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Revolting Revolution: Aliaa Magda Elmahdy and the Crafting of an Ethic of Solidarity

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Abstract

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By posting a nude image of herself, Aliaa Magda Elmahdy began a movement that seeks to incorporate the nude body into political life in Egypt. While there are countless differences between the now over forty images on her post, they each play a role in constituting a form of political action based around the nude subject. “Revolting Revolution: Aliaa Magda Elmahdy and the Crafting of an Ethic of Solidarity” seeks to understand how it is this political action occurred, as well as what possible benefits there are from projects like Elmahdy’s. To understand her work, this paper begins by first investigating the meaning behind revolution. It determines that revolution does not necessarily bring about change, and instead, often the same power dynamics remain in place. Despite this, there are moments of revolt that society seeks to expel from politics by describing them as disgusting or disturbing. These instances are the ones that this paper will identify as having the capacity to change society. Elmahdy’s images serve as an instance of this sort of revolt. The second half of this discussion focuses on the particular images on her blog. In particular, it investigates the role of the female lips and in Elmahdy’s political project. With the help of Luce Irigaray, this paper seeks to show the way that Elmahdy’s images function as a type of feminine speech that move away from the stability focus of status quo politics in Egypt. Instead, they open up space for a chaotic understanding of citizenship by establishing an ethic of solidarity where the images are able to unite individuals despite their differences. This process occurs through a proliferation of differences where each individual begins to see that despite their inevitable differences, there is no justification to maintain the exclusion others.

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I. Introduction

On Sunday October 23, 2011, 20-year-old blogger Aliaa Magda Elmahdy posted a photograph of herself nude and titled the post: Nude Art (فن عري). From this single image, others began to comment and ask to contribute to their own images to her post as a way to move her single action to a larger project. As a result, Elmahdy's project has been able to expand from one image to 44.¹ Her blog began at a critical moment within Egypt seeing as Egypt is currently undergoing a revolution away from Hosni Mubarak.² Her blog is able to craft what can be considered a movement both inside and outside of Egypt, seeing as the images have been able to bridge a variety of cultures, politics, and nationalities. Despite the differing images, her post is able to retain an aspect of continuity, in so far as each image works to craft a solidarity movement against the dominating structures like the Egyptian political sphere. The images are all centered around a desire to reclaim the body and, as such, the nude body is a part of each of the images. The significance of this will be further investigated through this paper; however, in order to determine the implications of this political strategy, I will begin with an exploration of the political variables involved, and later move to a discussion of the political praxis developed from Elmahdy's blog.

This paper will investigate the way that we understand revolution by looking at the one currently underway in Egypt in order to problematize the assumption that from revolution something new is created. By using Egypt as a case study, I will illustrate the way that revolutions often simply result in a recurrence of past power dynamics. Change is, instead, located in moments seemingly outside revolution. Furthermore, it is from

¹ This count is as of March 28, 2012

² Hosni Mubarak was Egypt's fourth president from 1981 until he was deposed in February 2011.

these occurrences that there is the potential to destabilize the circular cycle revolution exhibits. Elmahdy's blog is demonstrative of one of these moments. Despite being categorized as revolting and trivialized as irrelevant by the newly emerging political parties within Egypt, her blog has a fundamentally political element. To discuss the power of her blog within Egyptian society, this paper will look at a play on words between *revolution* and *revolt*; while this dynamic does not exist within the Arabic language, seeing as the root of each one differs, the relationship between the two words is not lost. Elmahdy's blog makes use of languages from across the globe including Arabic, English, Persian, German, Spanish and countless others and, in a sense, demonstrates a connectedness between each of these cultures. The impact of Elmahdy's actions as "revolting" is not diffused if one decides that the linguistic connection between the two terms is absent. Furthermore, my aim is not to map western languages, or their corresponding structure, onto an Eastern one, but rather, I wish to examine the linguistic tools available within English to provide the reader a reference point to begin to break apart the power dynamics at play within the Egyptian political structure.

I am writing this thesis to highlight the everyday tools available to citizens to bring about and enact change. There is not a moment where individuals either receive a green light to empower themselves, nor one where power can ever be truly removed. Elmahdy's blog, in this way, demonstrates an application of the constant availability of an individual to reveal a given system's inadequacies. She isolates the way that, despite the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces' (SCAF) attempt to foreclose the use of the nude body in Egyptian life, there is no true mechanism to eliminate this power. From this perspective I hope to invite a rereading of what it means to be a revolutionary. Instead of assuming that revolutionary movements necessarily invite change and

progress, I hope to expose the ways that the newly emerging movements actually uphold the ideology of the past. Elmahdy's methodology functions as an alternative form of politics. She becomes the *revolutionary* in the colloquial sense, precisely because she is not looking to develop a perfect or ideal worldview in Egypt. Her work is one that begins to build bridges of solidarity between theoretically different individuals, movements, and ideologies through a process that has been deemed revolting by the domestic political arena due to the inclusion of the nude female body.

The first chapter, *From Revolt to Revolution and Back Again*, begins by investigating the relationship between Elmahdy's project and the other political variables within Egypt, specifically the SCAF and two of the major political parties: the April 6th and the Salafists.⁴ I hope to complicate the assumption that from revolution something new is necessarily created, instead, there are moments, like Elmahdy's project, that serve as the impetus for a politics of change. Her politics unfolds due to its ability to function as a moment of disgust that Egyptian society is seeking to remove due to the fact that she focuses on the nude body and in doing so challenges Egypt's interpretation of an ideal female citizen.

To build a connection between disgust and politics I investigate the theoretical intersection between the works of Julia Kristeva and Achille Mbembe. While these two authors are not ones that are typically juxtaposed, I hope to demonstrate the way Kristeva's discussion of the abject provides the impetus for Mbembe's postcolonial

³ The April 6th is a youth movement that began April 6th 2008 to organize support on behalf of workers in Egypt. They created a Facebook group called: the April 6 Movement that played a crucial role in amassing the protests at Tahrir and in protests against Mubarak more generally.

⁴ The Salafits are a conservative Islamic party in Egypt who recently won a fourth of the seats in Egypt's parliament.

politics. It is through the lens of their work that I hope to demonstrate the way that these images are able to force the viewer into a moment of disgust that occurs in a twofold manner. On the one hand, the viewer becomes disgusted with the particular image, insofar as it complicates their understandings of citizenship, while at the same time the viewer begins to feel disgusted with him/herself because of the recognition of his/her own personal insecurities that can never be fully eliminated. It is through this opening up of disgust onto oneself that Elmahdy's blog gains political traction. She is able to expose the ways in which traditional politics is constantly oriented on the expulsion of difference in the name of stability, which in this particular case occurs through the rejection and displacement of disgust on Elmahdy in the name of crafting an ideal Egyptian citizen. The realization of one's disgust at him/herself begins to break apart the system's ability to maintain a stable interpretation of citizenship. The individual's disgust at their inability to conform within society is displaced and through its displacement, the individual is able to pacify their own anxieties in order to create a false sense of security and satisfaction with themselves. Elmahdy's problematization of this complacency with the given system, and the way her blog exhibits a forced reflection opens space for a realization of how the political system is not, and never was, truly ever stable. Instead, it constantly exhibits moments of fragility through each attempt it makes to lash out and contain difference. It is this aspect of containment that the second chapter will take up through an examination of the particular images' ability to problematize the idea that containment can ever be a possible political goal.

In the second chapter, *From Silent Image to Speaking Subject*, I hope to demonstrate, through a reading of a selection of images Elmahdy has provided, the implications of containment, as well as the political ethic of solidarity that becomes

available from Elmahdy's work. To do this, I will focus on the role of the body, and on the ways that from a refocusing on the body a new reading of politics becomes possible. To accomplish this goal I look primarily through the lens of Luce Irigaray's work. Her political engagement with nudity and the body provides an avenue to explore the political ramifications of Elmahdy's project. In lieu of maintaining a focus on the masculine order, Elmahdy constructs a method of engagement that is immersed in a feminine ideology. By drawing out the parallels between the constraints placed on woman and the female body and the explicit removal of visual constraints, namely Elmahdy's clothes, I hope to demonstrate the way in which Elmahdy's blog functions as more than simply a collection of images. Instead of assuming that these images have no dynamic potential, I hope to expose the way that images, rather than solely words, have the potential to craft a politics of solidarity⁵ that is able to recognize its inability to create uniformity and instead accepts and embraces the inevitable differentiation that occurs.

From this, I hope to craft a starting point for a new engagement between politics, Egyptian society, and the role of the woman's body. Rather than assuming that these moments can be thought of as distinct, Elmahdy and her blog function as a synecdoche for these macro-discussions. While I am drawing on scholars from distinct theoretical backgrounds, my hope is that the intersection of post-colonial authorship and feminine philosophical accounts can provide an unfolding of new philosophical discussions. Much like the solidarity movement crafted through Elmahdy's blog, I work to demonstrate that despite theoretical differences across various fields of analysis, there are connections to be drawn out. By drawing together this particular moment within

⁵ Solidarity here should be thought of as an ethics of care where one realizes that there will always be a constant proliferation of differences and, that despite these differences, none of them preclude individuals from interacting or cooperating with each other.

Egyptian society and the seemingly theoretical works of philosophy I hope to provide an instance that contextualizes the potential of a feminine political strategy. This particular investigation of Elmahdy's blog post works to introduce the possibility of a connection between political moments and philosophical accounts in order to provide a praxis for engagement with contemporary events as they unfold.

II. From Revolt to Revolution and Back Again: An Opposition of Disgust

Revolt:

1: *Originally: to cast off or change allegiance or subjection. In later use esp.: to rise in rebellion against a ruler or established authority; to rebel.*

2: *Without preposition. To react with disgust or distaste.⁶*

This chapter will begin by examining the political variables at work in Egypt, as well their impact on Aliaa Magda Elmahdy's project. I will start by looking at the details surrounding her blog as a political tool, the Egyptian political dynamics, and revolution as a theoretical concept in order to problematize the assumption that revolution is synonymous with change. This process provides motivation for a re-reading of the images that Elmahdy has produced in order to investigate their role as an oppositional movement that seeks to destabilize the hierarchy within Egyptian politics.

In doing so, I hope to aid in an alternate understanding of revolution, in so far as it is often considered to be the birth of a new ordering of power dynamics and, therefore often it is desirable to argue it as an entirely new event; however, it is realistically no more than a return to the beginning, a sort of cyclical pattern where the same power structures simply have new leaders. It is as though the original meaning of revolution as an astronomical term “[indicating] a recurring, cyclical movement”⁷ has never truly changed despite the shift in its colloquial meaning. Thus instead of looking at revolution as the defining factor of political change, this paper will investigate the theoretical driver of revolution, revolt. From there, it will investigate how within revolt there is a hidden

⁶ Oxford English Dictionary. *Revolt*, v.

<http://www.oed.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/view/Entry/164954>.

⁷ Arendt, Hannah. *On Revolution*. Reprinted. (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 42.

component of disgust, in so far as the events that have the potential to radically shape and alter society are often the ones that society attempts to expel. Rather than taking on these components and investigating how they function, they become categorized as disgusting and as moments that repulse society; however, these events can function as a political driver for change. They reveal aspects that society is unable to contain and conceal, and because of this, this paper will discuss this moment as a remainder within politics insofar it functions as an instance that is unable to be fully integrated into a given society.

Furthermore, this remainder, which will be determined to be the body as an agent of feminine politics, has the potential to destabilize the political arena, and in doing so, craft a politics of change. This position of the remainder will be investigated through looking at Elmahdy's use of images as a route to revolt against the Egyptian political sphere. By beginning with an understanding of what revolution, and with it revolt, mean, I hope to demonstrate how the tools to craft a fundamentally new power structure are found within the events whose revolutionary potential seeks to invoke a change to the normative order. These moments are what conjure up an emotional response of disgust; however, this reaction is not entirely at the actions or moments of disgust, but rather a disgust felt by the viewers at themselves.

Aliaa Magda Elmahdy as an Egyptian Revolutionary

Before investigating the philosophical implications of Elmahdy's imagery, it is critical to first begin with an investigation of what exactly she has done, as well as what the political climate was at the time her actions began. Elmahdy's blog post on October

23 entitled Nude Art (فن عري) began with a simple black and white photo of herself nude, accented by a red bow and shoes.⁸ The images on this post have expanded to include men, women, animals, fruit, drawings, and photo-shopped images. Each of these help cultivate a revolt against the power structures in place despite her blog lying outside the protests against Mubarak.⁹ Her actions have been criticized by political parties from both the left and right inside of the country, and in a sense, have further placed her acts as taking place outside of the revolt in Egypt.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the media has described her as being a revolutionary, and in doing so, sparked an intellectual inquiry into what it means to be revolutionary.¹¹ When looking at the protests in Egypt

⁸ Due to Emory University's protocol the following information must be provided: *The link below is for a blog that may contain content only suitable for adults. If you click the link below, you understand and wish to continue.*

Elmahdy, Aliaa Magda, "Nude Art." مذكرات ثائرة

<http://arebelsdiary.blogspot.com/?zx=28d5d4cb9fad5963>. (Oct. 13, 2011).

⁹ On January 25th Egyptians began a protest movement that is often referred to as the protest at Tahrir Square. This moment began as a call to protest poverty, unemployment, government corruption and the rule of three-decade president Hosni Mubarak. This protest movement continued throughout the week, police officers responded with tear gas, cannons, and guns, and by January 26th Facebook, twitter, and Blackberry Messenger services had been disrupted. This disruption was due to the fact that much of the organization of the protest movement in Egypt was crafted using these technologies. The protest continued as Hosni Mubarak refused to step down, and by the beginning of February, the violent nature of the protest began to escalate. Tanks were still deployed throughout Tahrir Square. By February 5th the leadership of the National Democratic Party resigned (including Gamal Mubarak, Hosni Mubarak's son); however, it was not until February 11th that Hosni Mubarak stepped down, and handed power over to the army.

AlJazeera, *Timeline: Egypt's Revolution*.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/01/201112515334871490.html> (Feb 14, 2011).

¹⁰ While there are other major parties within Egyptian politics, this paper will focus on two in particular, the Salafists and the April 6th due to their ideological opposition in the interest of space.

¹¹ Global media sources have dubbed Allia Elmahdy as a revolutionary, as argued on CNN interviews, but also through twitter both her name and project have become known as #nudephotorevolutionary on twitter.

as a part of the Arab Spring, it is critical not to view them as only composed of their explicitly political parts. Instead, by digging beneath the surface, alternative mechanisms for potential change come to light.

Elmahdy has used her blog, and with it, nude photos, as a process to demonstrate her disapproval as well as to call for change in Egyptian society. Seeing as she has been rejected by the April 6th's because they do not accept her "atheism,"¹² as well as from the Salafists, due to the fact that her actions are deemed by them to be antithetical to Islam, Elmahdy's process has placed her in what can be considered a third way. This third way is, in a sense, something that has always been there, waiting to be unearthed. It is not an alternative path for change, but an excess or remainder that cannot be integrated into society and serves as a constant outlier. The existence of such a third way is demonstrated by the way Elmahdy's actions can remain groundbreaking even though two dominant political organizations attempting to craft Egypt's future (one representing secular liberal democratic change, and the other, pushing for an Islamocracy) explicitly devalue and ignore the dynamic nature of her work.

Even though Elmahdy does not occupy the space that has been categorized as revolutionary, seeing as she was not a part of the literal protests on Tahrir Square, her work exhibits a desire to engage in what she considers to be the political arena and, this

Fahmy, Mohamed Fadel. *Egyptian Blogger Aliaa Elmahdy: Why I Posed Naked*. http://articles.cnn.com/2011-11-19/middleeast/world_meast_nude-blogger-aliaa-magda-elmahdy_1_egyptian-blogger-nude-photo-kareem-amer/2?_s=PM:MIDDLEEAST (Nov 19, 2011).

¹² Fahmy, Mohamed Fadel. *Egyptian Blogger Aliaa Elmahdy: Why I Posed Naked*. http://articles.cnn.com/2011-11-19/middleeast/world_meast_nude-blogger-aliaa-magda-elmahdy_1_egyptian-blogger-nude-photo-kareem-amer/2?_s=PM:MIDDLEEAST (Nov 19, 2011).

work of hers in particular speaks to revolutionary potential.¹³ It is through this process that one must begin to deconstruct what it means to be political, and from this point, expand the definition of what is considered to be a part of the political sphere.

Constituting a Revolution

Revolution is not simply a “forcible overthrow of a government or social order for a new system”¹⁴ but it is also a full turn. When looking to define and interpret what a revolution is, it’s critical to see the way that revolution today is “inextricably bound up with the notion that the course of history suddenly begins anew.”¹⁵ It is within this concept that revolution has come to be thought of as marking a break in the historical trajectory of a particular nation-state and the beginning of something completely new and distinct. This has resulted in an intertwining of revolution and freedom. Revolutions are, in a way, thought of as a mechanism by which those who lead the revolt are able to provide some sort of liberation for all citizens from a particular oppressive power dynamic, in this case, Mubarak’s dictatorial rule.

It is unclear, however, how this political phenomenon began. This search for freedom is, in a sense, unclear due to the amorphous nature of the term. Defining freedom first requires deciding who is to be free, what are they are to be free from, as

¹³ In a CNN interview Elmahdy stated that “[she] was never into politics” but chose to join the protests beginning on May 27th “because [she] felt the need to participate...and refused to remain silent.”

Fahmy, Mohamed Fadel. *Egyptian Blogger Aliaa Elmahdy: Why I Posed Naked*. http://articles.cnn.com/2011-11-19/middleeast/world_meast_nude-blogger-aliaa-magda-elmahdy_1_egyptian-blogger-nude-photo-kareem-amer/2?_s=PM:MIDDLEEAST (Nov 19, 2011).

¹⁴ Oxford Dictionaries. *Revolution*, v. <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/revolution>.

¹⁵ Arendt, Hannah. *On Revolution*. Reprinted. (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 28.

well as why, and what utility this freedom holds. In this light, revolution becomes more than a blanket freedom from oppression, but instead freedom from a particular oppressor in order to bring about a new ordering of power dynamics. This new ordering is not so much the birth or beginnings of a wholly new structure, but rather a search for “some pre-established endpoint” that often amounts to no more than “swinging back into a preordained order.”¹⁶ When looking at the case of Egypt, it becomes unclear if the meaning of revolution, once predominantly an astronomical term, has ever truly changed. The particular details of what is occurring in Egypt call into question the reappropriation of this term to connote a break with the past and a start of something new.

The assumption that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), who have taken control of Egypt since Mubarak’s exit, is distinct from Mubarak, and the ideals of their rule are different goes unquestioned. Mubarak was a dictator, and, according to statements made by the SCAF, they are in the process of transferring their rule to the people; however, the power and mechanisms by which the SCAF has exhibited this power has remained much more continuous than many are willing to admit. In a way, the SCAF has simply taken over the role of the leader responsible for ensuring that all citizens toe the party line. For women, this has meant following what it means to be a *good* Egyptian woman, where good is an unfilled adjective that is used to describe women without agency. The word itself is filled with arbitrary interpretations created by a particular power structure in society, or in this case the SCAF, and determines a particular meaning for the word that has no necessary or absolute interpretation.

¹⁶ Arendt, Hannah. *On Revolution*. Reprinted. (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 42-3.

The SCAF determined women to be in line with their particular role by conducting “virginity tests” to root out all women who have failed to meet their definition of a good citizen. The result was to charge all who failed with charges of prostitution.¹⁷ There has been a criminalization of this process, as of late December 2011; however, the result of this trial failed to work to complicate if this power the SCAF claims to have is valid, and instead simply put a cap on one particular outlet. These proceedings did not preclude, or even question if the power the SCAF had been using was justifiable; rather, they solely argued that the mechanism the SCAF was using to demonstrate their power was problematic.

This power the SCAF uses, however, did not come from nowhere, nor can it be reduced to Mubarak; instead, it is critical to look at the fluidity and progression of power structures. The power structures in place in Egypt today are, in many ways, reminiscent of the power dynamics at work throughout colonial rule. That is not to say that Egypt never experienced a nationalist independence movement, or even that Egypt is still tied to historical colonizers like Great Britain through some sort of neocolonial manner; however, the dynamics of ruler and ruled, where the citizen is, in a sense, indebted to the ruler, has remained unchanged. Egyptian revolutions today are not fighting for their freedom from imperial rule; however, they are in a sense still working to destabilize the power that is tied up in the SCAF.

¹⁷ Amnesty International worked to document “the abuse allegations... [and] found 18 female detainees were threatened with prostitution charges and forced to undergo virginity tests. They were also beaten up and given electric shocks” Associated Press. *Egyptian Female Protesters Forced to Take ‘Virginity Tests’: Report*. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/05/31/egyptian-female-protesters-virginity-test-n_868997.html. (May 31, 2011).

The process by which the SCAF is able to effectuate its control is symptomatic of the systems of power at work in postcolonial states; it also brings to light the question of whether the power dynamics of imperialism from colonial rule have ever truly vanished. These governing bodies use violence as an instrument of governmentality. This mechanism of operating power has been argued by Michael Foucault to be “[t]he ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security.”¹⁸ Instead of situating itself in one particular area, governmentality is able to infiltrate each aspect of society.

Power, according to Foucault, should be thought of as a fluid construct that reaches into each crevasse of society and, while it has the power to do harm, as seen by the SCAF’s application of governmentality, it never fully recedes from anywhere. Thus, despite the application of power as a negative force, it can never in itself be fully negative and, in this way, always contains opportunities for reconfigurations of power dynamics.

Understanding the way that postcolonial government structures have been able to maintain and legitimize their power helps to explain the tools available to deconstruct their control. Achille Mbembe’s analysis on the systems of power at work in postcolonial states provides insight into this particular issue. The governing bodies have, in a way, crafted themselves a web of control that is able to reach into each aspect of society as a

¹⁸ Foucault, Michel. ‘Governmentality,’ in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, Peter Miller (eds). *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). 87-104.

way to maintain both a watchful eye, reminiscent of *big brother*, and to use any means necessary to ensure this dominance. Mbembe argues that the “postcolony” in particular is in itself a chaotic description because it “is made up of...political machinery that...constitute a distinctive regime of violence.”¹⁹ From this standpoint, Mbembe’s investigation of the power held within the postcolony centers on the way that “state power creates...its own world of meanings [and]...attempts to institutionalize this world of meanings as a ‘socio-historical world.’”²⁰ The value and way in which power is crafted is, in a sense, arbitrary. There is no literal tool or mechanism that the government, or in the case of current Egypt, the SCAF holds that designates their position as ruler, other than their ability, and choice, to enact violence on the broader population.

This process results in an institutionalization of violence and an assumption that the tools used are both necessary and acceptable to ensure continued rule. Due to the arbitrary nature of this world of power, there is, within it, constant openings and cracks that can be used to break it apart and change the framework by which ruling occurs. Instead of assuming that the ruling party has a particularly unique talisman, or as Mbembe calls it the commandment²¹ that justifies, or even codifies, the ruler and ruled as static categories, there is an acceptance and reinforcement of this dynamic by all players. It is this assumption in the validity of the commandment that creates a constant

¹⁹ Mbembe, Achille. *On the Postcolony*. (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2001), 102.

²⁰ Ibid. 103

²¹ The commandment can be thought of as a sort of talisman that the person(s) in power are thought to have. According to Mbembe, the term “was used to denote colonial authority...in so far as it embraces the images and structures of power and coercion, the instruments and agents of their enactment, and a degree of rapport between those who give orders and those who are supposed to obey (without, of course, discussing) them.” Thus the commandment serves as a marker to demonstrate the power dynamic in the quintessential authoritarian regime; see his work, *On the Postcolony*. (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2001), 134.

duality where there is the ruler and ruled both work to maintain their position. Attempts at change that fail to take into account the false construction of this duality simply recreate the same, and in a sense, the revolt that occurs becomes a simple revolution back to the start. The route to breaking this change can be seen through the integration of the grotesque and obscene, in so far it is this mechanism that is able to characterize a revolt against the dominant social order.²²

Redefining Revolt

Etymologically speaking, revolt began as a word simply describing a rebellious act against a particular oppressor; over time it started to take on a larger connotation of shock and disgust, insofar as the *turning* moved from a literal turn for or against to a metaphorical *turn* of the stomach.²³ In many ways, these two meanings appear to be incommensurable; however, a deeper investigation of what it means “to revolt” helps shed light that these two definitions are, in many ways, much more synonymous than

²² Mbembe seeks to *uncover* the uses of these terms in order to further determine if there is some kind of process by which what is deemed “grotesque” can actually be used as a mechanism to destabilize systems of power. He argues that in postcolonial states there is a unique process by which a relationship is created to the person/or structure in power where a commandment is established that leaves all individuals involved in a state of “zombification” where both the dominant and those dominated are powerless because they have projected the power in the system onto an external object, the commandment; see, e.g., his work *On the Postcolony*. (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2001).

²³ Initially from the Middle French, *révolter*, to turn (1414), revolt later functioned as a word meaning to rebel against established authority (1502). This meaning continued, and in a sense, expanded to include different types of authority (alliances, 1526, religion 1538); however, in 1630, the Italian word *rivoltare* began to connect this act of rebellion with revulsion and disgust, bringing about the current dual meaning of revolt as both an act of rebellion as well as an act of displacing disgust on a particular object, action, or ideal.

Oxford English Dictionary. *Revolt*, *v*.

<http://www.oed.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/view/Entry/164954>

they first appear. This is not to imply that the meaning of “revolt” is in some way static, and the central locus of its meaning is found within its origin, and all other meanings are mere add-ons; rather, each additional meaning complicates the one before and provides an outlet for understanding.

Elmahdy’s work as emblematic of “revolt,” both as revolutionary and as an instigator of disgust, demonstrates the shortcomings of a limited understanding of this term. Revolt is able to be a word that has meaning not only situationally, but also constantly in flux, as illustrated by the etymological history of the term. This is in part because the way that one understands the relationship that meaning has to a particular word. Words are, according to Friedrich Nietzsche, in a sense, nothing more than “the image of a nerve stimulus in sounds.”²⁴ Instead of thinking of words containing the meaning of an object in and of itself, we must recognize that words “[are] not intended to serve as a reminder of the unique and wholly individualized original experience...but must...fit innumerable, more or less similar cases.”²⁵

Rather than imagining that each word is designed to establish some clear linear connection between a concept and its application, it is critical to realize that the meaning is derived relationally and situationally. By recognizing that the meaning of the word, or the “‘thing in itself’...is quite incomprehensible,”²⁶ one can begin to understand the way in which meanings are only understood by “the relations of things to man”²⁷ through a process of metaphor. This begins to open up space for a questioning of whether there is some kernel of truth found within these metaphors that compose

²⁴ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense*. Fragment, 1873: from the *Nachlass*. Tr. Walter Kaufmann. 2.

²⁵ Ibid. 3

²⁶ Ibid. 2.

²⁷ Ibid. 2

language. Truth in this light can never operate as a static absolute; instead, meanings are constantly assigned through an order of convenience, and it becomes clear that they are “worn out and...have lost their pictures.”²⁸ Nonetheless, these words continue to be articulated as absolute truths because without accepting them, communication between individuals becomes impossible, seeing as there would be no possibility of developing a common understanding of what different individuals are speaking about.

One example of this disconnect is understood through Nietzsche’s explanation of the application of the word “leaf.” The word “leaf” is applied to describe the image of the leaf; yet, it never is able to fully contain within it a complete explanation of all leaves. Instead “the concept of ‘leaf’ is formed through an arbitrary abstraction from these individual differences, [and] through forgetting the distinctions.”²⁹ Thus it is impossible to develop linguistic words that are able to ever fully comprehend the meaning of the concept or object being discussed through language. From this account, one can understand that there is a connection between words and their meanings; however, despite these connections the meaning is not encompassed by the term used. In this way, there is a recognition that a part of meaning is left out if one were to only look at the term used in a vacuum. Furthermore, there is no clear articulation of how or why this disconnect between a concept and its corresponding term occurs. At best, there appears to be an articulation that words gain meaning only in so far as they assist humanity’s interactions with the world.

Attempting to access a particular meaning becomes nearly impossible seeing as understanding the essence of particular terms is nearly impossible. The words end up

²⁸ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*. Fragment, 1873: from the *Nachlass*. Tr. Walter Kaufmann. 3.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 3

becoming the concepts and are in this way no more than empty phrases. When attempting to describe *why* a particular term is an accurate description of an object, we are forced to use the term to define itself in a tautological manner: This is a leaf because it has “leaf like” qualities, which “is to say...the leaf is the cause of the leaves.”³⁰ It is in this way that after admitting that the leaf is unable to fully encompass what it means to be a leaf, and therefore unequal, we none the less use this unequal word to explain why a particular object is the way that it is.

It is in this way that one begins to see the complications that arise when particular metaphors within language are used to be applied to other concepts. Theoretically there should be some sort of relationality between terms, that despite being *unequal* there should be *more or less similar cases* that demonstrate the word as accurate; however, there is inevitably a disconnect.³¹ Nonetheless, there is a relationship crafted between a term and its meaning, insofar as the meaning found within the term establishes a normative meaning over time. This meaning can be considered as a sort of contract or implicit bargain within a linguistic group where a particular word corresponds to one (or sometimes more) meaning. While there are times that these words are redistributed to new objects or concepts and adopt new meanings, it is rare that the old applications ever fully disappear or that the words can ever be completely reappropriated without retaining some of the original stigma associated with them. It is in this sense that individuals cannot simply decide that they want to swap or invent new

³⁰ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*. Fragment, 1873: from the *Nachlass*. Tr. Walter Kaufmann. 3.

³¹ Because this disconnect does not preclude meaning from being attributed, there must be an alternative, or at the least a supplemental mechanism by which meaning and communication occurs. It is this aspect that is left out of language that will be further discussed in the context of the body.

meanings to words because, in the process, the structure of language would be uprooted. However, despite the attachment of a word to a meaning or sound image, there is no direct connection between the two. This disconnect is seen through issues that are able to complicate the way images correspond to words, as well as the complications that arise when multiple meanings somehow culminate in a particular word. This duality in meaning is exhibited through Elmahdy's work.

When looking at her blog, the response has both contextualized her work as a moment of revolt (rebellion) as well as one of revolt (disgust). The use of bodily images brings to the forefront the political and social issues surrounding Egypt. In particular, she examines the issue of freedom of speech through a slightly modified version of the original photograph of herself. This image has her photograph tripled, so that instead of the singular image of Elmahdy in her black stockings with red shoes, there are three almost identical frames. The only distinguishing factor is the inclusion of a yellow bar, across her vaginal area, across her mouth, and then across her eyes. This image is in a sense a play on the idea of the three wise monkeys, and can be understood as one instance of her revolt against the current political order in Egypt by protesting the rape, the silence, and the blindness of the violence Egypt is currently facing. The meaning behind this image, as well as several others, will be further investigated in the following chapter; however, what is critical to note is the way that the dual meanings of revolt are at work in this particular image.

The concept of the three wise monkeys has historically been used to note a particular moment when an individual (or in this case the government, and in a sense

the international arena) has turned a blind eye to a particular injustice.³² The intersection of this imagery that is tied to a critique of the political institutions and the nude body of Elmahdy draw out the ways the silence experienced is twofold: a literal silence of the rape of woman, but also a silencing of woman as subject. This is, in a sense, an attempt to limit woman from the ability to craft herself as citizen and as subject rather than object. The witnessing of the feminine body in Elmahdy's work draws out a moment of disgust that is in a way reminiscent of the literal moment where one becomes reminded of a moment where woman as object did not mean absolute control over her, but instead, functioned as absolute dependence, as seen through the relationship crafted between child and mother.

Kristeva and the Abject as a Tool of Resistance

This moment can be thought of as the abject, and in this way, it can be best understood through thinking of the description of a young child who pulls away from his/her mother's breast due to the disgust of its mother's milk. The disgust becomes particularly fascinating in that the mother is simultaneously the object of the child's pleasure, but also that of his/her dissatisfaction. This process of "abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be."³³ This relationship is understood as a defining separation where the individual begins to

³² Historically this image has been tied to revolts against injustice as seen by the works of Mahatma Gandhi, for more information see, e.g., Gandhi, Mohandas. *On Non-Violence*. Ed. Thomas Merton. (New York, NY: New Directions, 2007).

³³ Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 10.

understand him/herself as separate and distinct from those around him/her and with that begins to craft his/her own understanding. It is this differentiation that encompasses a sense of anxiety insofar as the individual is forcibly removed from a sense of safety and security that it experienced, and thrown into society.

Thus the abject serves as a reminder that in a sense revives a pre-linguistic response in the individual in so far as the individual is forced to remember a moment before language, when they were, in a way, dependent on the body. The images that encompass Elmahdy's work draw out this emotional connection in the individuals viewing her blog that is, in a way, a kind of forced remembrance. It can be understood both as a literal abject feeling where the images of the body evoke a feeling of disgust, insofar as the individual is viewing images that call into question the normative value that nudity is somehow intrinsically tied to pornography. This mentality is brought about by the content warning that is automatically generated:

The blog that you are about to view may contain content only suitable for adults. In general, Google does not review nor do we endorse the content of this or any blog. For more information about our content policies, please visit the Blogger [Terms of Service](#).³⁴

The viewer is then asked to confirm that "s/he understands and wishes to continue" in order to view the blog. This warning, in a sense, colors the understanding that the viewer has of the blog and conjures up the feeling that something they are about to witness is inappropriate. The warrant behind the content warning is rooted in the

³⁴ Due to Emory University's protocol the following information must be provided: *The link below is for a blog that may contain content only suitable for adults. If you click the link below, you understand and wish to continue.*

Elmahdy, Aliaa Magda, "Nude Art." *مذكرات ثائرة*.

<http://arebelsdiary.blogspot.com/?zx=28d5d4cb9fad5963>. (Oct. 13, 2011).

nudity of Elmahdy's blog, not through the language or other messages produced through the imagery, but through her choice to portray the body as is without any sort of covering.

Even if one were to consider the choice of nudity to be inconsequential, the combination of the nude images with the message that they entail brings about a mixed sense of responses. While some viewers become inspired and ask to have photographs of themselves included, others responses range from dismissive to outright disgust. This range of attitudes, in a sense, demonstrates the way that one chooses to relate to the abject; Responses range ranges from an embrace, as seen by the desire to become a part of Elmahdy's project, or even the simple acceptance of her work. However, there is also a relationship established where the viewer looks at her work as something that must be cleansed and eliminated. This moment can be seen through the individuals who have argued that her images are no more than instances of pornography. It is within these responses that one can see how individuals have been immediately "turned-off" from the image simply due to the incorporation of nudity. This instantaneous rejection is drawn out in the inclusion of the woman's nude body, and it is critical to note that there is no sense of Elmahdy's agency or choice within these rejections of her work. Elmahdy's acts are described as ones that she would later regret, or even more simply, as ones that the viewer comprehends as total vulgarity.³⁵

³⁵ In response to the false statement that Aliaa Elmahdy was a part of April 6th, the April 6th representatives responded with an official statement that "this is yet another attempt by the National Security (agency) and the remnants of the old regime to smear us." Lovett, Edward. *Blogger's Nude Photos Split Egyptian Liberals*. <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2011/11/bloggers-nude-photos-split-egyptian-liberals/>. (Nov 17, 2011).

When one expands to Egyptian society, this same anxiety occurs in so far as like the desire of the child to return to a previous time, there is a longing to return to a time pre-Mubarak. It is as if there is a desire within the revolution itself to return to a pre-colonial point in Egyptian society where all citizens were equal, and freedom ran wild; however, Elmahdy's work begins to complicate this essentializing narrative. Even the simple act of pointing out the ban on the nude body in art arising in the 1970's begins to call into question whether or not the values and rights being searched for are located in a particular point in time. Furthermore, the intertwining of her work with calls of modern values of liberty and freedom of speech begin to complicate the idea that there can be a return, or a removal of the oppression of Mubarak. In this way, it exposes the revolution for what it has amounted to, an attempted return to some starting point before Mubarak, before oppression, that Egyptian society no longer has access to.

Much like the child who has entered the realm of the symbolic and left behind the imaginary as it entered the realm of language and began to differentiate itself from others, Egypt has been thrown into the world of nation-states, of democracy as the ideal governing structure, and with it, the desire to classify and determine what constitutes an ideal citizen. This ideal is one that is, in reality, futile. There is no possibility of

Much of the discussion over her blog has occurred over twitter where tweets are arrupting saying things like: "I can't see the difference between Aliaa and a stripper, she just had a camera and a blog" and "Truly do feel sorry for her. She's barely 20 & misguided. This will shadow her forever" Smith, Emily Esfahani. *Egypt Shocked After Female Dissident Blogger Posts Nude Photos*.

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/11/17/egypt-shocked-after-female-dissident-blogger-posts-nude-photos.html>. (Nov 17, 2011).

Others still tweeted about the repulision implicit within her photograph with statements like: "We are defending secularism from innuendos & then we get this #NudePhotoRevolutionary Stop shocking people to the point of repulsion." Al-Masry Al-Youm, English Edition. *Fury Over Young Activist Publishing Nude Self-Portrait*.

<http://www.egyptindependent.com/node/514254>. (Nov 13, 2011).

establishing an ideal citizen or returning to any kind of idealized world, and, through Elmahdy's work, she begins to complicate and question whether these are in fact the only options, or whether there is something that lies outside of language, and outside of the average everyday of Egyptian society. This remainder has the capacity break out of the cycles of violence that governing institutions have continued to uphold. She begins to call into question if there is a particular truth, or a singular unified understanding of the constraints imposed on civilization. It is, in this way, Elmahdy's ability to expose the remainder, which is left out of language and, in a broader sense, left out of discussions of what composes Egyptian society, that starts to break apart the binary position that Egyptian politics has crafted. This leaving out occurs through an understanding that there are aspects of society that are unable to be contained and controlled within a given society Elmahdy is able to show that language itself is unable to govern what types of identities and meanings can be attributed to woman as Egyptian citizen by embodying a type of woman that is, in a sense, trying to be excluded from the current definition of what it means to be an Egyptian woman.

It is Elmahdy's ability to draw out the connections between the abject and the unsayable through her access point of the body that begins this fracturing of the dominant social order. This unsayability is precisely how her work invokes an overflow of the abject. Language is constantly limited. As Nietzsche demonstrated, words in themselves are always unable to portray and convey all aspects of meaning; as such, language as a form of words and speech is insufficient to describe the entirety of a given situation. Understanding is, in a sense, a heterogeneous process. Individuals obtain meaning through words, but also through that which is unsayable, and something that is not a part of the signifying relationship. Through the incorporating of the body, and

with it the abject, Elmahdy begins to demonstrate the remainder that is left out of language. Her images expose the ways in which language alone is insufficient to categorize and contain any particular absolute meaning and through her project she begins to expose the constantly expanding nature of any attempted categorical creation. In this way, the relational moments between particular terms continue to expand so that the similarities become even more disparate. This process occurs through a focus on the abject, in this case the woman's body, and its integration into a particular categorization, Egyptian citizenry. In doing so, it is able to expose the way that what was at first thought of as a static definition is in fact constantly malleable. Furthermore, the disgust felt towards this abject is in a sense a fear of some sort of contamination to the system at hand, and this type of fear helps explain why it is that a revolt, without the inclusion of the abject, is incapable of crafting any radical political change.

The Body as Remainder

The photographs produced through Elmahdy's work serve as a starting point to investigate the way this abject functions as the remainder that is left out of language insofar as it is unable to be contained fully within any sort of linguistic interpretation of what it means to be an Egyptian citizen. Each image is able to contain within it elements of shock that serve to remind the reader through revealing something that was hidden to the actor. It is through this process where there is, in a sense, a sort of *shock* induced by the photograph that the actor is able to instill an emotional response in the viewer. This process is done contingently, seeing as there is no clear direct pathway between the photographer and the viewer, and instead, there is simply a provisional relationship

between the two individuals involved; however, unlike the contingent relationship between language and meaning, this one is mediated through the role of the image.

The mechanism for this mediation is seen through the photograph's use of what can be considered a mask. It is in this way that the photograph does not serve to signify a particular meaning or aspect, but rather composes itself as a mask that works to, according to Roland Barthes "[make] a face into the product of a society and of its history."³⁶ While Barthes initially identifies this mask as a literal face,³⁷ it is critical to see that the meaning behind what he names the mask can be found in images that are not solely oriented around one's face. Instead, the element that creates the mask is the image's way of drawing out a message or concept without the application of ornamentation. Instead of the mask being a prop that is applied to the image, the image itself serves as the mask of society. This moment comes out of images that are, according to Barthes, "absolutely pure,"³⁸ seeing as they are not hiding behind any material barrier.

This purity is not meant to be demonstrative of an absolutely correct and accurate account, for the photograph as contingent is incapable of ever having some sort of absolute mastery over an image or concept. Rather, through the simplicity of the image itself it is able to establish itself as pure. It is in the ability of a photograph to exist that induces an emotional response in the viewer while "[risking] being perceived as

³⁶ Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 34.

³⁷ This analysis is first developed through Barthes' discussion of a photograph by Avedon of William Casby. In this image, William Casby's Face is posed in front of a simple white background; see Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

³⁸ Ibid. 34.

dangerous.”³⁹ This risk occurs when the image is said to “[speak] too much,”⁴⁰ or to invoke a constant reflection in the viewer. This speech is crafted from the photograph through its ability to evoke a feeling of pensiveness that makes the viewer think.

Rather than attempting to resolve and contain a particular problem, the photograph embodies moments or ideas that are, in a sense, shut out of our minds. The images are able to function as a way to assist in exposing moments that have been silenced as a way to help resolve particular aspects of guilt. It is able to craft particular moments that are not necessarily the focal point of the image, but rather are pieces that are “revealed only after the fact.”⁴¹ From these attributes the viewer is able to relate and contemplate the particular elements that make the image dangerous and highlight the moments or aspects that are trying to be shut out of one’s mind. It functions as a “kind of subtle *beyond*”⁴² by drawing the viewer to want to see more, and understand a further connection that operates outside of the image, despite the fact that there is no outside. For Elmahdy’s work, this relationship is produced through her erotic imagery, in so far as this moment is able to craft a desire to see beyond what is at hand, and moves the viewer to want to see a moment in which being and body can unite together.⁴³ Instead of assuming that the body is static, her image begins to show how the body is in a constant state of becoming insofar as it can never be contained or reduced to one particular static interpretation or identity.

³⁹ Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 38.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 38.

⁴¹ Ibid. 53.

⁴² Ibid. 53.

⁴³ Ibid. 59.

Language within the Image

One must, therefore, begin, not end, with an understanding that words can, do, and will always have a multiplicity of contingent meanings. This realization provides the groundwork for an investigation that recognizes the way meaning is understood, in part, outside of the controls of language. This process results in an incorporation of a search for what, or how, the remainder is understood and reveals that the remainder is, in a sense, found as the body. Through this realization, individuals are able to push the limits of linguistics and see the way that language in and of itself is unable to account for all meaning, and through this incorporation of the role of the body and materiality, meaning begins to be understood. This is not to say that we must move away and fully reject language, but instead, we should recognize that language cannot be the end point, or even fully expose an entire discussion. Elmahdy's blog post, *Nude Art has scatterings of words, either within pictures (or on their own) that serve as a sort of commentary or even slight explanatory light which assist the viewer; however, none of the words on their own are sufficient to convey the full meaning of the post. It is this combination that excites the idea that the images are, in a way, an invasion of the remainder into the linguistic sphere. Rather than writing or speaking to demonstrate dislike of the current order in Egypt, these images in a sense *do the talking*, seeing as they are what craft the complicated relationship that observers begin to have with her work. It is not the words that create a dual idea of disgust and push for change, but rather, the images that bring out the feeling of revolt, and all of the meanings it holds within. This section will build from the notion that words have contingent meanings and therefore, in a sense, contain amorphous meanings to demonstrate how the value and identity structures within society operate in a similar manner. This moment occurs to draw out the way that revolt*

does not necessarily have to operate in a singular manner, and through the inconsistencies within each image one begins to see that the linguistic control that we assume is necessarily inevitable can actually be diffused.

Her blog therefore, serves both as a mechanism to protest the limits of freedom of speech within Egypt, but also as a way to protest the sexism that is rampant against women in Egypt.⁴⁴ Through the text found on her blog, she argues that these images are “screams against a society of violence, racism, sexism, sexual harassment and hypocrisy.”⁴⁵ This text, in a sense, is representative of the limits that are inevitably found within the linguistic sphere. One can write and report on all of the atrocities that have occurred in Egypt and all of the ways that sexism has continued; however, this mechanism in itself has been insufficient to result in anything more than a push for rights inclusion. That is not to say that the expansion of rights is irrelevant; rather, it is to say that reporting and writing alone is insufficient to result in change. Even when one looks at historical rights-based movements in Egypt, success occurs through an intertwining of what is considered to be abnormal or antithetical to tradition, namely an incorporation of the body into protest.

⁴⁴ While in a description of one of her photographs Elmahdy indicates that “[t]he yellow rectangles on my eyes, mouth and sex organ resemble the censoring of our knowledge, expression and sexuality,” an interview with CNN demonstrates that this is not her only objection. When expanding on why it was she decided to engage in this type of political action, and if it will be in fact effective, Elmahdy discussed how “[women] under Islam will always be objects to use at home. The (sexism) against women in Egypt is unreal, but [she is] not going anywhere and will battle it 'til the end. Many women wear the veil just to escape the harassment and be able to walk the streets.”

Fahmy, Mohamed Fadel. *Egyptian Blogger Aliaa Elmahdy: Why I Posed Naked*. http://articles.cnn.com/2011-11-19/middleeast/world_meast_nude-blogger-aliaa-magda-elmahdy_1_egyptian-blogger-nude-photo-kareem-amer/3?_s=PM:MIDDLEEAST. (Nov 19, 2011).

⁴⁵ Elmahdy quoted in: Egypt Independent. *Fury Over Young Activist Publishing Nude Self-Portrait*. <http://www.egyptindependent.com/node/514254>. (Nov 13, 2011).

This incorporation is not limited to the literal body, but also includes, the way that the body can be used to illustrate aspects of the human condition in order to mock political culture. Through these uses of the body, there is a sort of opening up of the governing society to the material world of the body and an altering of the binary that marks those in power as distinguishable and outside the material world of the body. Instead of assuming that this binary must constantly operate as oppositional, her work begins to collapse the differences so as to defuse the need to view the binary as necessarily antagonistic begins to fade.

One example of this body and revolt can be seen when one looks at the path in Egypt towards a situation in which the veil was not considered mandatory. The iconic factor in this process was Huda Sha'rawi's unveiling of herself. Before this, women in Egypt were expected to spend their time at home, and any time they were in public it was assumed that they would wear the hijab, or veil. After her husband died in 1922, Sha'rawi chose to stop wearing the veil, and the first moment that this occurred in Egypt was after she returned from a woman's conference in Europe in 1923. Even more, this event resulted in a folding of the women's rights movement in Egypt onto protests against British Imperial rule. Huda Sha'rawi was able to mobilize a movement focused on expansion and inclusion of Egyptian women into the political sphere through a focus on what was considered, at the time, to be a break with the dominant structures and an act of negativity, the removal of her hijab.⁴⁶ This act, like the current work of Elmahdy,

⁴⁶ While this is one reading, it is important to realize what taking off the veil functioned to do. In a sense, Sha'rawi was, in addition to finding a foothold of revolt outside of the dominant social order that argued for a constant covering up of woman, integrating herself into the dominant political order. Her unmasking was in a sense a protest with a particular future goal: integration. This is not to say that her action did not have a profound effect on the breaking apart of British rule, but rather that by focusing on

represents an incorporation of the physical space into the political sphere, in order to destabilize what is considered to be *productive* and *useful* actions for change.⁴⁷ Instead of assuming that in order for a movement to be political it must directly work with political parties, Elmahdy's blog begins to expose the ways that unconventional methods can be just as, if not more effective, in establishing change.

In many ways, it is through Elmahdy's work that one begins to see the possibility of a revolt that lies outside of revolution. Revolt can be thought of as that which is opposed to the status quo, whereas revolution, in a way, implies a return to the same starting point, or in this case, the same power structure. While we often think of revolution through various adjectives such as a democratic revolution, or through the attachment of a particular nationality such as Egyptian, they both, in a sense, skirt the

equalization through integration, the dynamic nature of her positioning was limited, contained, and removed as Egypt became a nation-state. Furthermore, due to the integration in of the women's rights movement into the broader anticolonial movement occurring within Egypt, the commodification of women's bodies simply shifted, rather than dissipated. Women were now able to be equal to men, but only as long as they uphold the values that those in power deemed to be useful, which has amounted to continued limitations placed on women's freedom of expression. In this sense, the choice to wear or not wear the hijab was a kind of concession to women that has allowed other types of politics regarding sexuality, nudity, or political life to go unquestioned. It allows for those in power to point to a tangible right that has been granted as a way to ignore other shortcomings regarding social and political rights.

⁴⁷ The use of productive and useful here corresponds to the idea that in order for an action to be explicitly political or productive, it must have a tangible action attached to it. The removal of her veil was an act that was able to be solely her own, but yet held within it a larger symbolic process where, without speech, Sha'rawi could demonstrate her comfortability with her own body, as well as criticize the need to be covered up in order to be an Egyptian citizen. This incident was able to challenge the idea that first there must be a particular movement, and then individuals can do acts of protest once they are a part of it. The women's rights movement, in many ways, took off only *after* this act by Sha'rawi. While she had been a part of conferences and organizations to discuss the need for women's rights and inclusion of women as active agents rather than individuals restricted to the home, it was not until she actual took off the veil that women's movements as such began. A part of this can be understood through the way that she became an icon for others to look to in order to see and understand that they were in fact not alone in this movement.

issue of what is changing or how that change occurs, and instead focus on a particular future or focal point. The first example, democratic revolution, reduces revolution to a mechanism to bring about a particular endpoint, and while what it means to be democratic is up for debate, it nonetheless shifts the discussion into how to best craft the adjective, and loses sight of the process, revolution. Similarly, the tacking on of a particular nationality reduces the revolution to one that is focused on creating an idealized and exclusionary version of the nation.⁴⁸ It is not a revolution as such, but a revolution *for* creating a future Egypt.⁴⁹ The political trajectory developed from Elmahdy's revolt is focused not so much on the ends, but rather on recognizing and exposing that the process at hand. This amounts to a politic where one begins to recognize and realize that material structures are neither inherent nor absolute, but rather always have the capacity to be morphed and changed.

While Sha'rawi adopts a politics around the removal of the veil, this is not the only route to change. Furthermore, it is critical to note that it is not the veil itself that is

⁴⁸ Because nation-states are defined through a process of establishing particular borders and boundaries, the process of determining who is (or is not) a citizen results in idealized categories. These categories can focus on particular ethnicities, but more often than not they revolve around particular values or customs that are mandatory for individuals to uphold. It functions as a social contract where the citizen is granted citizenship only insofar as they uphold the values that have been determined to be important by the state.

⁴⁹ A part of this focus on futurity can be understood in the political arena postcolonial states find themselves placed within. There is, in effect, one particular governing structure: democracy, and that state is then thrown into global politics through the idea of a nation-state. It is in this sense that revolts consistently have a teleological end of creating an ideal democracy as well as constructing themselves as a nation-state. This in itself has a host of problems in that alternatives are not only not considered, but in a way, the space for understanding and crafting those alternatives is not yet available. Rather than searching for a particular end, this paper will be arguing for an alternative reading that is not focused on "what's next?" but instead complicating whether or not the traditional focus of "what's next?" should even be our starting point. It is, in this way, an argument for a break away from stasis or futurity, and a desire to try and unfold whether there is a third way to read and understand particular events.

problematic, but rather the requirement for woman to wear the veil. This requirement creates a trade-off where woman must sacrifice her control of her body, or become pushed outside of the realm of subject. Elmahdy's project reveals how the veil itself is not disempowering through an image of a woman wearing only the veil, and allowing her vaginal area to remain uncovered.⁵⁰ Rather than assuming that her choice to wear the veil in this image is necessarily disempowering, one can see that this woman is working to prove that Islam, and the message of the veil are not antithetical to woman as a political subject. A politic of the body in no way requires an elimination of the physical veil, but rather a rejection of what can be considered the "veiled voice" or the way in which political ideology is able to produce woman with a veiled language.⁵¹ This veil within language is, like the restrictions being placed upon women in Egyptian society for Sha'rawi, the desire to craft an idealized female citizen.

While for Sha'rawi the removal of the physical veil corresponded with a recognition of woman's role as a political subject, this is not the only political avenue. Elmahdy's blog works to question whether access to the female body can only come from a visual of the face and hair, and instead, looks to the moments that make a woman's body distinguishable, namely, her vaginal area. The importance of this focal point will be further investigated in the following chapter when I turn to an examination of a variety of images she uses. First, however, it is necessary to look into how it is that

⁵⁰ Due to Emory University's protocol the following information must be provided: *The link below is for a blog that may contain content only suitable for adults. If you click the link below, you understand and wish to continue.*

Elmahdy, Aliaa Magda, "Nude Art." مذكرات ثائرة.

<http://arebelsdiary.blogspot.com/?zx=28d5d4cb9fad5963>. (Oct. 13, 2011).

⁵¹ Najmabadi, Afsaneh. "Veiled Discourse-Unveiled Bodies" *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3, *Who's East? Whose East?* (Autumn, 1993): 487-518, 489.

revolution is constituted, and only after this work is done, can an effective investigation of the particular tools Elmahdy uses occur.

Mbembe and Abject Politics

The significance and importance of Sha'rawi's actions can be seen, to a certain extent, through her desire to reclaim and refocus politics onto the body. This moment sparked controversy precisely because she was able to demonstrate the Egyptian political sphere's inability to control what political tools were available. Even more so, her choice to use a particular mechanism that was found disgusting within Egyptian politics, due to the desire to correlate the uncovered female body with pornography, made it an effective locus of resistance. This next section will demonstrate that Elmahdy's project is built on a similar foundation to Sha'rawi's, and that precisely because of its revolting nature it is able to constitute an opposition movement to the power dynamics at work within Egypt.

Disgust is able to expose the tools of power that the state uses for what they are: arbitrary creations. From this starting point images have the ability to demonstrate the ways that the system attempts expels the moments, like Elmahdy's blog, that it is unable to contain. This attempted expulsion demonstrates the inability for any given power structure to remain absolute. Elmahdy's blog begins this investigation by focusing on the way that the SCAF has attempted to classify and categorize the body as something that must be controlled and dominated by the state in order to maintain stability. She identifies mechanisms used to try and limit the body out of society including the ban on nude artists as well as attempts to try to destroy and cover up nude statues.

Her blog unfolds with drawings and paintings of women who, despite the push against inclusion of the body into artwork, have chosen to place themselves in this area that is being rooted out of Egyptian society. Given that Egyptian society is trying to close the body out of politics, her blog works to point out the limitations and insecurities that justify this strategy. Elmahdy calls out these individuals for having “sexual hangups” and for feeling “humiliated” and reveal the exclusion of the body from political life as a way to displace the insecurities that are held within the power structures of the governing institutions.⁵² The subsequent images of the body, whether drawn, painted, photographed, and of men, women, or compilations of the two all begin to break apart and question if the power to deny these particular freedoms truly exists, or whether it is in a sense more a self-perpetuating form of power.⁵³ These images serve as, in a way, a

⁵² The full quotation is as follows:

Put on trial the artists' models who posed nude for art schools until the early 70s, hide the art books and destroy the nude statues of antiquity, then undress and stand before a mirror and burn your bodies that you despise to forever rid yourselves of your sexual hangups before you direct your humiliation and chauvinism and dare to try to deny me my freedom of expression.

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Elmahdy, Aliaa Magda, “Nude Art.” مذكرات ثائرة.

<http://arebelsdiary.blogspot.com/?zx=28d5d4cb9fad5963>. (Oct. 13, 2011).

⁵³ The images are not all directly of or by Elmahdy. Her blog is structured so that others can contact her and provide images to be included; this process on the one hand results in a commodification of particular images as now being “property” of Elmahdy. It would, however, be reductive to claim that she now holds total ownership. The very nature of a blog, and the fact that she does not serve as the doorkeeper on what is deemed to be valid, important, or appropriate to be included creates Elmahdy as a conduit for the movement rather than as the owner. Instead of taking ownership for any particular picture (or distancing herself from ownership) each picture (even ones of carrots or cats) are included to compose what one image identifies as “My Naked Revolution” or (thowratee a3hrea). While many images include a reproduction of Elmahdy's original image, or acknowledge her through name or through their own interpretation of her work, the images, and by extension their creators, are in a sense all in solidarity with the particular movement of revolt. In order to provide clarity to the

path to expose the personal as well as political insecurities of those in control through her post.

At one level, these images highlight the insecurity of those who are using violence to enact the power they have at hand. As the SCAF conducts virginity testings, and pushes for limits on visual forms of expression that relate to nudity and the body, it is as if there is some internalized fear of their own bodies. Elmahdy's blog expresses itself through images of those who find comfort in their body as is, and do not feel that there is a need for a covering up that is necessary in order to feel safe.⁵⁴ This covering can be seen literally through the desire to push for a clothing of Egyptian citizens and, in a sense, relegating of the body out of the public sphere. Historically this type of covering has been articulated through the veil, and in the case of Elmahdy, can be understood through the disgust with her nude body.

This disgust is a process by which those reacting with disgust are engaged in both a disgust with her actions, but more so, a disgust with themselves. Elmahdy's images are an act of individuals demonstrating their own comfortability with who they are, and the beginnings of a disengagement with systems of power that define themselves as crafting identity constructions for individuals to engross themselves in. However, this politic of covering is more than just the literal act of clothed/naked; rather, it is a desire to cover and, in this case, quiet dissent. A particular definition of what constitutes a good citizen

reader, this paper will discuss the photos as being Elmahdy's in order to provide a subject; however, it is critical to remember that they are no more hers than anyone else's.

⁵⁴ Comfort in this sense is not necessarily being content, but rather an acceptance or acknowledgement of the role of the body. It is therefore less of an emotional response where one is happy or truly satisfied, but rather a recognition in both the inevitable abject nature of the body (both their own and others) as well as a way to begin to recognize the way that the body serves as a constant kind of mediator that begins to mitigate the exclusionary nature of the power structure.

is created (or at the very least being negotiated).⁵⁵ In this way, the covering is almost a maneuver to gloss over conceptions of citizenship that operate outside of the definition being purported by the SCAF. Thus the comfortability articulated through the images Elmahdy provides begin to call into question if this type of covering and collapsing of what it means to be an Egyptian is necessary. Instead, Elmahdy demonstrates that the desire to create a singular identity is simply the system's way of expressing its fear of losing control. In this way, one begins to see that what is first exhibited as disgust is, in fact, a fear of change and a fear of loss, whether it be of power, status, or of control. From this perspective one can begin to see that the disgust is, in a way, not directed at Elmahdy, but disgust felt within the system, in so far as it is unable to contain within it the power to solidify the arbitrary structures of citizenship that it has crafted.

⁵⁵ In the process of crafting a citizen, it is primarily done through the creation of a common enemy (whether real or imagined). This works to serve as “a unifying principle within the nation itself that would be valid for domestic politics.” (Arendt 78). Only through the creation a common enemy does the citizenry become united. This method crafts an antagonistic relationship between the citizenry and change. Each instance of change or of a differentiation serves to conjure up the question of whether that which is new or different is simply the enemy in disguise. Traditionally this enemy was thought to be “the common enemy from abroad”; however, this reading of the enemy results in a closing out of the way that politics has emerged. When one is crafting and determining who has rights before the law, and what the political arena looks like for the citizen, there is a desire to contain difference, or at the very least what could constitute change. Thus the *good citizen* becomes the static one, who looks to support and uphold values and concepts that are easily identifiable and are pleasant to the ruling population. For Egypt, this can be seen through the Salafists' (an Islamist party in Egypt) push to incorporate Islamic values of modesty through the push for women to wear the veil, a replacement of the image of the woman in politics with a flower on campaign signs, and the literal covering up of topless mermaid statues throughout Egypt. This is not to say that the secular parties do not operate in a similar manner; their desire to contain and suppress the route that Elmahdy has taken with her blog is demonstrative of a desire to ensure that actions that are considered to be “too radical” are pushed to the edges of politics and deemed to be politically irrelevant; see, Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*. Reprinted. (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 78.

Post-Mubarak Egypt is, in a way, exhibiting many of the same traits as the postcolonial state as understood by Mbembe. Even though Mubarak is not considered to be a colonial oppressor, the notion of a democratic transition away from imperial rule, which characterized the postcolonial movement, is palpable in Egypt. The leaders of the postcolony brought with them proclamations like “I brought you to democracy and liberty... You now have liberty. Make good use of it.”⁵⁶ It is in this way that the state positions itself in a place where individuals are forced into a false sense of unity and liberation. By situating itself as encompassing all of the values that the protest of inhabited, all those who disagree with the policies, actions, or even the interpretations of the values at state are categorized, not only categorized as outsiders, but, as a threat.

This is the case when one looks at the SCAF. The mechanism by which they were able to rally and maintain power was through its characterization of its involvement with the protest movement as one that chose to align with the people at large.⁵⁷ This process placed the protestors in a sort of double bind where they were forced to either align with the SCAF, since they were quickly taking over the *people's* revolution, or risk being dubbed in support of Mubarak.⁵⁸ Even if the focus is broadened outside of the SCAF, the mantra of *you are either for us or against us* is constantly upheld.

⁵⁶ Mbembe, Achille. *On the Postcolony*. (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2001), 103.

⁵⁷ Despite Mubarak being the chairman of the SCAF, the SCAF chose not to fire on protestors revolting against Mubarak in Tahrir Square. Through this process, they quickly took over the role of leadership in Egypt and have served as the final word on governmental changes ranging from facilitating constitutional amendments, legal frameworks for governance, as well as election processes. Their universal acceptance has continued to decline; however, there has not been much of a clear trajectory of what mechanism can, or even will, be used to decentralize power in Egypt, or, at the very least, how there will actually be a transformation of who hold the power in this society.

⁵⁸ This for or against mentality is emblematic of the power dynamics Mbembe isolates in the postcolony. The system in place is designed explicitly to root out all outlets of

Both the conservative and liberal standpoints of Egyptian politics have criticized Elmahdy's project. The conservative base has crafted much of their tenets around particular interpretations of Islam that view modesty and nudity as oppositional, and consider her choice to pose nude as "a form of body abuse."⁵⁹ Despite this perspective from the Islamists, in particular the Salafists, in Egypt, one would at first assume that the liberal stance would be more accepting, or at the least, understanding of Elmahdy's form of protest; however, it is the liberal faction's stance that can be seen as more exclusionary of her actions.

Prominent Egyptian secular figure, Sayyed el-Qimni, has argued that Elmahdy's actions have "hurt the entire secular current."⁶⁰ He goes on to say that Elmahdy's blog is "a double disaster" to the secular stance that personal freedom should be valued, thereby preventing the April 6th from interfering and explicitly condemning her actions.⁶¹ Elmahdy's project is unable to function as a part of either side of the protest movement. For this reason, it begins to function as a *remainder* insofar as she is positioned as what is left out of the political sphere by those parties, but yet at the same time remains connected to the movement at large through the media and even more general internal and international support. In this way one can see how Elmahdy and her project at large is constantly connected to the Egyptian revolt, but is never recognized as such by the parties who are currently vying for power. This process allows

difference by crafting the commandment that the ruling body is in support of as something that is, in many ways, a universal good, such as liberation from an oppressor.

⁵⁹ Michael, Maggie, "Aliaa Magda Elmahdy, Egypt Activist, Poses Naked, Sparkes Outrage" http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/11/17/aliala-magda-elmahdy-naked_n_1099081.html (Nov 17, 2011).

⁶⁰ Sayyed el-Qimni quote in, Maggie Michael, "Aliaa Magda Elmahdy, Egypt Activist, Poses Naked, Sparkes Outrage" http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/11/17/aliala-magda-elmahdy-naked_n_1099081.html (Nov 17, 2011).

⁶¹ Ibid.

this blog to begin to move “beyond the bounds of identity, meaning, and law,”⁶² in so far as it is able to begin to complicate whether the parties deemed as oppositional are in fact truly different or distinct. Rather than assuming that because these newly emerging political parties and organizations identify themselves as being “post-Mubarak,” or at the very least, attempt to assume the position of being new and distinct, it is actually not the case. The power structure and dynamics they support are, like the SCAF, no more than a repetition of the same historical rulers that constantly look to foreclose particular aspects of self-identification as lying outside their “new” interpretations of a good citizen.

The push to define citizenship as oppositional and dichotomistic recreates a system that limits uses of power and requires what can be considered to be an unconventional technique to escape the boundaries of these two categories. Elmahdy is able to use her images to establish an access point through its use of exposing that which the system cannot contain. Thus, her blog is able to highlight the remainder that the system at hand has worked to integrate and contain, and her image functions as a way to show how the remainder is able to overflow and expose the fragility of the structure due to its ability to demonstrate the inadequacies of the system in place.

⁶² “Beyond” here should not be thought of as somehow operating outside of power, or in some unique distinct position that is able to look into society. Instead “beyond” should be thought of as a realization that the current project of change is no more than a teleological examination constantly focused on a particular end point. “Beyond” is, therefore, a recognition of the limitations of the practices that have been tried and instead of searching for a new end, to move away from that goal and towards one that orients itself and delves in that which is constantly excluded from the discussion. This paper will argue that that which is excluded can be thought of as the body, the abject, and in a sense, the feminine; see, Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), 25.

Historically, this moment has occurred in other postcolonial states. Achille Mbembe isolates the way that social discourses that are considered to be vulgar functioned as a mechanism by which individuals could *demystify* the power held in the commandment in Cameroon and Togo.⁶³ This demystification process occurs through a process that serves to simultaneously compel submission of something that is seemingly incompatible with the norms developed while also demonstrating a complete disregard for any kind of absolute truth.⁶⁴

Elmahdy is able to take up vulgarity in a different sort of manner. Like Cameroon and Togo, Elmahdy works to expose the limitations of power mechanisms, and in a way humanize the system at work, as seen through its ability to demonstrate the utter lack of control that the SCAF can hold on individual freedom. It goes in a way one step further, in that it begins to provoke the system at work and call into question if there ever is any sort of recourse for those who defy the ideology adapted by the ruling party. Elmahdy calls out an unidentified *you*, which I would like to argue functions both as the governing structure in Egypt as well as those who support this institution, and says:

...undress and stand before a mirror and burn your bodies that you despise to forever rid yourselves of your sexual hangups before you direct your humiliation and chauvinism and dare to try to deny me my freedom of expression.⁶⁵

⁶³ For an explanation of commandment see f.n. 20

⁶⁴ Mbembe, Achille. *On the Postcolony*. (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2001), 108.

⁶⁵ Due to Emory University's protocol the following information must be provided: *The link below is for a blog that may contain content only suitable for adults. If you click the link below, you understand and wish to continue.*

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Elmahdy is able to call out their self-hate, which she sees as at the root of their limitations and restrictions on public space. The rhetoric of self-hate that she applies to the unidentified you calls into question whether or not the idea of *loving oneself* is the end goal of her project. It is as if she wants to cast doubt on the notion that a citizen, person, or identity is valid in so far as they are deemed to be approved of. This approval, in a sense, is not just approval by the state, but an internalized approval where the individual accepts him/herself and finds value in the identity that they have crafted. While on the one hand it is easy to read Elmahdy's project as one giant *learn to love yourself and everything will be ok* campaign, this concept is in a way just as reductive as the calls against her actions. The juxtaposition of self-hate and her call for the understood you to cleanse themselves exposes the uncleanness within everyone. It marks a transition from self-hate as a mechanism or justification to work to cleanse the population at hand into *good citizens* and instead, pushes for a kind of relishing in the disgust. This ethic works to expose, realize, and accept all aspects of oneself without a search to justify or receive validation from anyone else that the identity that one espouses is in fact correct, or even acceptable.

The words alone, however, would be unable to encompass the entirety of her critique, but instead the accompanying photographs in a way *do the talking*. Whether it is through collapsing of time and space to fold Elmahdy's original photograph into the iconic painting of Eugène Delacroix of *La Liberté Guidant le Peuple* (Liberty Leading the People), or through a juxtaposition of Aliaa Elmahdy's photograph to what has been known as "blue bra" girl,⁶⁶ these images⁶⁷ are able to start to reveal the irony in the

⁶⁶ The "blue bra girl" is the name that has been attached to describe a woman who was beaten during a demonstration in Cairo. This incident involved Egyptian military forces

SCAF's desire to create limitations on what is deemed to be acceptable instances of *freedom* of expression, and even more so, why it is that they are the ones allowed to identify the limits of what terms like freedom, citizen, or even revolt should be. These two images function to juxtapose Elmahdy with another prominent figure for revolution, either historically as seen by the image where she is placed beside Lady Liberty, or domestically, as shown by her parallel to the blue bra girl. These moments are able to help the viewer draw connections between the images within Elmahdy's project and other political resistance movements, and in doing so, depict her as being explicitly revolutionary.

Much like the actions taken up by those in Mbembe's Cameroon and Togo case study, this revolt takes place inside of the power structure at hand. In fact, it is the regime in power, and the fact that its ability to maintain power is no more than a sham that allows for a situation where ordinary citizens can both "simulate adherence...such

beating a woman wearing the abaya to the point that it was ripped open and her torso was exposed, and, with it, her blue bra. This event was filmed and placed on youtube. The video shows soldiers beating with a baton, stomping on her body, and pulling her veil over her face to clear the space for further attacks on her now mostly nude body. This event led to a wave of the iconic "blue bra" and some of the largest demonstrations of women since Huda Sha'rawi. Due to Emory University's protocol the following information must be provided: *The link below is for a video that may contain content only suitable for adults. If you click the link below, you understand and wish to continue.*

Russia Today, "Shocking Video: 'Blue bra' girl brutally beaten by Egypt military - YouTube ." *YouTube.*

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mnFVYewkWEY&skipcontrinter=1> (Dec 18, 2011)

⁶⁷ Due to Emory University's protocol the following information must be provided: *The link below is for a blog that may contain content only suitable for adults. If you click the link below, you understand and wish to continue.*

Elmahdy, Aliaa Magda, "Nude Art." *مذكرات ثائرة.*

<http://arebelsdiary.blogspot.com/?zx=28d5d4cb9fad5963>. (Oct. 13, 2011).

as wearing uniforms and carrying the party card” while also “saying the unsayable.”⁶⁸ The unsayable can be in a sense associated with the body since it is the body that operates outside of language. By acting with both of these elements, Elmahdy draws out the ways that it is possible to both contain elements that the system at hand supports while also defying the wishes of those in power. The mechanism by which the “unsayable” infiltrated the protest has varied. In postcolonial Togo and Cameroon, this practice was embodied through speech. Saying the unsayable was a literal practice where individuals would use vulgarity through references to fecal matter, odor, genital organs, and often these actions occurred through slogans and songs that individuals sang. This process used what was viewed as disgusting about the body as a mechanism for protest, and while the body was not literally used, its imagery was at the forefront of the opposition movement against the government in power. The role of the body seems to be less in the requirement that the characteristics that are used to subvert the dominate power are bodily; rather, the role of the body is in creating or establishing something that is abject to the dominant societal order.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Mbembe, Achille. *On the Postcolony*. (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2001), 108.

⁶⁹ Abject here is meant to refer to the human reaction of horror and disgust. According to Kristeva, this reaction occurs when one feels that there is a threatened breakdown in meaning because the distinction between the self and the other is becoming delimited. She looks at this primarily through the image of the corpse; however, other images that remind us of our materiality can cause the same sort of reaction; see, e.g., her work *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

Understanding an Abject Revolt

Elmahdy's work has the capacity to demonstrate that the inability of Egyptian society to exclude her politics is able to function as a moment of revolt. Her work is able to demonstrate the fact that, despite the SCAF's best attempts, there are aspects of society that they have no true power over. It is through her images and their expansive nature that the limitations that have been placed on society are exposed, as that which is abject begins to spill over out of the crevices and across society. It is not simply the fact that these images draw out the abject, but rather, that they help expose the fact that the abject has always been there, and that this abject remainder never can be removed. As such, the abject functions to show that there is never a moment that is fully void of agency, and as such, it serves as an access point for protest, despite the system's desire to exclude its presence.

This process results in Elmahdy's ability to "remythologize [the dominant governing structure's] conceptual universe while...turning the commandment into a sort of zombie."⁷⁰ The abject nature of the protest destabilizes the value of the commandment as a fetish object because it creates a process by which the static nature of the signs that compose this structure is destabilized. It is able to cast doubt on the validity of the boundaries and structures that have been put in place by the dominant social order, but even more than that, it is able to deflate the power of the commandment insofar as the depiction of the commandment's power as absolute begins to fade. This process "does not do violence to the commandment's material base [but

⁷⁰ Mbembe, Achille. *On the Postcolony*. (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2001), 111.

rather], creates potholes of indiscipline on which the commandment may stub its toe.”⁷¹ Thus, through the incorporation of vulgarity, the cyclical nature of revolution is altered, but not because there is any kind of reversal, where those oppressed by the dominant forms of power are now in charge, but instead, by a kind of retreat of power from both the ruler and the ruled.

This moment is one that is reminiscent of Etienne de La Boétie’s discussion of voluntary servitude. In his work, Boétie is able to isolate “a weakness characteristic of the human kind that we often have to obey force” and that “we ourselves cannot always be the stronger.”⁷² Instead of trying to work to constantly maintain power, there are moments where an individual chooses to give up the search to be in power, and in such a way, voluntarily cedes their power to the elites. This is not to say that the individual loses their power, but rather the individual is a part of the ruling process, in that they have chosen to place themselves in a subordinate position. From here, one is able to see both the fluidity of power, but also the role that the ruled has had in maintaining the dominant order.

For Egypt, the political parties are demonstrative of the way that the ruled in a sense also contribute to maintaining the status quo and its oppressive nature. One of the images on Elmahdy’s blog plays on an image of Elmahdy and incorporates it into a graph of the individual freedom the political parties allow. This image has Elmahdy peering out with only her face over a black bar that represents the Islamist’s % *Lack of Individual Freedom* and similarly has another bar, this time in red, for the Liberal

⁷¹ Mbembe, Achille. *On the Postcolony*. (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2001), 111.

⁷² De La Boétie, Étienne. *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*. Tr. Harry Kurz (Auburn, Alab.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2008), 41.

parties that covers from Elmahdy's feet up over her vaginal area.⁷³ This type of imagery teases out the question of what individuals are deemed to be free, and what they are free from. These political parties that have, in a way, defined themselves as against the oppression and silencing of Mubarak are no more innocent than the SCAF in working to maintain a covering and a categorizing of what is or is not acceptable for Egyptian society.

This particular blog has, despite attempts from political parties, been able to influence the political sphere, and in doing so, provide an opportunity to begin to see the ways in which the remainder, which can be thought of as the woman's body, is able to serve as a site of resistance. The following chapter will focus on a selection of particular images from Elmahdy's blog that begin to highlight the various components and aspects of her political project. It will begin by focusing on her initial image, and work its way through the relationships and dynamics that this image has with others posted. Through this process, I hope to demonstrate the way that a new form of politics can be found within these images. Elmahdy's post, *Nude Art*, and its images operate as a mechanism to re-read the current masculine ordering of society and establish a politic of solidarity. It is within this politic that a shift away from status quo power dynamics becomes possible, insofar as it replaces a politic focused on a stable identity and elimination of difference, and instead of trying to contain the multitude of differences inherent in any

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given structure, it works to craft a moment of solidarity that builds bridges between theoretically disparate projects.

III. From Silent Image to Speaking Subject: A Route to Solidarity

“*Woman must be nude*” - Luce Irigaray.⁷⁴

This chapter will look to investigate what type of political engagement Elmahdy's images craft. By establishing that her work has revolutionary potential and the capacity to bring about a shift in power dynamics, it is critical to now look into what type of politics will unfold from her work. This process will begin by looking at what the foundation is for her first images, and from there, investigate how it is that Elmahdy crafts the nude subject, as well as what the implications are for this type of politics that she reveals.

Elmahdy begins her post with an image of herself nude. From here, she begins to show the ways that the tools to destabilize a given system are already held within it. This occurs through her choice to pose nude, seeing as she draws out the ways that despite being located within the Egyptian citizenry, she can place herself as an individual whose attributes are antithetical to what it means to be a *good* Egyptian woman. It is in this way that she starts to draw out the ways that one cannot assume that there is some natural external to a given system; instead, there is no outside. Her choice to embody something that is seen as outside demonstrates the way that the system has simply worked to hide what is internally oppositional within it.

This provides a framework for realizing that political strategies do not need to be invented or created from something external to a particular society. In the context of Egypt, this requires an investigation of the political variables at play. As the previous

⁷⁴ Irigaray, Luce. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Trs. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill. (London: Continuum, 2004), 12.

chapter demonstrated, rather than assuming that the emerging political parties are necessarily effective, or even that they are seeking to bring about change, one must look into the recesses of society to discover the revolutionary moments. Elmahdy's blog, through its ability to function as a part of the abject that society is seeking to exclude, demonstrates the way that the moments on the periphery can actually begin a restructuring of society overall. This process occurs through the realization that there is still a contingent connection between these fringe moments of disgust and society overall. The connections, are, in a way, best exhibited through society's anxiety that these moments are uncontainable. As a result, these uncontrollable moments become categorized as disgusting, and precisely because of this characteristic, they are able to enact change.

Within Egypt, I hope to show that this disgust is seen through the lack of acceptance of Elmahdy's work. This chapter will expand and investigate the political tools that become available through Elmahdy's positioning as abject. Furthermore, much like the expulsion of Elmahdy to the periphery, her project looks at the way the woman's body has been expelled from Egyptian political society. Her focus on the exclusion of the woman's body from the artistic sphere is able to parallel the desire of the political climate to exclude the female body from discussions of citizenship entirely. Woman as independent subject has in a sense been lost within the Egyptian political environment, and in a way, Elmahdy's image, and the ones that have been generated to accompany it, demonstrate a transformative political project where from the loss of woman as subject, there is the realization of the need for a feminine politics to develop.

This chapter will investigate the transformative process that the collection of images take where they move, in a sense, from a recognition of the loss of woman from

the current political sphere, to a realization that within the political sphere itself, there has been a feminine politic of solidarity that has always already been there, waiting to be exposed. The images provided on Elmahdy's blog work to craft this moment of solidarity and in doing so, demonstrate the way that it is within the recesses that the tools to craft change in a particular society are not something outside or external to the situation at hand, but are rather embedded within the revolution, and found in the moment of revolt.

I hope to demonstrate that this politics is not simply a redefinition of subjectivity, but an expansion of how we understand language and communication so that new avenues, like the images on Elmahdy's blog, can begin to function as a form of communication that craft Elmahdy's political ethic of solidarity. This type of ethic can operate as a new starting point for citizenship construction that does not seek to contain and destroy difference, but rather functions as an acceptance of the inevitable distinctions and provides an opportunity for a new understanding of citizenship.

Reinterpreting Loss

Elmahdy's blog was not some arbitrary occurrence, but rather, it emerged out of the unique situation of Egypt undergoing a revolution set the stage for her project to begin. The moment that Elmahdy has situated herself is, in a way, one of mourning. Woman as subject has been to a certain extent lost within Egyptian society. Woman is left outside of the realm of art, and even more so, the loss of woman as subject appears to be at the heart of the virginity testing that Elmahdy wishes to protest. This process is one where woman, as an idealized subject, is seemingly brought to the forefront. This

moment can be thought of as one of realization of the way that femininity as such has become a descriptor that is constantly constructed by the masculine order rather than internally, and in this way functions as a moment where one realizes their loss of agency. This loss is not only material but also metaphysical insofar as it is a realization that the relationship that woman has had with the world has always been clouded by the masculine linguistic structure. Elmahdy begins to mourn this loss through her use of poetry and imagery; however, it is within this moment of losing that there is a transformative effect. It is as though “when one loses...something is [found] hiding in the loss...within the recesses.”⁷⁵ In this way, Elmahdy is able to be transformed. Rather than fearing the loss in its entirety, and seeking to return to some original moment when the loss didn't exist, she begins to search for the ways that this loss of feminine subjectivity is not so much one where woman becomes void of agency, but rather, a moment where the agency that she holds is no longer identifiable by the masculine. The solution mechanism she identifies is through a realization of the transformative power that woman holds within her body.

Irigaray and Nudity as Woman's Subjectivity

Elmahdy situates herself as nude at the opening of her post as a way to begin to reclaim the woman's body as a subject position within Egyptian society. Her first and initial image has her standing, foot resting against a chair, fully nude with the exception

⁷⁵ Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. (London: Verso, 2004), 21-22.

of a red bow, flats, and a pair of black thigh high stockings.⁷⁶ From here, one must investigate why it is that nudity is a necessary component of her project. The need for nudity occurs, in a sense, because, as Luce Irigaray argues, woman “is not situation [and] does not situate herself in place.”⁷⁷

For Irigaray, the world is structured according to the phallogentric order. She begins by assuming that the masculine psychoanalytic tradition whereby the world is ordered by the phallus, and because of this, the world is always already read as masculine. Language, and with it the material world ordering, constructs itself in a manner where there is no way to understand the world that does not already assume a masculine reading. It is in this way that the woman cannot craft a situation, she is, instead, an object for the system at hand to work upon and in the process identify her as a tool or subset of the masculine order. From this, it becomes impossible for the woman to situate herself into any particular place or moment because there is no *outside* the system at hand. She cannot simply leave the phallogentric order; however Irigaray does not seem to argue that this relegates woman to hopelessness.

While identity for woman is not constructed from within, and is, in this way, crafted by man, it is not some sort of unidirectional process. Man too constructs his identity through his crafting of the woman. This type of oppositional structure is able to create a situation by which man begins to understand his identity as *not woman*, but never is forced to craft what it is that makes a woman. Irigaray isolates a part of this

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<http://arebelsdiary.blogspot.com/?zx=28d5d4cb9fad5963>. (Oct. 13, 2011).

⁷⁷ Irigaray, Luce. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Trs. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill. (London: Continuum, 2004), 12.

problem in her discussion of the castration complex. Given that the world is ordered by the phallus, and in a way, the masculine, the feminine is placed in a position where she is thought to feel as though she is missing something, namely the penis. From this point, woman develops what has been called the castration complex, and as a result, Irigaray argues that woman looks for clothes to function as a sort of covering that represents her identity, and in a sense, allows for an artificial identity to be crafted. This identity is structured around a desire to make a sort of covering that conceals what it is that is deemed to make woman different, her vaginal lips.⁷⁸

The lips become the focal point for Irigaray's central argument for how to understand the world in a way that is not simply operating within the phallogocentric world order. Instead of looking to create a new path, she argues that the tools at hand are, in a sense, constantly available. In a literal sense, the vaginal lips can operate to enclose the penis, and in this way, Irigaray extends the metaphor to a larger reading of society. The lips, as a method of analysis and re-reading of society, can serve as a way of understanding and seeing society that is not constrained by the phallus. Furthermore, the lips are, by their very nature, not singular. This pushes for a type of expansiveness that complicates the traditional reading of society as dual where there is the masculine and feminine; instead, the lips create a sort of ever expanding definition of what it is that identity can operate as.

⁷⁸ This moment of covering is particularly true and profound with the investigation of what makes a *good* Egyptian woman. Covering, containing, closing up, is constantly viewed as a necessity. While Irigaray's discourse locates woman as the abstract individual and, in a sense, writes from a Eurocentric perspective, her work, and discussion of the notion of covering is not only profoundly relevant for the particular case of Elmahdy, but can help read and provide a re-reading for how it is that femininity becomes constructed as a complete erasure of what it is that marks woman as different.

Elmahdy's project serves as a process by which one can see an extension of Irigaray's project. The opening of woman as nude, and the chaos⁷⁹ that seems to constitute Elmahdy's reading of revolution as feminine, rather than masculine serve as the starting point for a feminine ordering of language. The reading of the world, as ordered by the two lips rather than the phallus, crafts an understanding of identification that is constantly open to variety. The lips themselves can never cover each other, or envelop the other, or be condensed into one. Instead they are constantly able to partially cover each other up, but never devour or control anything else. Furthermore, her vaginal lips cannot speak within the world ordering of the phallus. Instead, they serve as the tools by which it becomes possible to articulate a new envisioning and development of identity that is not contingent upon man. Thus, they do not search to rearticulate language or identify a particular essence by which woman can identify herself, but rather open up understandings of identity that can be constructed as constantly plural and expanding.

⁷⁹ Chaos is seen through Elmahdy's willingness to juxtapose images of women, a cat, carrots, paintings, photographs, men, intercourse, etc. throughout the post. Furthermore, the combination of this variety of imagery appears to be critical in her project. When an anonymous viewer commented on the images of the nude woman, Elmahdy simply responded: @Anonymous-2, Why did you comment only about women? I posted a nude photo of a man too. This appears to be a moment where Elmahdy is seeking to expand her reading of the feminine to more than just "the woman" but instead, to all that operates as a destabilizing factor against Egypt's current phallogocentric ordering.

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Furthermore, these lips function as a sort of envelope, or container, that the system at hand constantly seeks to cover. Irigaray sees this covering through the attempt of man to use material objects to contain the woman such as providing her with gifts, a home, and other material objects, and in a sense, shutting her into a particular space. This works to craft artificial envelopes to place the woman in so that her lips cannot speak, and instead, it is his artificial lips that serve to cover her. It is no coincidence that one of the primary elements of imagery that Elmahdy looks to, in terms of reclaiming the female body, is the uncovering of the vaginal area of the woman. This exposure is designed to counter the literal covering of woman that Egyptian society has put in place. The veil, burka or even simply clothes can all be instances of the artificial lips that Egypt has crafted for woman. Even more so, these artificial lips are used to design and craft what can be seen as an artificial identity for what woman *should be* in the eyes of the masculinist order. The lips in a way serve as a sort of covering that Elmahdy's work begins to strip away.

The creation of the artificial lips for woman, however, is able to accomplish more for man than simply commodifying woman. Through the application of these artificial lips man is able to envelop the woman with his artificial envelopes. This process requires him delving into her, and in a sense, using her flesh as his route to success. Her lips become reducible to their role in sex, reproduction, and a woman becomes a subject only in so far as she aids man. This process reduces the woman's lips down to a particular tool or commodity rather than embracing their radical transformative nature. An articulation of society through the lips, rather than the phallus, is able to, in a way, craft a mode of relationships where the woman is always complacent. Man's desires are acted upon her, done to her, and she is an object to be used. The solution, according to

Irigaray, is the recognition of plurality in the system. This plurality can be thought of as a third term that functions as a limitation on the absoluteness of the power being enacted by the driving force, in this case the Egyptian political male. The limitation occurs in so far as there is no longer the opportunity for a unidirectional application of power politics where the woman is so objectified that she loses all forms of agency.

The third term is not some sort of outside terminology; it provides the opportunity for a third way. As indicated in the first chapter, this route functions as an outlet within the system that is currently being covered, ignored, and as something waiting to be unearthed that is not an alternative path per se, but rather, a mechanism that subverts and reorders the current power dynamics within which the system operates. This process, in a way, takes form in Elmahdy's work through her choice to look inward and investigate what tools are always already available, rather than searching for something new, or by searching for a particular universal ideal. Instead, her project takes its form through a process of constant uncovering and transformation in order to demonstrate alternative readings of identity and citizenship.

Egypt as an Envelope

Elmahdy's images are, in a way, a path by which she works against the constraints that have been put in place by the artificial envelope. Her images begin to demonstrate the complexities by which identity and citizenship are understood. This identification is possible because, like citizenship, identity is understood in terms of what it is not (e.g. I am Egyptian because I am *not* French, I am a good woman because I am *not* exhibiting particular negative qualities). This process results in an

understanding of politics where the parties involved define themselves in terms of being *not* like Elmahdy. Whether explicitly or by accident, this identification mechanism is exhibited through the relationships crafted around her image. As the first chapter discussed, her work has been lambasted by both liberals and conservatives as being necessarily problematic and antithetical to Egyptian identity, in so far as she works to craft a definition of citizenship that lies outside of the boundaries constructed by these political organizations. Furthermore, when one looks at the particulars of Egyptian political configurations, there is a broader exclusion of the woman in general. There becomes a crafting of woman's identity that is never her own, but always something external to herself, and in this way, woman as agent of action becomes excluded.

One instance of this exclusion of woman as agent can be seen through the political campaign of the Salafists, who are considered to be one of the most conservative parties in Egypt. They declined to include the images of female candidates on campaign posters and instead replaced them with the image of a flower, or of the woman's husband. This process crafted the idea that the women's role in politics is, at best, on the sidelines or in the background behind her husband. Even more so, the image of the flower seems to indicate that femininity and politics are incompatible or, at the very least, that the woman's body itself is incommensurable with politics.

Elmahdy's work appears to contain a desire to reject this understanding of woman. Her work exhibits her (and others') unwillingness to simply resign to silence and accept that the inclusion of female candidates is in itself sufficient to demonstrate an incorporation of woman into the political sphere. Instead, there appears to be a problematization of what role it is that woman should hold in politics. Elmahdy's blog is calling for a new form of political engagement breaks away from historical analysis

designates woman as object and, in a sense, predominantly functions as a way for man to gain validity.

It is as if woman is always tangentially connected to the work of politics, but she is never recognized in this work as such. In a sense, “he defines her and creates *his* identity with her as his starting point, or correlatively, with this determination of her being.”⁸⁰ It is this process that situates woman as simultaneously integral to the identity of man as political, but at the same time, as inconsequential.⁸¹ Women becomes understood as “threatening because of what she lacks: a ‘proper’ place.”⁸² For Irigaray, this lack embodies itself in the construction of woman more generally; however, her analysis of the position and ethical considerations woman is left with hold true when one looks at the particular interworking of the Egyptian woman in contemporary politics. As an alternative, Elmahdy invites an ordering of the lips rather than the phallus to craft woman as subject.

Elmahdy and the Nude Subject

In order to move away from the artificial envelope, Elmahdy, in a way *goes nude*. Her images are constructed through the ordering of the lips rather than the phallus. This differentiation can be seen, to a certain extent, through the chaos and disjointedness that surrounds her images, in so far as there is no particular ordering or

⁸⁰ Irigaray, Luce. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Trs. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill. (London: Continuum, 2004), 11.

⁸¹ Inconsequential insofar as she can never be sufficient, but instead is necessary, not as an equal or self-benefiting figure, but necessary, only as a starting point to be moved past, and with the constant attempt of being moved beyond.

⁸² Irigaray, Luce. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Trs. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill. (London: Continuum, 2004), 12.

organizational pattern clearly visible. This moment shifts away from the hierarchal organization that dominated the phallogentric order of Egyptian society. Elmahdy does away with the need for particular criterion that images must include in order to be determined valid, and in this way begins a new crafting of citizenship.

Because Egypt currently operates as an envelope looking to enclose and contain its citizens, this section will look to investigate the way that Elmahdy's political engagement lies the foundation for a new type of citizenship to occur. This process will begin with looking at the way that Elmahdy's images function to craft and uphold what Irigaray discusses as an ethics of sexual difference. This discloses itself "in matters of nudity and perversity."⁸³ According to Irigaray, this ethic develops due to the fact that the woman, in the masculine order, is not situated as subject, but rather, only situated relationally through the artificial envelope that society has created for her. In this way, nudity and perversity align to demonstrate that, rather than adopting an identity based on the artificial envelopes society has crafted, woman can turn to the envelope that she herself always already had: her two lips. In this way, the woman's shift away from the envelope society has provided marks a moment of perversity, in so far as she is turning away from what is considered to be a part of societal norms and construction, and instead, looking to establish a new form of politics and identity through her own lips.

This engagement for Elmahdy occurs through her situating herself as nude. This moment of nudity is able to serve as an unveiling, in a literal manner, of the envelope that she has been placed within in Egyptian society; however, her image goes a step beyond. She begs the question of why this envelope existed in the first place;

⁸³ Irigaray, Luce. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Trs. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill. (London: Continuum, 2004), 12.

nonetheless, it is critical to examine why it is that she maintains pieces of the artificial envelope, in both a literal sense, as seen through these objects, but also, the envelope of Egypt as seen by the color scheme of black, white, red, and, at times, yellow.

Elmahdy's first image shows her nude, in the sense that her breasts and vaginal area are left uncovered; however, she is still wearing stockings, red heels, and a red bow. Her second set of lips remain visible, and in this way, her envelope becomes recognized, at least in a partial sense, but there is a sort of unwillingness to reject and remove the artificial envelope in its entirety. Theoretically, this act could be seen as symptomatic of the far-reaching tentacles of the system at hand; however, I will argue that there is an alternative explanation.

The accessories adorned, are not inconsequential, nor are they demonstrative of domination; instead, they can be thought of as reclamation, and reappropriation of particular ornaments that have been deemed necessarily oppressive or restrictive. Each color in the image has particular significance for Arab history and culture through the creation of the Arab Liberation flag. After the Revolution of 1952, the Free Officers who overthrew King Farouk assigned each color a specific symbolic meaning. White was for the bloodless nature of the revolution; black was for the end of foreign imperial oppression; and red, for the period before the revolution which was characterized by the struggle against the monarchy as well as British occupation.

This color combination and outline of three horizontal stripes have been adopted from the Arab Liberation flag and been appropriated throughout the Arab world, with the distinguishing factor being a particular national emblem in the center of the flag. It is, therefore, no coincidence that these three colors are the ones embodied by Elmahdy in her original image. Her choice to highlight the color red signals the lack of

transformation from Egypt historically to the present day. There is, in fact, a continuing struggle against the ruling power. While today that power is seen through Mubarak's successor (or remnants from his Regime) the SCAF, Egypt is, nonetheless, operating at a time before liberation.

Given that according to Irigaray, "the feminine could never be the *mark of a subject*,"⁸⁴ it appears critical that there is, in this way, a mixing of the artificial envelope (the stockings, bow, and shoes) with the second set of lips. It is as if Elmahdy, rather than attempting to operate outside the system of artificiality, of closures and openings, wants to position herself as not only fully encased in the system at hand, but also as unable to be contained by it. The adornment of particular items, as well as the color combination at hand, place Elmahdy as a part of Egypt. She is, in this way, a literal embodiment of the Egyptian identity, as seen through the coloring of its flag, or at the very least, she become a part of the Arab Liberation; however, she injects something that has been left out: the body, or in particular, her second set of lips. This marks the opportunity for a new type of ethics and relationality to be established around Irigaray's notion of sexual difference, rather than the traditional ethics of inclusion, and exclusion, through citizenship. Rather than viewing Egyptian identity as necessarily oppositional, Irigaray's ethics opens up the space to view the differences as bridgeable. While there may be distinguishing factors between different individuals, concepts of identity, or even viewpoints on what that identity is, the concept of sexual difference as an ethic moves beyond thinking of these differences as absolute binaries. Instead, it crafts the possibility to see the differences as distinguishing factors, but as ones that can be

⁸⁴ Irigaray, Luce, in Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 15.

bridged through solidarity. It is for this reason that the ethic that Irigaray considers to be *sexual difference* will be discussed as an ethics of solidarity, seeing as the politics her ethic entails can be expanded room looking at the sexes generically, to looking at the way that individuals in particular situations can not only relate to each other, but can move past viewing differences as justifications for exclusion.

This play on the color imagery of the flag is further expanded when investigating one of the later images on her post. As mentioned before, Elmahdy also presents an image that is a play on the three wise monkeys. This particular image has her vaginal area, mouth, and eyes covered by a yellow bar.⁸⁵ This yellow covering demonstrates the silence, as well as the suppression of the government of Egypt in particular, when it comes to the social and societal events surrounding Egypt. Like Elmahdy's embodiment of the colors of the Arab Federation flag, which by extension mark a matching to the colors of the Egyptian flag, the yellow bar marks the introduction of the final element that designates this particular flag from all others: the Eagle of Saladin. The Eagle of Saladin serves as the distinguishing factor for the Egyptian flag, and while it is technically gold and white on the flag, the use of yellow is sufficient to note a parallel between the two colorings.

Elmahdy's application of the yellow bars across her body works to highlight the enveloping of the government structure onto the citizen of Egypt. The location of the bars is not accidental. Each one serves to demonstrate a particular role (or lack thereof)

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that the government has played: the vaginal area for the virginity testing, the mouth for the silence about the injustice, and the eyes demarcating the lack of recognition, or even acknowledgement that these violations have been, and in fact are, occurring; however, the silence brings about another underlying question: is it just that the government is silent? Or is it that opposition to the government is *silenced*?

Wittig and Censorship

Thus far, much of this discussion has been an overarching critique of the limits and inabilities of language to understand and articulate the world around us, as well as a discussion of the suppression of the individual through the use of language. This suppression of voices demonstrates the role that the government has in silencing and seeking to eliminate the voice of the opposition. Because of this, it is important to realize that, in the words of Judith Butler, “[t]he power of language to work on bodies is both the cause of sexual oppression and the way beyond that oppression.”⁸⁶ It is in this way that the political nature of Elmahdy’s blog continues to unfold. Given that in the status quo, women, unless operating within particular identity boundaries set up by the Egyptian political arena, are in a sense unable to speak, the task at hand is to establish themselves as subjects.

Irigaray’s discussion of the two lips assists in recognizing the tools that women have within them to speak; however, one is still left wondering what it is that makes woman as a distinguishable defining category. The focus of this writing has been on the application of the woman’s body within the work of Elmahdy, but there are not only

⁸⁶ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 148.

images of women on her post. Thus the understanding of what it is that composes the category of man and woman must be expanded. It is in this way that “‘men’ and ‘women’ are political categories, and not natural facts.”⁸⁷ The categories are understood, only insofar as the political superstructure is able to maintain its monopoly on what is able to constitute speech, and what is deemed to be an appropriate outlet for expression.

Monique Wittig offers an opportunity to begin to understand and “resolve the contradictions between the sexes, abolishing them at the same time that it makes them understood.”⁸⁸ While she has argued that these dynamics are resolved through a “class struggle between women and men,” Elmahdy’s work appears to be working towards a similar goal through a modified avenue. The goal of Wittig’s class struggle is that “there cannot any longer be women and men, and that as classes and categories of thought or language they have to disappear, politically, economically, ideologically.”⁸⁹ There are two critical components of this line of thought that must be deciphered, first: is this class struggle reminiscent of the Marxist revolution? And second: does a disappearance mean that these categories literally no longer exist?

As for the first discussion of what it means to have a class struggle, and if Wittig is arguing that if the class struggle as outlined in Marx and Engel’s work was enacted then these categories would disappear, it appears that she is arguing for something larger. Material in her eyes cannot be reduced to labor, production and economics but “there is another order of materiality, that of language.”⁹⁰ Rather than viewing language as a side

⁸⁷ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 147.

⁸⁸ Wittig, Monique. *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1992), 30.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 30.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 30.

effect of society, Wittig is able to articulate it as material in so far as it is able to craft, and in a sense, work upon society. Language, as material, entails the capacity of transforming and structuring society in a particular social ordering. Furthermore, it serves as the structure that codifies particular relations and subjectivities within a given society, and as such, it cannot be left out of discussions of material politics. By understanding language as material, the importance and necessity of speech becomes critical; however, Wittig does not appear to provide an avenue for what recourse is left to those who are left out of speech, as well as what it means to speak.

Speaking and with it the use of language is more than simply articulating a point with words; rather, speaking includes a type of empowerment through language. Language itself, though, is and can never be a fully empty vessel. With it, there are necessary constraints, such as the need for particular words to have consistent meanings for communication; however, a constraint that is often overlooked, or, in a way, sidelined, is the role that the structure of language itself plays in establishing who has the agency to speak. Language as such is gendered. This moment occurs through woman always operating in relation to man within speech. As Jacques Lacan has argued, it is as though when women speak, they are always taking up subject positions and attempting to imitate males, due to the fact that language is grounded in the Phallus as universal signifier; however, this is not to say that woman is necessarily left out of speaking, but instead, one must reinterpret what it means to speak in order to see the ways that woman as speaking subject can occur as an independent subject, by investigating the ways in which those excluded from speech have currently crafted themselves as extensions of the masculine order.

This is not to say that those that are left out of language are by their nature, excluded because of particular classes, but rather, at least in the context of Egyptian society as the post-Mubarak order unfolds, it appears that that which is left out of language, and in this way politics more generally, is the feminine. This is to say that one must be a woman to be excluded, although often that appears to be the case, but instead, the feminine should be thought of as that which serves to complicate and expand what it means to be political, and what is entailed in the possibilities of becoming an Egyptian citizen. While this term has, in many ways, an incredibly vague and ever morphing definition, this type of flexibility is not only crucial, but inevitable when it comes to defining and understanding what femininity composes.

Reading of the feminine has always already been articulated through a masculine understanding of femininity as the opposite of masculine, or at the least as composed of particular characteristics that the masculine is not. Instead, one must begin to read the feminine, in the way that Elmahdy presents, as an ever-expanding category where there are not particular guidelines or requirements constructed around what is *allowed*. Much in the same way as her blog provides an opportunity for any and all images to be included in the struggle, and in so doing crafts a seemingly disjointed web of images, their connecting factor is in a sense an ethics of solidarity. Solidarity functions as an alternative to the theoretical destruction of difference that one could argue Wittig's politics would allow. Elmahdy's blog demonstrates that instead of assuming that the only possible way to resolve the contradictions that inevitably arise from differences is elimination of all difference, one can instead adopt an ethic of solidarity where the importance of each difference becomes minimized.

One Iranian activist's contribution brings this moment to the forefront. She provides an image of herself nude, holding a mask of Elmahdy's face and on the image it states: "I would rather go naked in solidarity with Aliaa Magda Elmahdy than be silent."⁹¹ Solidarity in this sense is the enactment of a politics of opening and realization that the *voice* that is currently doing the speaking is, like the revolution, simply a rearticulation of the same. In this way, the speaking that occurs is more like repeating. The masculine order speaks, but only in so far as it reminds others of their place, their situation, and what their role is as citizen. If the voice speaking provides no access point for change, or at the very least, has no interest in articulating change, then it appears necessary to see the ways that speaking can and does occur through alternate avenues.

This process begins with questioning what it is that constitutes a voice. The images as a moment, or movement, of solidarity are not necessarily static and unchanging, but they are in a way speaking. Rather than thinking of speech as only literal, when one looks at Irigaray's concept of the two lips, it becomes possible to see that these lips are, in a sense, the ones that are "doing the speaking" in Elmahdy's work. They begin to complicate and throw off the covering that society has placed on them and they begin a trajectory of where it is the images themselves that are doing the speaking.

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<http://arebelsdiary.blogspot.com/?zx=28d5d4cb9fad5963>. (Oct. 13, 2011).

Barthes and the Speaking Photograph

The images Elmahdy provides are in no way static; they are dynamic images that begin to craft a new way of relating to the particular situation in Egypt. While in a literal sense, these images are incapable of speech, and could be thought of as mere objects being observed, this viewpoint must be problematized. Each image is able to contain within it something external to the primary focal point of the image that the viewer witnesses. Instead of simply seeing a particular image we in fact *see* something else. A relationship becomes crafted where the viewer is exposed to particular attributes and aspects that, while they are a part of the photograph, are able to expand and draw out particular points and messages that the primary focal point of the image does not necessarily include. This section will seek to demonstrate the way that the images on Elmahdy's blog serve as the voice of her political project.

In this way, Roland Barthes argues that the "photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see."⁹² When looking at the image, one is not simply seeing one particular object. For example, Elmahdy's picture is not simply one of a woman who is nude, but rather, from this starting point, the viewer is exposed to a political project of opposition and of feminine identity. Instead of only seeing her as a nude body, one is exposed to particular objects, colors, styles; however, what is "seen" by the viewer is, in a sense, an emotional reaction. In this way what someone is *seeing* is always more than the particular image as a whole, because each part within it operates as a separate and distinct subset that we are able to see as well. It is often within these subsets that one is

⁹² While Barthes discusses this in terms of a photograph, his analysis is nonetheless critical in understanding Elmahdy's images, seeing as they began from the starting point of a photograph of her own body.

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 6.

able to, in a sense, see a part of the meaning the photographer is looking to convey. The photograph in its entirety is able to craft what Barthes considers to be called *studium*, or the “field of unconcerned desire, of various interest, [and/or] of inconsequential taste” that instigates within the individual a particular motivation or reaction to the photograph.⁹³ Barthes discusses this reaction in terms of a “half desire” where the individual is at a state of like or dislike but not of loving a particular image; however, it is from this starting point that the individual is able to begin “encounter the photographer’s intentions.”⁹⁴

This type of analysis becomes critical when looking at the reactions that Elmahdy’s image received. From the perspective of Barthes, whether or not individuals (or in this case the political parties at play in Egypt) liked, in an artistic sense, the images produced, they were in no way unaware of the political project unfolding within her work. In the work of Elmahdy this occurs through the individual reactions to her photograph being surrounded in disgust and distaste for her project overall, not simply for the image at hand. The dismissal of the image of being simply pornographic is one where the viewer is simply looking to belittle her work so as to ignore and sidestep the project that is right before their eyes. Behind the statements about disgust and other unpleasanties made about her images, there is a constant underlying fear associated with her work. This fear is rooted in the nature of the *studium*. The literal image of Elmahdy is alone incapable of crafting a politics of solidarity, but the aura it is composed of crafts a moment that cannot be contained or removed by the viewer. The aesthetics of the color combination of the image, and the simple look in her face that

⁹³ Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 27.

⁹⁴ Ibid. 27.

appears to be asking the viewer to *see her*, not to simply look at the identity or attitudes that have been crafted for her to compose. There is in a sense, an encounter that one experiences when viewing the image that occurs with the parts at the periphery: the colors, the clothing, the face, or, as one contributor noticed, her shoe.

One image on Elmahdy's blog crops her original image down to simply one foot, that appears to be stepping, and includes below it the text: Freedom and the R(evol)ution,⁹⁵ Who's to say what's a **step** too far?⁹⁶ This image is able to highlight one aspect of the image, and transpose one moment of the *studium* into another image, while also creating a *studium* of its own. The detachment of particular pieces of the photograph is not necessarily something that Barthes would have considered to be a useful moment of reproduction. This particular image is able to expand upon and highlight a particular moment within the original photograph of Elmahdy. While it is possible to view reproduction as a sort of mechanical process where there is simply repetition and recreation for the purpose of establishing more and more of the same particular image, this type of reproduction appears to be functioning in a different sort of manner. This process is not simply a moment of reproduction that is necessarily linked to the body in any sort of predictable manner, but instead, begins to function as a reproduction that is constantly unpredictable and expansive from any particular starting point: in this case, the reproduction of the shoe. The *step* that she is taking in her political project can be reproduced through the simple image, and the continual

⁹⁵ The parenthesis are my addition, the image has the EVOL written backward so that it can be noted that within revolution, there is LOVE.

⁹⁶ Due to Emory University's protocol the following information must be provided: *The link below is for a blog that may contain content only suitable for adults. If you click the link below, you understand and wish to continue.*

Elmahdy, Aliaa Magda, "Nude Art." مذكرات ثائرة.

<http://arebelsdiary.blogspot.com/?zx=28d5d4cb9fad5963>. (Oct. 13, 2011).

highlighting of the red, helps invoke not only the memory of Egypt, but also introduces an additional emotion, that of love.

Furthermore, the image is able to craft its own *studium* through the highlighting of the word LOVE within revolution; however, this moment is not simply one of love, but rather of love written backwards, or a turning to love. This moment draws out what does it mean to love, and if there is in fact some significance of Elmahdy's project being one of love in reverse. Instead of simply assuming that there is one particular linear trajectory that love and compassion can take, it appears that her project begins to complicate what it means to love, how compassion is found, and if it is in fact possible to have a love that is in part surrounded by, or at least at times confused with, evil. Were one to read the word (evol) phonetically, love in reverse begins to sound a bit like EVIL. This similarity draws out the way that Elmahdy's project is able to function simultaneously as one of an ethics of love, but also, as one constantly complicated by, and confused with some sort of evil undoing of Egyptian society. These *studium* function by highlighting particular moments like the red in Elmahdy's shoe, the LOVE within revolution, and freedom within a twitter hash-tag placed at the bottom, in order to connect Elmahdy and her *step* towards redefining citizenship in Egypt with love and freedom.

The rotation of love within revolution highlights the way that the *turn* that revolutions seem to be exhibiting is not one of progress, but rather, one away from love. Instead, Elmahdy's project provides a way to recognize the need for love to be part and parcel with change, instead of deemed oppositional. In the same way that Elmahdy is able to demonstrate that there cannot be an eradication of the female body from society through her blog post, the way that love is able to hide within revolution accomplishes a

similar feat. Her project is able to exhibit the way that a politics of love, like the female body, has been enclosed in an artificial envelope. It is through one's engagement with the images on Elmahdy's blog that the envelope that has been pushing love out of politics and towards the periphery begins to fade.

When viewing these images, whether Elmahdy's original photograph or later alterations of it, the viewer experiences a unique encounter. This moment does not require the viewer to in any way agree with, or begin to side with the photographer; but rather, the viewer is forced to grapple with the particular issues that the photograph takes up. This moment appears to have unfolded within the Egyptian political sphere as one of anxiety. The desire to quickly brand Elmahdy, and, her project overall, as a moment of pornography as the Salafists wish to argue, or as an unfortunate political mishap as the April 6th have done, appears to occur through a moment of panic that functions to attempt to identify and categorize the female body into particular definitions of citizenship. The radical dynamic nature of her images and their capacity to uproot and alter the course of the cyclical revolution appear to be lurking in the peripheries of her image. Without the use of words, her image is able to speak to the viewer and inform the reader of the inadequacies of the system at hand. The photograph in itself is able to, in a way, enact violence.

This moment of violence is not one that should be thought of as necessarily oppositional to love or compassion, but rather a recognition that these types of oppositions are not necessarily problematic. There can be an ethics of solidarity and compassion that works to do violence to a particular system in order to rearticulate particular power dynamics. In a way, this moment complicates the notion that an ethics of love, or in a way, a reading of solidarity through the lens of the feminine, is

necessarily incompatible with moments of violence. This is not to say that the picture itself is violent, or even that the photograph is of something that is particularly violent, but rather, it becomes violent insofar as it serves as a moment that cannot be refused or transformed by the viewer.⁹⁷

Elmahdy's image crafts an image of citizen that lies outside of the governing sphere's capacity to contain. She is able to, in a way, *do* violence through the image, in so far as she can simultaneously embody what it is and means to be Egyptian while also being so clearly oppositional to the constraints that have artificially been imposed on the citizen in this society. Her image works to remove the envelope of what constitutes a "good citizen" within Egyptian society.

It is, in a sense, a transformation or an unearthing of the female body that occurs as a result of the original image. The stripping away of the artificial lips society has placed the woman or the citizen at large within is pulled back, and the ethics of solidarity begins. The structure of this particular post is interactive, in the sense that individuals have submitted additional images and Elmahdy has included them all. Some function as a reproduction of her photograph and incorporation of it new images, others use it as a model to craft their own illustrations, paintings, or even general images; however, the structure of the blog maintains a relationship between each image. At first, one could consider this relationship to be a tenuous one, like Nietzsche's discussion of the leaves, but there is a key difference. While the leaf's leafness was crafted around its original term, none of these images are seeking to be "Elmahdy-like," but instead, each one is able to add-on, and in a way, expand the work she began.

⁹⁷ Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 91.

Image as Politics

By demonstrating that there is a constant relationality between the images on Elmahdy's blog, one is able to begin to see that the images contain some sort of connective element, which I will identify as an ethic of solidarity. Later images choose to appropriate parts of the image, or to incorporate her name; each operates to draw a connection, and as one image of a nude man sitting says, "todos somos alia."⁹⁸ However, one cannot help but investigate further what this concept of "we are all alia" can mean. Clearly it would be impossible for everyone to literally become her, but there is the capacity for a movement to be crafted around this particular image and ideal that it contains. This does not require a collapsing or caving in of differences but rather an acceptance and recognition of those differences. As Judith Butler has argued it would take the form of:

[A]n international coalition of feminist activists and thinkers—a coalition that affirms the thinking of activists and the activism of thinkers and refuses to put them into distinctive categories that deny the actual complexity of the lives in question—will have to accept the array of sometimes incommensurable epistemological and political beliefs and modes and means of agency that bring us into activism.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Translated as *We are all Alia*.

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⁹⁹ Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. (London: Verso, 2004), 48.

There does not need to be a singular model of communication that exists before action, but rather, a particular moment can serve as a bridge to begin an opening for alternative modes of thought and discussion.

Whereas the political structures at work within the masculine order of Egypt continue to assume that the mechanism by which politics occurs is one of uniformity, there is a kind of multiplicity found within the compilation of images that Elmahdy provides. This is not to say that one must constantly search for differences and uphold each one as unique, distinct, and acceptable, but rather each complexity is not something that can be contained and removed. This moment is not an articulation of “some...‘third gender,’ nor...a *transcendence* of the binary. Instead it is an internal subversion in which the binary is both presupposed and proliferated to the point where it no longer makes sense.”¹⁰⁰

One could view the images produced by Elmahdy as in constant opposition, of man/woman, human/animal, amateur/professional, the list goes on; however, it is through the mass expansion of each of these individual possible binaries that one begins to see the ways that this constant mode of opposition is nonsense. There is no complication of the binary through a realization that the binary itself makes no sense, either through the creation of a third term in particular, or through some sort of synthesis of the individual parts, but rather, there is another route that has been discussed as a third way that is crafted. There becomes a proliferation of these binaries to such a degree that it becomes clear that there is no true utility in viewing each opposition as a distinguishing factor that precludes an acceptance of each side; however,

¹⁰⁰ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 162.

it is in this moment that one begins to ask: what is left? If the binary structure is inadequate, and relationships have become, in a sense, chaotic, what kind of politics unfolds?

This politics is one without an endpoint, or a clear step-by-step process by which one can follow. Instead, it emerges as one that contains particular elements, and modes of understanding, from which the possibility of revolution as something new can unfold. While this moment may not be considered a revolution as such, it holds within it the meaning that revolutionary desires contain: the creation of something new. This moment does not entail a rejection of all that once existed, seeing as there is no outside of the system, and by the same measure the power of the political configuration at hand “can be neither withdrawn nor refused, but only redeployed.”¹⁰¹

Elmahdy is able to begin this sort of rearticulation of power through her use of the body. In this way, her project seeks to redefine what it means to be a citizen. The highlighting of the censorship of one’s body as well as the desire to construct a particular image that the body can be seen to serve as moments where Elmahdy is looking to take control of her body; however, there is something larger than her own individual body at stake. It is not simply that she desires to have her body accepted as a nude image, or her body free from virginity testing, or her body free from particular coverings, but rather there is a realization that each body is more than itself. Despite the ways in which each body is, in a literal way, separated from other bodies, they can never be *fully* separate. Rather than assuming that each particular body is somehow distinct, Elmahdy begins to open up a space to express the ways that our bodies are able to impact the ones around

¹⁰¹ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 158.

us. In fact, “although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite over only our own. The body has its invariable public dimension.”¹⁰² It is this injection of the body into the public sphere through her choice to place herself nude on a blog, a literally public sphere that serves to remind the viewer of the public nature of one’s body.

While for Elmahdy this public aspect can be attributed to her choice to literally place her body on display in a wholly public light through her use of the blog, there is a deeper public dynamic at work when one investigates how the body is constructed and what sorts of rights it has (or at times, goes without). There is a need to understand, and realize that the body itself, and in this case as image, can function as the mechanism for action, as the speaking subject. As Butler has argued, “there need not be a ‘doer behind the deed’ but that the ‘doer’ is variably constructed in and through the deed.”¹⁰³

The *doer* in this case can be thought of as Elmahdy. She is not, in this case, literally speaking, transforming, articulating, and in this way *doing* the deed, which can be thought of as the revolt. Instead, her image functions as the actor by which Elmahdy is seen. This dynamic can be more clearly understood by looking at the relationship that is crafted between Elmahdy as an individual and Elmahdy as a particular image. The disgust articulated by April 6th and the Salafists occurs not because of Elmahdy as an individual, but only through the manifestation of Elmahdy as nude image. It is in this way that the image begins to craft Elmahdy. Her project, as well as her identity, becomes understood only after, and through the mediated relationship of the photograph.

¹⁰² Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. (London: Verso, 2004), 26.

¹⁰³ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 181.

Despite Elmahdy as the original creator, or theoretical author, it is not the act of her creating the photograph, but rather the way that she becomes interpreted through the image itself.

Furthermore, from this point there is a further step within the political structure of Elmahdy's image. She opens up an understanding of the image where it can serve as "synechocal for the social system *per se* or a site in which open systems converge" creating a forum for "unregulated permeability [constituting] a site of pollution and endangerment."¹⁰⁴ Instead of fearing the contamination of differing images and interpretations of citizenship, Elmahdy produces an image that serves as a starting point for a new political engagement with citizenship that no longer works to eliminate difference, but instead diffuse the power and importance of the differences at hand. It is the emergence of a politics that looks "not to celebrate each and every new possibility *qua* possibility, but to redescribe those possibilities that *already* exist within cultural domains designed as culturally unintelligible and impossible."¹⁰⁵ The sites and locations for this politics, as Elmahdy's image exposes, are within Egypt, but are found, through reinterpreting and understanding what it is that is able to constitute a citizen. This process occurs by understanding that static definitions of citizenship operate as a means of exclusion and containment. Instead, the existing order must be reread and reinterpreted, and only from this starting point, can a new political configuration unfold that is in a way *revolutionary*.

¹⁰⁴ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 168.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 189

IV. Conclusion

While the political events in Egypt have in no way finished unfolding, the events that have transpired thus far remain integral in understanding and assessing the implications for the political configurations Egypt will uphold. The solidarity movement begun by Elmahdy is in no way complete either. Over the course of composing this particular paper, her images have doubled (from 22 to 44), and it is doubtful that this movement of solidarity is nearing its end. This paper functions almost as a snapshot into the political environment in Egypt; however, like the photographs of Elmahdy, it too is not silent.

My hope is that this writing has begun to demonstrate the need for a constant investigation into the moments that we either consider irrelevant, or, in the case of Elmahdy, disturbing. From there, one can begin a process of questioning that does not resolve or eliminate those anxieties, but rather exposes and reveals the justifications one has for their attitudes. This process reflects an understanding of our own desires to maintain stability and a constant fear of change; however, at the same time the case of Elmahdy exposes the necessity to move away from this dynamic in order to allow for collaboration and cooperation both within a given society as well as across cultures.. There is no perfect solution or ideal that this paper proposes, but rather, an opening to question, and a realization that there may be no solution after all. There instead must be an acceptance of the inevitable disgust and chaos of society.

We must problematize the possibility of a solution at all. Much like revolution, solution is not necessarily a moment of *resolution*; instead, it is also used to describe

“the action of dissolving”¹⁰⁶ and is used to designate when an assortment of different parts are able to all appear to be the same. Solution, when read in this light, operates as nothing more than a rooting out of differences, and expulsion of the messiness inevitable within politics. Rather than searching for a solution, this paper seeks to demonstrate the need for, and an embracement of, life’s messiness. There are moments, aspects and attributes that one may find disgusting or disturbing; however, those are the ones that add to the mess. They increase the possibility of change and are the *unsettling* pieces that cause one’s *neat* solution to fall apart.

It is in this way that my work is not invested in determining a teleological end or developing a particular prescription, but instead, it works to demonstrate how within these seemingly dismissive moments are dynamic political actions. Elmahdy’s project is able to show the potential found within moments that are often left out of philosophical or political discussions through her medium of the blog. I hope to have shown that much like Egyptian society’s desire to exclude the woman as subject, despite the revolutionary potential that she holds, we often are quick to ignore and belittle unconventional mechanisms for change.

The past year has shown that these mechanisms have the capacity to speak to entire nations in order to share a particular goal, as demonstrated by the role of social media in the overthrow of dictators across the Middle East and North Africa. Elmahdy’s project that began as one single image has been able to spread globally through its medium of the blog. This medium provides not only an opportunity for the expansion of understanding political engagement, but also a locus for an extension of philosophical

¹⁰⁶ Oxford English Dictionary. *Solution*, n.
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/184375?rskey=kNSwMq&result=1#eid>.

scholarship. My hope is that through my investigation of Elmahdy's blog there can start to be a continuation of philosophical discussions that begin to investigate the way that philosophical movements and applications are constantly operating in society.

Philosophy has the capacity to seek to explain and have an impact on the importance of emerging unconventional engagements with the political sphere. In this way, there is an opportunity to recognize the inherently interdisciplinary nature of philosophy in order to invite a juxtaposition of philosophical theories with contemporary social issues.

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