art, facilitates comprehension and constructs a position the spectator must occupy. By looking at the rhetorical possibilities of the spectator position in Cairene women's revolutionary graffiti, we seek to offer a new way of viewing women's agency in contemporary Cairo.

### **The Importance of Studying Graffiti: A Background**

The scholarly study of graffiti is hardly a novel endeavor. As early as 1953, Littman and Meredith focused on numerous unpublished Nabataean graffiti/inscriptions. In the decades following them, scholars have analyzed graffiti from archeological, historical, and gender/cultural perspectives. Naveh (1979) examined Hebrew, Phoenician, Aramaic, Thamudic, and Safa'ic graffiti/inscriptions to make the claim that dedicatory/votive inscriptions and graffiti have numerous commonalities. Studies examining restroom graffiti, using either semiotic approaches (Brunner and Kelso 1980) or content analysis (Matthews, Speers, and Ball 2012), have suggested that there are fundamental differences in the ways males and females communicate through this art form. Aguilar (2000) looked at graffiti as a type of age- and culture-specific literacy in the context of Latino adolescents. Through a semiotic analysis of "Cholo" graffiti from Los Angeles, Aguilar demonstrated that Chicano adolescents are capable of participating and engaging in constructive literary practices that are culturally specific and culturally recognized. Frederick (2009) studied graffiti art in Australian cities and found intriguing links between modern mark-making practices and Australian rock art. These studies established graffiti as a cultural medium in a communicative process.

Scholarly works have also demonstrated the political prospects of graffiti and street art. Sociopolitical approaches have focused on art as propaganda, specifically in the Hispanic world and in Latin America. Using field research, Chaffee (1993) analyzed the motives behind the use and effectiveness of art forms such as graffiti, murals, and posters as propaganda tools in Spain, the Basque country, Argentina, and Brazil. This comparative study demonstrated how street art is a useful indicator of popular conflicts and sentiments across the political spectrum. Palmer (2008) focused on Chilean radical propaganda painting and proposed that the purpose of contemporary Chilean art, which is characteristically Latin American with roots in propagandistic murals, is to address major social and political issues.

To align this review with the Egyptian cultural context and exigence of this study, we highlight a series of scholarly endeavors that focus on the recent Egyptian graffiti movement; these works conflate the cultural and political potential of graffiti and street art discussed above. They portray a phenomenal rise of graffiti as a form of popular political and social/cultural expression following the January 2011 revolution in Egypt, forming the foundation for our study that views graffiti as cultural communication, particularly as communication in revolutionary contexts. Grondahl (2013) and Hamdy, Karl, and Eltahawy (2013) have documented the constantly and rapidly changing graffiti art of today's Egypt and thus depicted the volatile political situation in the country. Khatib (2012) analyzed the politics of imagery, while Abaza (2012) and Tripp (2013) emphasized issues of power, resistance, and identity construction. To elaborate, Grondahl has focused on the rapidly changing graffiti of post-January 2011 Egypt through 400 full-color images and interviews. Hamdy, Karl, and Eltahawy have documented graffiti created by the most influential artists and examined the historical, socio-political and cultural contexts that have influenced the graffiti movement in Egypt. Khatib, Tripp and Abaza

have explored the significance of visuals in political struggles across countries in the Middle East. Khatib found visuals to be significant in the Cedar Revolution in Lebanon, the Green Movement in Iran, and the Arab Spring in Egypt, Syria, and Libya. Khatib contended that visuals encompass “physical, electronic, non-electronic virtual and embodied spaces” (Khatib 2012, p. 7); she used the term *image politics* to describe the various ways in which visuals can be politically important. Tripp and Abaza emphasized the importance of graffiti as a non-violent form of political resistance against seemingly invincible regimes. Tripp also investigated the creation of collective identities as a result of common experiences of oppression—collective identities that are formed as people unite to pursue non-violent means of dissent, such as through graffiti.

More recent studies have emerged that pay attention to gender dynamics and creative political activism in contemporary Egypt. Badran (2014) argued that an intrinsic aspect of the ongoing revolutionary process in Egypt is the promotion of gender transformation through art activism. Focusing on the visual art of Huda Lutfi, whose work powerfully displayed both the bravado and fragility of patriarchal culture, Badran explored the ability of visual art to deconstruct gender and operate as a powerful tool in the creation and sustenance of a revolutionary ethos. Building on the history of Egyptian feminism and in the context of the January 2011 revolution, Sorbera (2014) claimed that women’s agency has challenged and re-shaped the discourse about women as objects in need of protection. To support this claim, Sorbera investigated the creative strategies through which young revolutionaries in Egypt today are creating a new political discourse and imagining new forms of political participation.

This overview explicates the cultural and political potential of graffiti and street art. The works reviewed suggest that understanding the role of graffiti as a tool for propaganda in specific

cultural contexts can illuminate basic societal processes, from gender inequality to public literary practice to identity construction and nonviolent resistance. Specifically, in the context of contemporary Egypt, studies have emphasized the phenomenal rise of graffiti as a form of political activism and the significance of such creative endeavors in revolutionizing gender discourses in post-Mubarak Egypt. In this study, we build on these claims about graffiti and gender in the contemporary Egyptian context. We argue that revolutionary graffiti in Egypt not only constitute art as a form of political engagement and a medium of communication but also signal Cairene women's sense of agency evident in the relationship between the women in the graffiti images and the spectators of the graffiti. Through a rhetorical examination of women's agency as demonstrated through how gaze functions in the graffiti to construct a particular spectator position, our purpose is to understand how revolutionary graffiti depict the role of women in post-Mubarak Cairo

### **Artifacts**

For this analysis, we have chosen nine graffiti images from public spaces in Cairo created during and after the January 2011 revolution (see Appendix I for thumbnail images). These images were chosen for several reasons. First, all include prominent images of women, and even when men are depicted, the woman/women in the images remain dominant—they are in color and hence stand out, while the men do not; they are positioned above the men; or they are larger than the men. Furthermore, they represent some of the first and/or most popular graffiti pieces to emerge from the revolution, and the renderings address major issues related to Cairene women raised by artists and activists' campaigns during the revolution. While many of these graffiti images have been erased or modified and no longer exist on the walls around Cairo, they have been immortalized in pictures and videos due to their iconic status.

Our access to these images, then, was through several sources. We photographed some of these graffiti ourselves during a visit to Cairo in March 2013; the remaining images were retrieved from various visual media. The images analyzed are listed below; we have given them descriptive names for easy reference. The images will be explained in greater detail in the analysis portion of the essay; photographs of the images appear in Appendix I.

(1) Samira Ibrahim (Philiptchenko 2012)

Issue: Virginty testing of female activists.

(2) Blue Bra (Oke n.d.)

Issue: Military's mistreatment of women.

(3) Red Dress with Spray Can (suzeeinthecity 2013)

Issue: Need to address sexual harassment.

(4) Woman Rescuing Man (Picture taken in Cairo by first author March 2012)

Issue: Women's fierceness during Cairo's protests.

(5) Queen Nefertiti with Gas Mask (Picture taken in Cairo by first author March 2012)

Issue: Historical testimony to the power and influence of Egyptian women.

(6) Pharaonic Women (suzeeinthecity 2013)

Issue: Women have led movements for social change throughout Egypt's history.

(7) Gas Canisters (Grondahl 2013)

Issue: The possibility of change?

(8) Mourning Mother (Abaza 2012)

Issue: The mothers of martyrs.

(9) Protestors Shot in the Eyes (Van Leuven 2013)

Issue: Central security forces shot protestors in Mohammed Mahmud Street.

## Method

As communication scholars, our method of analysis for these graffiti is rhetorical criticism, a research method designed for the systematic investigation and explanation of symbolic acts and artifacts for the purpose of understanding rhetorical processes. Understanding the nature, functions, and impact of rhetoric—the human use of symbols to communicate—is the purpose of rhetorical criticism. Traditionally, the critic examined an artifact to determine the ways in which traditional forms of persuasion were used and the impact of those on an audience (Foss 2009); critics today ask questions beyond notions of persuasion and impact—questions of significance particular to the artifact and to the critic’s interests in that artifact. Ultimately, the rhetorical critic hopes to contribute to the kinds of worlds constructed by symbols, the meanings attributed to those symbols, and the communication practices that follow from a greater understanding of rhetorical acts (Foss 2009).

In employing rhetorical criticism to examine graffiti about and/or by women in Cairo, we offer a way to understand women’s agency in post-revolution Egypt. In this sense, a feminist perspective also informs this essay. We are concerned with ways these graffiti might challenge an ideology of domination and provide avenues for and the capacity for agency among Cairene women. At the core of feminist perspectives is challenging oppressive structures that narrowly prescribe women’s social roles and choices so women can create their own lives. Agency or self-determination, then, is a hallmark of feminist theorizing—“that women can negotiate social constraints to make the best choices for that particular moment, recognizing the contingencies of their historical contexts and material worlds as limitations but looking for ways to subvert those limitations if possible” (Renegar and Sowards 2009, 9). Cairene women, thus, are change agents; by using graffiti and street art they “focus on symbols as the resources available for their use in

the change process—spoken and written words; visual rhetoric; and the thoughts, interpretations, and meanings represented by the symbols” (Foss and Foss forthcoming).

To begin our analysis, we coded all nine images, looking for the central and shared features across them. We used “frequency” and “intensity” as primary criteria for coding. If something stood out because it repeatedly appeared in the images—the color “red” or “black,” for instance—we coded it because of frequency. If some aspect of an image was particularly striking or unusual—a blue bra or an image of Queen Nefertiti—we coded it on the basis of intensity. We examined the graffiti artifacts several times, looking for additional elements that might be important to the overall meaning that surfaced across images. We then categorized the coded elements, seeking patterns across the nine graffiti images.

The elements that emerged as salient across the texts were the eye contact of the individuals depicted in the graffiti and the spatial orientation of those depicted in relation to the audience. In some pieces of graffiti, color was strong and augmented the nonverbals of eye contact and bodily orientation. We referenced Egyptian color symbolism to assist us in making sense of the color of the images (Baines 1985; Nyamache and Nyambura 2012). Using these elements as core to our analysis, we then examined the interplay among these factors in order to understand the images in terms of the spectator position created by the revolutionary graffiti and its implications for women’s agency in contemporary Egyptian society.

### **What Do the Images Reveal?**

The interplay of eye contact and spatial orientation coalesced around the concept of “aversion.” “Averting” literally means to turn away or aside in avoidance; thus it is an action that contains both eye contact and body position. Averting the eyes is a nonverbal sign of submission, appeasement, and deference – qualities often associated with proper feminine comportment

(Guerrero and Floyd 2006). Yet in cultures in which eye contact is not valued, aversion carries connotations of respect as well: to avert the eyes acknowledges the esteem or honor in which the other is held (Foss, Domenico, and Foss 2013). Aversion also occurs when one is in a difficult cognitive situation—remembering information, thinking about how to respond to a difficult question, or planning what to say (Doherty-Sneddon and Phelps 2005). Gaze aversion, then, accomplishes several purposes, all of which allow the individual to manage a situation in which there is a power differential or a difficult cognitive task.

But there is another meaning of “avert” as well, and that is to see something coming and ward it off or to prevent something from happening by taking action in advance. The definition of “avert” as fending off suggests behaviors in which an individual deliberately employs strategies to keep something from happening. Both definitions of “avert,” then, contain the strategic management of circumstances through the gaze. Accompanied by a certain body position and augmented at times by color, the graffiti offer an assertion of agency. The interplay of these two logics of “aversion” inform our analysis of the gaze that these pieces of graffiti construct.

(Note: Insert Image 1 about here)

*Image 1: Samira Ibrahim*

When the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) took over in February 2011, following Hosni Mubarak’s overthrow, sexual harassment became a means to intimidate and publicly humiliate women protesters on the streets of Cairo. In March 2011, military personnel began to perform “virginity tests” on female protestors. Army spokesmen justified these tests by stating that these protected the military from false claims of rape. One of the victims, Egyptian activist Samira Ibrahim, filed a case against an army medic, Ahmed Adel El-Mogy, who

performed the test on her. He was acquitted, like the majority of police officers involved. The graffiti analyzed here was created on the Friday following El-Mogy's acquittal (Beach 2012).

This image depicts Samira Ibrahim's face above an army battalion, every member of which is Ahmed Adel El-Mogy. She is looking away from the army, giving a semblance of submission, appeasement, and deference. But her gaze is not submissive when viewed in context: she is in a position of dominance by virtue of her scarved head being situated above the army. This stance is augmented by the red color of Samira's scarf. Red, according to ancient Egyptian symbolism, is the color of destructive fire and fury (Nyamache and Nyambura 2012), and in the context of Samira's gaze in this graffiti, manifests a non-submissive and silent self-determination that could be destructive towards her perpetrators. In addition, absence of eye contact with the audience implies that the spectator appears to be none of her concern.

(Note: Insert Image 2 about here)

*Image 2: Blue Bra*

The image of the "girl in the blue bra" became one of the most compelling of the revolution. The blue bra of a veiled young woman was exposed when officers beat and dragged her during a protest in Tahrir Square, ripping her clothing (Amaria 2011). The bra has come to stand for the military's mistreatment of women during and after the 2011 revolution. A woman being beaten would appear to be a classic display of male dominance. But in this image, the woman in the blue bra does not have her eyes closed—as might be expected from someone receiving a beating. Instead, her eyes are open, and she is looking directly at the members of the military who are beating her, almost as if she is challenging them to break her will. The blue color of the bra reinforces the woman's self-determination. In ancient Egyptian color symbolism blue depicts prestige (Baines 1985); the woman has prestige—esteem, honor, and reputation—

because she is standing up to those beating her. At the same time, she is not concerned about the spectators; the woman does not look out at her spectators for help but keeps her gaze focused on her aggressors, implicating them in the crime they are committing against her. Her prestige and her agency, then, stem from her ability to endure the situation in which she finds herself, on her own without outside help.

(Note: Insert Image 3 about here)

*Image 3: Red Dress with Spray Can*

This image portrays a woman in heels, using mace against her male attackers. Although her conspicuous body curves, high heels, and provocative dress connote femininity, her stance is strong and so is the text, which is written mostly in striking red paint. It reads “no to sexual harassment.” None of the men before her can withstand her mace or her gaze. Although she is partially turned so that she has her spectators in view, her gaze clearly is focused on her aggressors as she wards off an attack with her spray can. She clearly is not in need of outside intervention, and it is as if she is looking at her audience only to make sure they know how capable and confident she is in taking on this task alone. Her power is reinforced by the striking color of her red dress, which communicates both strength and rage (Nyamache and Nyambura 2012).

(Note: Insert Image 4 about here)

*Image 4: Woman Rescuing Man*

This piece of graffiti, on the wall of the American University in Cairo’s Greek campus on Mohammed Mahmud Street, depicts a woman rescuing and protecting a man. This graffiti image is a testimony to women’s fierceness in Cairo’s protests. The woman’s gaze is directly focused on the man, and the text reads, “during battles, I will be behind you, protecting you.” Her

audience watches as though the scene is playing out on a television screen, thus putting them at a distance from the action. There is no supplication on her part to her audience. The tiny splashes of red and gold on her side of the mural signal her rage, power, and invincibility, with red, traditionally associated with rage, and gold, traditionally associated with invincibility in Egyptian color symbolism (Nyamache and Nyambura 2012). This image suggests that a woman can perform acts of protection traditionally associated with men, strongly emphasizing female agency in revolutionary activity.

(Note: Insert Image 5 about here)

*Image 5: Queen Nefertiti with Gas Mask*

This image depicts the ancient Egyptian Queen Nefertiti wearing a gas mask. Historians consider Nefertiti to have been one of the most powerful and influential queens of Egypt. The tear gas is associated with protest because police frequently used it to break up demonstrations during the 25 January revolution. A traditionally feminine gaze is the foundation for this image. A classic in fashion photography, the woman with her head lowered but her eyes directed upward comes off as coy and flirtatious. Nefertiti's scowl, however, communicates judgment rather than flirtation. The use of a gas mask indicates that she is capable of protecting herself. This image of Nefertiti is entirely in black, a color that may connote death to its audience (Nyamache and Nyambura 2012) and underneath it is a line of dripping red paint, suggesting the feminization of rage. The combination of the gas mask, the judgmental scowl, the connotation of death, Nefertiti's royal status, and the red paint signal to spectators women's power and capabilities in the context of this revolution. An otherwise feminine gaze functions as a sign to spectators to keep their distance. Cairene women have the role models, like Nefertiti, tools, and self-confidence to make the revolution work for them.

(Note: Insert Image 6 about here)

*Image 6: Pharaonic Women*

The Pharaonic women figures depicted in this image represent royal Egyptian women who were involved in military leadership in ancient Pharaonic times (Carney, 2001). In this piece, the marching Pharaonic women depict royalty and leadership, both qualities that place them in a dominant position. That these women carry objects—perhaps staffs and scrolls—signals their willingness to fight, defend, and educate, which is a depiction of courage and self-determination. As with the other images, the women are not concerned with those viewing them; they are looking away, all gazing in one direction, focused intently on the destination toward which they are marching. The colors of the garments, primarily red and blue, suggest power and prestige and contribute to a sense of self-determination, and nobility of their cause. The combination of stance, focus, and color create a sense of strong determination about their task.

(Note: Insert Image 7 about here)

*Image 7: Gas Canisters*

Named the “Pyramid of Crisis,” this image literally depicts women in a very passive moment in the revolution—standing in long lines to fill their gas canisters for cooking but not standing in line to vote. When it can be discerned at all, the gaze of the women is downward and averted; most of the faces are blurred and covered so there is no sense of any external engagement. The lack of gaze combined with the women holding the canisters up with both hands creates a closed loop, seemingly impenetrable by the outside world.

But the word “change” written on one canister, offers a possibility of hope and self-reflexivity within the loop; the fact that the word is written in red reinforces this as, according to Nyamache and Nyambura, “this most potent of all colours [*sic*] in Ancient Egypt, was also a

colour [*sic*] of life” (Nyamache and Nyambura 2012, 55). Thus, the women themselves are not just constrained in the loops made by the canisters and their arms, but they can subvert their limitations by controlling the loops; this depicts that they will figure out how to bring a change/transformation they can manage, and they will decide how and when to change/transform. The spectator remains outside the image. There is nowhere they can enter the closed loops created between the women’s arms and the gas canisters. It is not the spectator’s task to interfere.

(Note: Insert Image 8 about here)

*Image 8: Mourning Mother*

This is an image of the mother of a martyr depicted carrying her dead son’s photograph with a message that reads, “forget who passed and focus on the elections.” These words are used sarcastically to refer to the long delays in bringing the Port Said massacre case to trial, delays which caused interest in the case to fade. The massacre occurred at a football game in the Port Said stadium on February 1, 2012, when a riot broke out following an Egyptian football match between rival clubs al-Masry and al-Ahly. Al-Masry fans violently attacked al-Ahly fans using knives, machetes, clubs, stones, bottles, and fireworks as weapons. Seventy-four people were killed and several were injured (Leyne 2012).

The mother of the martyred son who died at Port Said is looking in two directions in this graffiti image. One eye is averted and the other stares out blankly at the audience. Although the mother might be said to be looking at her audience, the blankness of her gaze communicates that she does not require the audience’s assistance. Her martyred son similarly looks away from the audience. Thus both remove themselves from any connection with the audience, in essence suggesting that their attention is elsewhere.

Even though this image depicts mourning, which is reinforced by the dominance of the color black, the color green that frames the mother signals hope through life and resurrection, healing and protection (Nyamache and Nyambura 2012). The mother of the martyr, although in mourning, is not broken; she is hopeful that her son gave his life for a better Egypt, and although her son is dead, as a mother she will always be a figure of protection. She does not depend on the viewer to provide hope or help for her, she is determined to and capable of protecting what she loves, whether her son or her country.

(Note: Insert Image 9 about here)

*Image 9: Protestors Shot in the Eyes*

Egyptian women were among the numerous protestors shot in the eyes by central security forces during street clashes in Mohammed Mahmud Street in late 2011. This final image depicts some of these victims—one female and two males. For these three individuals, one eye is necessarily averted because it is bandaged. For the male victims, however, the remaining eye looks directly at viewers in a beseeching way, establishing a connection with them. This is not the case for the female victim, however. While her head is tilted, which might give a semblance of submission, she does not look at the audience as the men do. Rather, she is simply offering evidence of what happened to her, and she does not seem to need to reveal anything to the audience. She remains apart from the viewers and her male comrades as well, in a self-contained state. The white color of her bandage, signifying victory (Nyamache and Nyambura 2012), connotes that despite this physical setback she will be victorious.

**Egyptian Women as Agents**

We argue that the women depicted in the graffiti analyzed perform agency by simultaneously managing the situation at hand and preventing the observer from intervening on

their behalf. The construct of “aversion” creates a productive frame through which to view the interaction created between graffiti portraying women in Cairo following the January 2011 revolution and the audiences viewing these images. Women are seen as engaging in what might initially be considered as gaze aversion for purposes of feminine submission. Yet when placed in the context of the image’s color, spatial orientation, and most importantly, its depiction of eye contact, the interplay of the gaze of the women in the graffiti and the audience of the graffiti creates a powerful sense of Cairene women’s agency.

To elaborate, the ten graffiti images analyzed reveal that Cairene women are powerful, independent, agentic figures; their aversion communicates tradition and revolution simultaneously. By using the traditionally submissive nonverbal act of gaze aversion, the graffiti artists acknowledge traditional roles and images of women. But the juxtaposition of the traditional averted gaze with the kind of aversion that signals warding off someone/something produces an image that transcends tradition. Women use the traditional gaze not simply to look away from the audience in expected ways but to deflect the audience’s attention, intervention, and assistance. When they do look at the audience, the blankness of the stare negates any connection between individual and audience, suggesting again that outside help is unnecessary. These women, then, may perform a traditionally feminine nonverbal act, but through gaze aversion they are able to keep their viewers at bay, to keep them from interfering, and to keep them from offering help, however benevolent it might be. This assertion of agency and rejection of outside interference may have a simple explanation that can fit neatly within observers’ assumptions: it could be that these depictions of women indicate Cairene women’s rejection of the intervention of (male) family members, an authoritarian state, and a conservative society.

Yet women who participated in the 2011 revolution in Egypt and who continue to fight for gender equality have set into operation a more complex and ongoing relationship with the outside world that must be acknowledged. They have put their viewers in the significant position of witnesses; specifically, the strategic use of aversion in the graffiti positions viewers to serve a passive, second-hand witness function. Gordimer states that an eyewitness is “the one who is or was present and is able to testify from personal observation” (Gordimer 2006, para. 6)—the Cairene women themselves. The audience viewing the graffiti, on the other hand, takes on the passive, second-hand witness role as those who were “not there on the spot” but have “seen or ‘remembered’ events nonetheless, either through listening to other’s testimonies, or by seeing representations of those events” (Bernard-Donals 2007, 340). And although the second-hand witness does not have a personal or sensory experience of an event, the knowledge of its occurrence, as provided through the eyewitness, commits the viewer to engage in the events depicted in some larger way. As Levine notes, the second-hand witness “implicitly commits himself [herself] to the task of assuming co-responsibility for an intolerable burden, for an overwhelming charge” (Levine 2006, 7).

Therefore, as second-hand witnesses, the viewers have the moral responsibility and obligation to answer several difficult questions. How can the viewer take action without interfering with Cairene women’s agency? How can the viewer support and participate in the creation of just, democratic Arab societies, and cultures of peace and reconciliation, without reducing Cairenes to passive participants in the transformation of their society? How can the viewer assist in the documenting of Cairene women’s acts of resistance and the transformation of their society, when the collective global memory can easily and sometimes conveniently slip into thinking, “that happened...but in a different reality to our own?” (Engdahl 2001).

Cairene women, as eyewitnesses, are the medium through which women's experiences during and after the January 2011 revolution are supplied to outsiders. In this role they have chosen for themselves, these women exert agency by precluding others from intervening agentically on their behalf but at the same time entrusting them with responsibilities—outsiders cannot interfere, but neither can they look away, ignore, forget, or remain passive to women's revolutionary efforts in contemporary Cairo.

This analysis challenges the primacy of the outsider/spectator who has often dictated terms for the Cairene woman and extends the meaning of “agency” from simply being “self-determination.” Following Emmanuel Levinas, Arnett (2003) states that agency is:

Responsiveness to the Other.... [the agent responds] to the call of the Other that shapes the identity of the “I” as a by-product.... [agency is] interhuman responsive action responsible for the Other. (39)

Agency as a “responsive creation,” in the context of this analysis, is best manifest in Cairene women's performance of agency through aversion. By averting their gaze they are at the same time depicting tradition and revolution. Their performance of agency is not just an outright, self-willed, challenge to tradition. Instead, it is a response to the watching world's notion of the Cairene women as helpless; this response is necessary to break the stereotype the watching world holds. Similarly, as second-hand eyewitnesses the outside world also exercises responsive agency. The second-hand eyewitness position is not the watching world's self-willed choice; instead, the outside world must respond to the call of responsibility that they have been given by Cairene women through the graffiti.

## Conclusion

“Agential capacity is entailed in the multiple ways in which individuals inhabit norms” (Foss, Waters, and Armada 2007, 225). In the case of Cairene women in contemporary Egypt, their testimony against injustice, the agency they hold in calling this injustice to attention through revolutionary graffiti, and the relationship they establish with the viewers of these graffiti through aversion suggest an intensely conspicuous and unique sense of agency. Cairene women’s agency manifests in revolutionary acts, in choosing to create graffiti—the language of images—to communicate with the world, in making their own agentic choice of the way they interact with the spectator of the graffiti, and in the insistence that their stories be known and remembered. The viewer, they insist, must recognize Cairene women’s actions (Peters 2001). By employing this kind of graffiti, Cairene women ask the world to understand that revolutions that lead to the transformation of societies find their vitality in the personal and subjective experiences of individuals and groups—Cairene women in this case—who use creative ways to gain salience, resist, and reform. In the performance of this agency, achieved through creative acts of aversion, Cairene women assert themselves, initiate change, and transform their societies while barring outsiders from defining and designing their destiny.

Cairene women also create a dynamic of “interhuman responsive action responsible for the Other” (Arnett 2003, 39). Both the Cairene women and their spectator are bound to each other. By exercising agency each responds to a call of responsibility. The Cairene women to break stereotypes about themselves and show the watching world the reality of their existence, and the watching world as second-hand eyewitness responsible for documenting Cairene women’s revolutionary struggles. Spectators are not asked to be saviors or to intervene, but to

document on terms dictated by Cairene women themselves—terms that insist Cairene women’s revolutionary struggles be known, understood, and remembered.

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