“The Revolution Did Not Take Place”: Hidden Transcripts of Cairokee’s Post-Revolution Rock Music

CAROLYN RAMZY

Abstract

In 2016, Egypt’s popular rock band Cairokee renamed the song that propelled them to fame from “Voice of Freedom” to “The Revolution Did Not Take Place.” The new song and its sarcastic video poked fun at the state’s centralized media and military leadership in their efforts to erase the 2011 popular uprising from public memory. Drawing on James Scott’s notion of hidden transcripts and the complicit role of the media in Jean Baudrillard’s *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, I investigate the band’s political shifts in Egypt’s post-revolutionary music soundscape. Despite aggressive efforts to censor their songs, how does Cairokee embed their political critique of military rule in present day Egypt? And, in their use of ruse, humor, and overt disenchantments with the Egyptian uprising, how do their songs and music videos craft, in Baudrillard’s words, a “third order of reality,” overcoming the classical dichotomy between the “virtual” and the “real” for their audiences offline, only to replicate the same exclusionary class politics that they critiqued in their music?

Figure 1: Video still of Eid’s “Sout Al Horeya” or “Voice of Freedom.” The protester’s banner in this image reflects a line from the song’s chorus: “In every street of my country, the voice of freedom is calling.” Image taken by the author.

Watch video: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0014.103>.

In February 2011, the lead singer of the rock band Cairokee navigated through Egypt's Tahrir Square and sang one of the most iconic songs of the 2011 Egyptian Uprising: "The Voice of Freedom." Amir Eid, joined by Hany Adel of the band Wust El-Balad, traveled the Square's congested sidewalks as demonstrators from various social, religious, and class strata looked directly into the camera and mouthed the song's poignant lyrics. It was a moment ripe with promise, possibilities, and dreams, and many demonstrators held handwritten signs that read passages from Eid's proud anthem:

We have been waiting for this for a long time
Searching but unable to find our place.
In every street of my country, the voice of freedom is calling.¹

Five years later, scholars, activists, and musicians such as Cairokee pointed to the state's current authoritarian crackdown on outspoken artists and bloggers as the sure signs of a failed revolution.² Under a new military regime headed by President Fattah al-Sisi, things have changed dramatically since this first video. The Egyptian state has worked hard to remove any traces of the 2011 uprising, including effacing critical graffiti and increased security around Tahrir Square,³ as if the revolution did not take place at all. In turn, music scholars warily warn of the "fetishization of resistance"⁴ and overemphasize the power and reach of dissident music in the Arab uprisings,⁵ instead pointing to the rise of "quiet" politics among contemporary musicians in Egypt.⁶ In turn, Cairokee's Amir Eid sang a new interpretation of his song on Sayed Abo Hafiza's prominent satellite comedy show, *As'ad Allah Masa'kum* (Have a good evening), in 2016. Five years after the uprising, Amir sat on a couch in sweatpants while a camera panned images of empty Cairo streets. As he sighed and sank into his seat, a new set of demonstrators in his living room held another set of handwritten signs: "the street is theirs," "no one is going," and "I'm staying home." With a stoic and almost comedic seriousness, each protester looked directly into the camera. Eid and a severe looking Abo Hafiza, who by now had stepped out of his hallmark comedic glasses and wig, looked directly to their viewers and sang over the same acoustic guitar accompaniment:

If you've just come from the streets
And saw a revolution with your own eyes

¹ "Sout Al Horeya" ("The Voice of Freedom"), uploaded February 10, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fgw_zfLLvh8. For a subtitled version of this video, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sV9UY_8qABY. All transliterations in this article follow the International Journal for Middle Eastern Studies system, with the exception of song titles that Cairokee have already transliterated and listed online. I have also maintained Cairokee's translation of their own song titles; for example, they have translated their song "El-Sekha Shemal" as "Wrong Turn" while it can also mean "A Left Turn."

² For more on Egypt's political topography under President Fattah el-Sisi, see Jeannie Sowers, "Activism and Political Economy in the New-Old Egypt," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47, no. 1 (2015): 140–3, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743814001500>.

³ Ayman Helmy, "Al-Fann Midān (aw al-grafitī al-akhīr 'ala ḥa'it al-thowra)" (Al Fann Midan [Or the Last Graffiti of the Wall of the Revolution]), *Egyptian Sisyphus* (sīṣīf maṣrī), April 5, 2019, <http://egyptiansisyphus.blogspot.com/2015/04/2-2011-9-2014.html>.

⁴ See Laudan Nooshin, "Whose Liberation? Iranian Popular Music and the Fetishization of Resistance" in *Popular Communication* 15 no. 3 (2017): 163–191, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2017.1328601>.

⁵ See Almeida Moreno, *Rap Beyond Resistance: Staging Power in Contemporary Morocco* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-60183-0>; Rayya El Zein, *Performing el Rap el 'Arabi 2005–2015: Feeling Politics amid Neoliberal Incursions in Ramallah, Amman, and Beirut* (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2016); Ted Swedenburg, "Egypt's Music of Protest: From Sayyid Darwish to DJ Haha," *Middle East Report* 265 (2012): 39–43; David McDonald, "Framing 'Arab Spring': Hip-Hop, Social Media, and the American News," *Journal of Folklore Research* 56, no. 1 (2019): 105–30, <https://doi.org/10.2979/jfolkrese.56.1.04>.

⁶ Darci Sprengel, "'Loud' and 'Quiet' Politics: Question the Role of 'the Artist' in Street Art Projects after the 2011 Egyptian Revolution," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 2 (2020): 208–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877919847212>.

Believe nothing by the [State] media. . .
The revolution did not take place in my country.
The streets were actually empty. . .⁷

Figure 2: Video still from “Maḥasalsh Thawra fī Biladī” (“The Revolution Did Not Take Place in My Country”). The protester’s protest in this image reads: “The street is there.” Image by the author.

Watch video: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0014.103>.

In this paper, I investigate Cairokee’s reconfigured songs, beginning with the transformation of “Sout Al Horeya” (“The Voice of Freedom”) to the more muted version “Maḥasalsh Thawra fī Biladī” (“The Revolution Did Not Take Place in My Country”).⁸ Initially an anthem for the Egyptian uprising, the new song is a stinging critique of Egypt’s centralized state media, its selective memory of the 2011 events, and its complicit role in the military’s authoritative rule following 2013. Drawing on James Scott’s notion of hidden transcripts and Jean Baudrillard’s *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*,⁹ I investigate the band’s political shifts, from an early English cover band to a prominent player in Egypt’s post-revolutionary music soundscape. I also follow the band’s subsequent retreat into the virtual realm after the marked censorship of artists after Sisi’s rise to power. I ask: Despite their self-censored songs, how does Cairokee continue to embed their political critique of military rule in present-day Egypt? And, in their use of ruse, humor, and overt disenchantment with the Egyptian uprising, how do their songs and music videos craft what Baudrillard called a “third order of reality,”¹⁰ overcoming the classical dichotomy between the “virtual” and the “real” for their largely middle-class audiences?¹¹ In the end, I do not analyze

⁷ “The Revolution Did Not Take Place in My Country,” *Abu Hafiza presents the song “Voice of Freedom” in a new form*, uploaded February 4, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hbwS1baZRso>.

⁸ In this article, I use Cairokee’s English transliterations for their song titles. If a transliteration is not available, I revert to the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES) guide for transliteration. All song lyric translations are my own unless noted.

⁹ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

¹⁰ Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, 11.

¹¹ Richard Rogers, “Internet Research: The Question of Method: A Keynote Address from the YouTube and the 2008 Election Cycle in the United States Conference,” *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 7, no. 2–3 (2010): 241–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19331681003753438>.

Cairokee's music and lyrics as "revolutionary" music, but rather, I investigate the band's fugitive and virtual "quiet politics,"¹² that is, their use of ambiguity, indirectness, and at times, even silence to engage contemporary politics in an increasingly authoritarian state. By escaping into the virtual and reaching further into an online global pop music market, how does Cairokee's post-revolutionary rock music reproduce the same neoliberal and exclusionary middle-class aspirations that shaped Egypt's failed democratic transition?

Drawing on methods of virtual ethnography—a mode of ethnography that bridges online and offline realms following the circulation of a given object across different online platforms¹³—I explore the band's creative beginnings, changing brand, and their quick rise to fame in 2011. With little access to the band and their fans in Egypt following the 2013 crackdown on academics, I analyze Cairokee's virtual interviews as well as online news publications to show how Cairokee's memorialization of the living contrasts with the state's strategic instrumentalization of the dead. Their song "Voice of Freedom" not only captured a broader sense of hope and belonging among many of its middle-class listeners, but for the group, it also marked their distinct change into a revolutionary band and forged their status as "Egypt's Voice of Freedom."¹⁴ While Cairokee reluctantly embraced this politicized status offline, I argue that the band's public sense of fakery, posing, and simulation helped them to navigate the increasing censorship on Egyptian musicians, particularly when the utopian mood around the 2011 uprising soured. And, as the Egyptian state cracked down on bloggers and protesters, the band further capitalized on their sarcastic, ironic, and even humorous critiques to question the mainstream media's alternative narratives of Egypt populist youth movement. But as they moved their caustic critiques online to platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, these sites narrowed *who* they could "speak" or "sing along" with, specifically crafting an elite fan demographic. Finally, using Hine's notion of "mobile ethnography,"¹⁵ I follow Cairokee's music across various class strata, particularly as they borrowed, sampled, and collaborated with "*sha'bi*" or working-class "folk" musicians on their 2017 album. Despite these efforts, I argue that they do not directly engage with the urban working-class issues that brought many blue-collar Egyptians to the Square. Instead, the band highlights one of the most influential aftermaths of Egypt's uprising: the transformation of "street art"—one that first engaged everyday listeners across wide class strata as cultural laborers¹⁶—into an increasingly exclusionary "post-revolutionary" genre as neoliberal middle-class aspirations for the revolutions reflected the state's continued civilizing projects.¹⁷ In other words, Cairokee's retreat into the virtual reflects the exacerbating and insulating role of social media following the uprising,¹⁸ prompting further political and class polarizations already taking place in Egypt.

¹² Sprengel, "'Loud' and 'Quiet' Politics."

¹³ Caliendo, 2018; Christine Hine, "Towards Ethnography of Television on the Internet: A Mobile Strategy for Exploring Mundane Interpretive Activities," *Media, Culture & Society* 33, no. 4 (2011): 567–82, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08912416117702960>; Hine, *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied, and Everyday* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

¹⁴ "Cairokee: Egypt's Voice of Freedom Plays On," *Cairokee official website blog*, <http://www.cairokee.com/blog/2015/4/18/cairokee-egypts-voice-of-freedom-plays-on>.

¹⁵ Hine, "Towards Ethnography of Television on the Internet."

¹⁶ Anastasia Valassopoulos and Dalia Said Mostafa, "Popular Protest Music and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution," *Popular Music and Society* 37, no. 5 (2014): 638–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2014.910905>.

¹⁷ Jessica Winegar, "A Civilized Revolution: Aesthetics and Political Action in Egypt," *American Ethnologists* 43, no. 4 (2016): 609–22, <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12378>.

¹⁸ Marc Lynch, Deen Freelon, and Sean Aday, "Online Clustering, Fear, and Uncertainty in Egypt's Transition," *Democratization* 24, no. 6 (2017): 1159–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2017.1289179>.

Early Simulacra? Cairokee’s Early Beginnings

Cairokee’s very name, merging the words Cairo and the Japanese “karaoke,” seems to be a pun on Baudrillard’s notion of a simulacrum, a virtual spectacle that overtakes the real thing.¹⁹ In fact, on the band’s Facebook page, they explicitly explain their choice of their name as a way to “sing along” with the experience of their audiences in the cacophonous city of Cairo.²⁰ In 2003, they first began as a cover band by the name Black Star—not to be mistaken for the hip-hop duo hailing from Brooklyn—and they sang songs by their favorite bands: Coldplay, Pink Floyd, and even Nirvana.²¹ With Amir Eid as the lead singer, Sherif Hawary on lead guitar, Tamer Hashem on drums, Sherif Mostafa on electronic keyboards, and Adam el Alfy on bass guitar, the group performed exclusively in English and only played on elite college campuses and talent shows. Gentle electric guitar riffs characterize their early sound over a drum kit and Eid’s crooning style is frequently paired with seemingly benign lyrics about young love.²² Sometimes, they performed just for friends in Eid’s home studio in the upper-middle class neighborhood of Maadi.²³ At the time, they were virtually unknown and they only sang one song in their local Egyptian Arabic dialect, “Gharīb” (“Stranger”), again another simulacra as a band that felt it strange to sing in their own vernacular language.

Cairokee finally got their big break on the very eve of Hosni Mubarak’s abdication of power when they released “The Voice of Freedom” on February 10, 2011. Over the course of one week, their low-budget video shot using a handheld camera in a single-shot generated two million YouTube views.²⁴ As El Hamamsy and Soliman observe, the video marked the beginning of a kind of “decentralized art,” where the boundaries between politics, audiences, and artists engaged viewers by foregrounding audience images and subversive street art in the same frame.²⁵ In the video, Eid and Adel walk through a bustling Tahrir Square (literally, Freedom Square) at the height of protests calling for Mubarak’s abdication. Over the course of eighteen days, demonstrators, bloggers, and activists, stepped out of the comforts of their homes and virtual spaces and displayed a temporary utopian unity in the streets.²⁶ Coptic Christians, Muslims, and secular Egyptians across many class demographics all took turns to pray and protected each other in the Square; impromptu concerts by musicians such as Ramy Essam sang with brazen boldness for the president to “Irḥal!” (“Leave!”) on an acoustic guitar haphazardly connected to a stereo amplifier; strangers offered each other sweet dates and bread at the entrance of the Square in a kind of hopeful homecoming; members of the military even stood beside civilians in prayer.²⁷ “Sout Al Horeya” captured these giddy moments as Eid and Adel walked through the crowds, sang along with protesters, and raised their hands

¹⁹ Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, 10.

²⁰ Cairokee’s official Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/pg/cairokee/about/> (accessed October 25, 2017).

²¹ Salma Ihab, “Cairokee, an Exclusive Interview with HashTags Magazine,” *Hashtags Mag.com*, January 17, 2013, <http://archive.is/kZuRt>.

²² For an example of their earlier sounds, see Cairokee’s “Kul al-Nas” (“Everyone”), uploaded August 28, 2007, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1wHMGqKFRmw>.

²³ “Cairokee: Egypt’s Voice of Freedom Plays On,” *Cairokee Official Website*, April 18, 2015, <http://www.cairokee.com/blog/2015/4/18/cairokee-egypts-voice-of-freedom-plays-on>.

²⁴ Ali Charrier “Two years on, the revolution still sells” *Kalimat Magazine*, March 27, 2013, <http://www.kalimatmagazine.com/culture/tag/music>.

²⁵ Valassopoulos and Mostafa, “Popular Protest Music and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution,” 643.

²⁶ Dalia Wahdan, “Singing the Revolt in Tahrir Square: Euphoria, Utopia, and Revolution,” in *The Political Aesthetics of Global Protest: The Arab Spring and Beyond* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 52.

²⁷ For more on other songs of protest, see Wahdan, “Singing the Revolt,” and Nadia Shalaby, “A Multimodal Analysis of Selected Cairokee Songs of the Egyptian Revolution and Their Representation of Women,” in *Journal for Cultural Research* 19, no. 2 (2015): 176–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2014.982921>.

high to signal both peace and victory. In the instrumental bridge, famed Egyptian folk poet Abdel Rahman el-Abnudi recited his poem “The Square”:

Egyptian hands understanding how to differentiate
 Breaking the mirrors of deception
 The beautiful youth showed up to change it is winter to spring
 And made the miracle and awoke the deadened country from its death
 Kill me, killing me won't return your rule again
 I'm writing with my blood a new life for my country
 This is my blood or is it the spring
 Both of them are green
 And am I smiling from my happiness or my sadness?²⁸

Cairokee quickly built on this momentum and, in November 2011, released another hit called “Ya El Medan” (“Oh Square”) with Aida al-Ayoubi. A veteran singer of the 1990s, Ayoubi came out of her retirement to sing nationalist songs in solidarity with demonstrators. “Ya El Medan” came at a time when activists felt that the revolution was slipping: in March 2011 and under Egypt’s transition military government, a new law criminalized strikes and protests with the threat of jail time or a LE 500,000 fine.²⁹ Though the Egyptian Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) was long regarded as the savior of the Uprising, they were the ones to spearhead mass arrests and clashes with activists in protests dubbed “Save the Revolution Day” and the “Second Friday of Anger.”³⁰ The release of “Ya El Medan” preceded one of the revolution’s most dramatic shifts: when army tanks brazenly trampled over protesters, many of them belonging to Egypt’s Coptic Christian minority, in the infamous Maspero Massacre.³¹ Captured on video, Egyptians watched as tanks eerily surpassed the brutality of the previous regime, running over and killing 28 protesters as well as wounding some 200 others. More disturbingly, people also witnessed the state media’s complicit reporting. While the media prior to this had enjoyed a few months of refreshing openness and bold criticism of the revolution’s political and military actors,³² audiences watched as Rasha Magdy on Egyptian state television (*al-qanā al-ūla*) called on viewers to come and save the army from largely unarmed protesters.³³

With the slow turn in Egyptian mainstream media and its state actors working to wipe out public memory of the uprising, Cairokee’s “Ya El Medan” was a reminder of the momentary liminal utopia that Tahrir Square once offered. The video is intimate and takes place in the soft glow of television screens and pans on the physical evidence of dissidence in someone’s living room. Specifically, the music video opens by zooming in on Eid’s handwritten lyrics of “Sout Al Horeya” but the camera quickly goes out of focus. Instead, it lingers on images of poster stencils, bullet ridden shirts, vinegar spray bottles to combat tear gas, bloody jackets of volunteer physicians who worked in the Square, and finally, a speaker phone that had previously sounded “the voices of freedom.” Here, Cairokee’s message is not hidden: the uprising was far

²⁸ I borrow my Arabic translation of this poem from Samia Mehrez’s course website, “Translating Revolution,” American University in Cairo, last modified March 13, 2011, <https://translatingrev.wordpress.com/2011/03/13/67/>. Several other translations of Abdel Rahman el-Abnudi’s are also available on the site.

²⁹ “New Egyptian law Criminalizes Protests,” *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, March 23, 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20111228070645/http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/node/371465>.

³⁰ “Tens of Thousands attend ‘Save the Revolution Day,’” *Ahram Online*, April 1, 2011, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/9055.aspx>.

³¹ Ekram Ibrahim, “Justice Denied: Egypt’s Maspero Massacre One Year On,” *Ahram Online*, October 9, 2012, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/54821.aspx>.

³² Naila N. Hamdy, “Prediction of Media Credibility in Egypt’s Post-Revolution Transitional Phase,” *Global Media Journal* 12, no. 22 (2013): 1–42.

³³ See the video of Rasha Magdy at <http://www.vetogate.com/1265194> (last modified October 8, 2014).

from over. Eid sings the first line over the crisp riff of an electric guitar, but it is Ayoubi's warm voice, pleading over the gentle lull of a 'ud (a Middle Eastern lute), that brings the nostalgia home. Her veiled face finally comes into view, contrasting with the text of Amir's "Sout Al Horeya":

"O Square, where have you been?"
 You have toppled the walls, and turned on the lights
 You've gathered in you a broken people
 We were reborn anew and a stubborn dream has been born
 We may differ, but our intentions are clear
 And at times the picture is not clear
 We will keep our country safe, and our children's children
 We will restore the rights of our youth who have gone before us. . .

Not an Original Copy: Virtuality and Fakery as Musical Activism

In his famous work, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, Jean Baudrillard explores how media's "seamless manipulation" of reality and virtuality compelled both the US's entrance into electronic warfare in Iraq and filtered a technological simulacra of the war to the American public.³⁴ Baudrillard writes that heavily produced "live reporting" from the front lines had crafted such manicured images of war that American audiences grew to prefer it.³⁵ For example, viewers could hear the clean and mechanized sounds of warfare—guns, bombs, and tank machinery—without the raw sonic aftermath of screaming victims or mourning survivors. Baudrillard writes, "We [as hostages to the media] prefer the exile of the virtual, of which television is the universal mirror, to the catastrophe of the real."³⁶ Musicologist James Deaville adds that it was also the rise of Hollywood production elements, such as the use of music and diegetic sounds in the news broadcasting, that created an audio-visual spectacle for consumers and transformed their televisions screens and speakers into sites of "living room wars."³⁷ In other words, television—and later computer and telephone—screens emerged as the sites of manipulation between the virtual and the real, as well as spaces in which audiences were confined to the hegemony of the state. In its classed sterility and protection from the dirt and messiness of war, many privileged viewers grew to prefer such a technological simulacra to the real thing.

Beginning in late 2011, Cairokee's music videos and song texts simultaneously targeted the media's complicit role in the hegemony of the Egyptian state while they embraced the simulacra of television and computer screens as safe spaces. Indeed, their retreat mirrored the growing clusters of Egyptian Twitter users whose increasing use during Egypt's rocky democratic transition only encouraged an uneven flow of information, intensification of fear, and partisan clustering into religious, secular, and elite blocs.³⁸ One of these clusters is even known as *hizb al-kanaba*, literally the "couch party." As a popular moniker, it described the television viewers as both confined to their television screens and relegated to apathy from

³⁴ Baudrillard, 4.

³⁵ There are some preliminary writings about the highly produced CNN coverage of the Persian Gulf war. See Nancy J. Woodhull and Robert W. Snyder, *Defining Moments in Journalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998); James Castonguay, "Hollywood Goes to Washington," in *Headline Hollywood: A Century of Film Scandal*, ed. Adrienne McLean, 273–297 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001); and Marc D. Feldman, "The Military/Media Clash and the New Principle of War: Media Spin," master's thesis, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL, 1993.

³⁶ Baudrillard, 28.

³⁷ Deaville, "The Changing Sounds of War: Television News Music and Armed Conflict from Vietnam to Iraq," in *Music, Politics, and Violence*, ed. Susan Fast and Kip Pegley (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 104–26.

³⁸ Lynch, Freelon, and Aday, "Online Clustering, Fear, and Uncertainty."

public political activities. It is a scene that Cairokee and Al-Ayoubi highlight in “Ya El Medan,” as the song takes place in the retreat of someone’s living room, couch, and television screen. Eid’s guest appearance on Abo Hafiza’s show also highlights this phenomenon. As he sang “The Revolution Did Not Take Place in My Country,” protesters in the living room seem to acquiesce to the last remaining safe space: the couch and the television screen. Among other political groups, *hizb al-kanaba* tweeted and retweeted mainstream media reporting. Twitter’s virtual distance—from the revolution’s events and between various blocs—ultimately undermined Egypt’s democratic transition, lending power and support from elite liberal and leftist blocs to the 2013 military coup that put the military in power, putting an end to the country’s democratic transition.³⁹ Jessica Winegar goes even further; she argues that it was the classed aesthetic judgments leveled by middle-class and elite Cairenes on the Muslim Brotherhood protesters as uncouth and uncivilized in Rabia Square that legitimated the military’s massacre of nearly 1,000 people in August.⁴⁰

Nonetheless, coupled with their use of social media and tongue-in-cheek interviews, Cairokee’s online presence critiqued the Egyptian state media and allowed for their elite and neoliberal audiences to navigate beyond mainstream media and benign Arab pop that avoided any military critique at all.⁴¹ Like other oppositional movements in Egypt whose momentum used social media to “transform online activism into offline protests,”⁴² Cairokee’s virtual presence did translate into over packed concerts where audiences took turns with the band to fill in censored texts that the band has implied in their rhyme schemes.⁴³ Again, all the band could do was “sing along” in a seemingly passive move. In the severe restrictions of media outlets in Egypt, a spike in the number of political and journalist prisoners, forced disappearances of activists, and extrajudicial killings of Islamists by security forces, many musicians and writers, including Cairokee, justify their exile into the virtual.⁴⁴ But it was in these virtual spaces and social platforms that Cairokee’s passive attitudes seemed to challenge the apparatuses of simulation into various forms of political engagement, through for a very specific elite demographic. And they did so by accentuating their virtual and “ventriloquist status.”⁴⁵ That is, they depended on digital technologies that blur the boundaries between human and machine through modulated and synthesized sounds—and I add here, images in music videos—to contest media and military dominance. Such ventriloquism, Auner

³⁹ Marc Lynch et co., “Online Clustering, Fear, and Uncertainty in Egypt’s Transition,” *Democratization* Vol. 24, No. 6 (2017): 1159–1177.

⁴⁰ Winegar, “A Civilized Revolution,” 619.

⁴¹ For works on Arab pop and politics, see Dan Gilman, *Cairo Pop: Youth Music in Contemporary Egypt* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816689279.001.0001>, and Andrew Hammond, *Pop Culture in North Africa and the Middle East* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2017).

⁴² Merlyna Lim, “Clicks, Cabs, and Coffee Houses: Social Media and Oppositional Movements in Egypt, 2004–2011,” *Journal of Communication* 62, no. 2 (2012): 231–48, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01628.x>.

⁴³ Amir Eid uploaded one of numerous examples as a full audience sings the words along with Cairokee on his Facebook page. Here, the crowd, many of them noticeably women, sing the words “Ithbat Makanak” (“Stand your Ground”): <https://www.facebook.com/AmirEid.Cairokee/videos/1411836632198467/> (accessed October 30, 2017).

⁴⁴ In Egypt, television and news media have oscillated with the times, between moments of highly autonomous press and total government domination: Naila Hamdy and Ehab H. Gomaa, “Framing the Egyptian Uprising in Arabic Language Newspapers and Social Media,” *Journal of Communication* 62, no. 2 (2012): 195, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01637.x>. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reports that, under today’s military-backed president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, free press has deteriorated dramatically and with record high imprisonment of journalists. Television news anchors openly disclose their cooperation with both the military and the police to avoid repercussions. See Jack Shenker’s “State Repression in Egypt Worst in Decades, Says Activist,” *The Guardian*, January 24, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/24/state-repression-egypt-worst-weve-ever-seen-activist-hossam-bahgat>. Also see Nour Youssef’s “How Egyptian Media has Become a Mouthpiece for the Military State,” *Guardian*, June 25, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/25/egyptian-media-journalism-sisi-mubarak>.

⁴⁵ Joseph Auner, “Sing It for Me’: Posthuman Ventriloquism in Recent Popular Music,” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 128, no. 1 (2003): 98–122, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrma/128.1.98>.

reminds us, is linked to broader cultural changes and is intended to reflect the anxieties and possibilities of what it means to be human in increasingly technologically mediated (and surveilled) spaces.⁴⁶

Figure 3: Video still from “Marboot Be Astek”/ (“Tied Up”), 2015. Image by the author.

Watch video: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0014.103>.

In almost all of their videos created since 2012, Cairokee is almost always singing from a television screen within a screen, wearing masks, or using amplified reverb to sound more like a digital echo, heightening this exile into the virtual. All of these changes are a marked contrast from their 2011 “Sout Al Horeya,” where Eid openly weaved in and outside of Tahrir’s crowds singing and engaging with working class audiences and participants in the song. Their faces finally fully resurface in their February 2016 release of the song “Akher Oghneya” (“Last Song”). On a number of occasions, the band also brazenly presses on these fissures between virtuality and reality—such as the explicit sounds of texts being spliced to cut out passages in the songs, for instance in their 2017 single “Dinosaur.” With a forceful beep that interrupts the buoyant electronic riffs that carry Eid’s clipped texts, Cairokee audibly cut controversial references to Tiran and Sanafir, two islands in the Red Sea that the Egyptian government transferred over to Saudi Arabia despite popular disapproval of the deal.⁴⁷ Only the Arabic rhyme scheme of their texts imply the hidden words as an inside joke between performers and listeners. The music resumes as if a glitch in the cassette spool corrects itself, and the song remains hauntingly unmoved, layering the stretching of folk spiked fiddle (*el-rababa*) onto Eid’s harmonized chorus repeating the words, “I am not surprised, I am not surprised, I am not surprised” (“*ana mish ḥastaghrab*”).⁴⁸

In their cleverly titled record, *El Sekka Shemal* (The Wrong Turn), released in 2014, and the first to follow Fattah el-Sisi’s election to the presidency, Cairokee also explored recurring themes of disenchantment, nostalgia, and being pushed out of Egyptian post-revolution media as dissident counterfeits. More importantly, they openly embraced accusations against uprising protesters and activists as “fakes,” “thugs,” and “useless youth,” levied by news outlets at protesters and activists to critiques

⁴⁶ Auner, “Sing It for Me,” 111.

⁴⁷ Rania Rabeaa Elabd, “Egypt’s Parliament Working with Sisi to Finalize Island Transfer,” *Al-Monitor*, June 11, 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/06/egypt-tiran-sanafir-island-transfer-saudi-arabia-parliament.html>.

⁴⁸ Cairokee, “Dinosaur” (Official Music Video), uploaded July 27, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_4zeNNSManE.

military manipulation of its State media.⁴⁹ In the very first track, “Ī’ādat Nazar” (“Reconsider”), Eid poignantly reveals to his audiences, “I searched in myself, rewound the [cassette] tape to see what happened. . . there is no date, no identity. I am not an original copy.” As a viewer noted, the song opens with a simple riff on acoustic guitar, so similar to the North American pop band Coldplay, that they comment on the single word: “colllllllllldplay.”⁵⁰ Followed by a swell in a responding electric guitar, Cairokee’s sound is vested in an ambiguous Western popular aesthetic until Eid finally sings the opening line in Arabic, “My features, half of my language, this guitar that lies in front of me—All the things my eyes see are not from me and they are not for me.” Here, Eid’s disenchanted voice and lyrics hauntingly speak to the “incomplete,” “partial,” and “virtual” presence of mimicry and mockery that Homi Bhabha locates in postcolonial discourses and culture.⁵¹ By concomitantly embracing the media’s levy as “fakes,” Cairokee’s confession also highlights a central irony for their neoliberal middle-class audience: so taken are local audiences with imported Western sounds and goods that many have experienced an unmooring aesthetic reordering,⁵² disdaining and distancing themselves from local and “low-class” Egyptian tastes, sounds, and images as vulgar while still pining to experience them in “clean” and “civilized” ways.⁵³

Eid explicitly captures this pining for a folk and working-class “authenticity” in the track, “Ghareeb fi Belad Ghareeba” (“A Stranger in a Strange Land”), featuring urban and *sha’bi* singer ‘Abd al-Basset Hamouda.⁵⁴ This was Cairokee’s first foray into an underground street genre, known as electro *sha’bi* that has long questioned the authority of the State, and sarcastically expressed a weariness of a utopic revolution.⁵⁵ The song’s dark orchestration, featuring Hamouda’s reverbing improvisation over a lonely accordion, and then interrupted by Cairokee’s cheap imitation of traditional urban music, seems to intentionally fulfill Eid’s prophecy of not “being an original copy.” The crisp and clean studio recording, devoid of the typical live cacophony of *sha’bi* music, embodies Cairokee’s sense of an unmoored identity following the January 2011 uprising. Again, while Egypt’s post-revolution aesthetic reordering looked to move “dirt out of sight” as middle-class protesters cleaned the Square in a beautification project that mirrored bourgeois nationalism,⁵⁶ Cairokee offered electro *sha’bi* music without the sonic messiness and deafening reverb of its low-class and DIY producers and audiences. Hamouda and Eid almost sing to each other but not quite. They take turns interweaving the plight of a working class *sha’b*, while Eid speaks to the pressures of self-censorship, containment and constraint. As Eid sings “[I am] a stranger in a strange land,” Hamouda responds with a different reality: “There are some people working and prosperity is high / [while] other people grumble and complain. . .” In a twist, Hamouda’s raspy voice returns to confirm Eid’s jaded simulacrum and sings: “So many youth wish to change, but they cannot find their dream and

⁴⁹ The state began to argue that the revolution was inspired by an outside “third hand”; see Michael Vincent’s “‘Troublemakers’ warned ahead of Egypt Vote,” *ABC Australia*, November 27, 2011, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-11-28/egypt-election-update/3698092>.

⁵⁰ See the comments section in Cairokee’s “Dinosaur”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4zeNNSManE>.

⁵¹ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994, 2007), 123.

⁵² Winegar, “A Civilized Revolution.”

⁵³ For more on this, see Ziad Fahmy’s work *Ordinary Egyptians: Creating the Modern Nation through Popular Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

⁵⁴ *Sha’bi* can literally mean “folk” or “of the people”; in his book, *Cairo Pop: Youth Music in Contemporary Egypt* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), Daniel Gilman writes that *al-musiqa al-sha’bi* means both “people’s music” and idiomatically “working-class music.” As a popular music, it draws its vocal style and lyrical style from the folk music tradition of *marwal*, a colloquial Arabic poetic form characterized by word plays, double entendre, and social commentary about local and working-class life (Gilman, *Cairo Pop*, 10). Also see: <http://www.aswandancers.org/shaabi-history> (accessed July 14, 2019).

⁵⁵ Ted Swedenburg, “Electro Sha’abi: Autotune-Rebels in Cairo,” in *Norient: Network for Local and Global Sounds and Media Culture* (2014.)

⁵⁶ Winegar, “A Civilized Revolution,” 618.

wish to express. . .” He trails off and does not articulate what the youth wish to express, highlighting pressures on the band to self-censor.

Cairokee’s Songs as Hidden Transcripts

As hidden transcripts, Cairokee’s songs and political activism circumvent self- and imposed censorship for their largely millennial audiences. James Scott examines “hidden transcripts” as the off-stage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm or contradict public transcript that are likely to endorse subordination to dominant groups.⁵⁷ Instead, hidden transcripts are produced for a different audience and under various constraints of power than public ones. It is by assessing the discrepancy between both, Scott writes, that we may begin to judge the impact of domination in public discourse. Here, I wanted to examine the difference between Cairokee’s pointed popular song materials, readily accessible to the public, with their official interviews where the band play with reticence, coyness, feigned ignorance, and at times, contradictory statements as early as 2011 to navigate state censorship as well as state media bias and disdain. In turn, Cairokee’s fan base responds to these covert meanings and censored words left out of their official recordings by singing omitted words themselves in Cairokee’s live concerts, or through their lively YouTube comments to their videos.

In one of the biggest performances of their early career, Cairokee was invited to perform on a popular satire comedy show *Al-Barnameg* (The Show) hosted by the internationally famed comedian Bassem Youssef in October of 2014. Youssef, a cardiac surgeon, hosted the show after his own homemade videos (called *B+* after his blood type) went viral for his scathing critiques of media coverage of the 2011 uprising. Youssef regularly invited controversial musicians, organized musical spoofs of past nationalist songs, and aimed to push against the boundaries of comedic censorship between January 2011 and June 2013.⁵⁸ Cairokee appeared on the show just after a widely debated military intervention had ousted Egypt’s first elected and Muslim Brotherhood president, Mohamed Morsi. In power, the military reinstated stricter censorship starting as early as the previous July. While Youssef was more candid in his commentary about the changes throughout the show, Amir Eid maintained subtle criticism of the tumultuous turnover of power. He began his set with the same piece the band had released following the 2011 power-vacuum that Mubarak left behind: “Matloob Zaeem” (“A Leader is Needed”).⁵⁹ The song, with its understated acoustic guitar accompaniment along simple chordal changes in the piano, initially targeted the ousted Muslim Brotherhood President, Mohammed Morsi. Despite Morsi’s PhD from the University of Southern California, Eid signaled to his ineptitude to lead Egypt’s transition following the uprising by making a double-entendre to his doctoral hat as a *khasu’*—a pole that impales people in not-so-polite ways. It was as a similar critique that Youssef himself had made, when he arrived to a court to protest charges of defamation wearing a comically oversized graduation hat.⁶⁰ With Fattah al-Sisi at the helm of a military government with his hallmark military beret, the song and its references took on a whole new set of meanings, and pointed to the shifting ring of hats.

⁵⁷ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 5.

⁵⁸ Joel Gordon and Heba Arafa, “‘Stuck with Him’: Bassem Youssef and the Egyptian Revolution’s Last Laugh,” *Review of Middle East Studies* 48, no. 1–2 (2014): 34, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2151348100056809>.

⁵⁹ For a segment of this show, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8OmBpE0KcE> (uploaded October 25, 2013).

⁶⁰ Michael Collins Dunn, “Bassem Youssef’s Hat Trick,” *Middle East Institute Blogspot*, last modified April 1, 2013; <http://mideasti.blogspot.ca/2013/04/bassem-youssefs-hat-trick.html>.

A leader is needed
 Who will protect the truth
 Will bring justice like a Faruq⁶¹
 Will be compassionate to the poor
 Will be fierce to the corrupt
 Will bring the roof on their heads
 And hang them by their necks
 Or raise a pole of shame on their heads⁶²

Despite the glaring contradictions, Cairokee curiously designate themselves as an apolitical band in public interviews or simply slip into silence when asked to address politics. When Bassem approached Cairokee for a few words after the song, Eid shrugged wistfully. His fellow bandmates, situated on a high dark stage behind him also maintained their silence and refused to answer when Bassem asked them about the country's current political scene. Their silence became the running joke of the entire interview: "If you follow all of Cairokee's interviews, they are exactly like this," Bassem said dryly to his audiences as the audience clapped and acknowledged their strategic reticence. "Apparently, we are going to get nothing from this interview. They've come here to sing, and clearly only reply in song." As Bassem introduced their final performance, he turned uncharacteristically serious and gently reminded his viewers of the shifting terrain of Egypt's media following the military intervention in July 2013. His own show had been previously stopped just a few months prior. *Al-Barnameg* would only make it six more months before officially shutting down and Cairokee's 2014 album, *Al-Sekka Shemal*, would stall with the Egyptian General Authority Art Censorship for more than a year. Their latest album *Noaata Beida (A Drop of White)* would also be completely banned by 2017. Without another word to their interviewer, Cairokee looked into the camera and sang another song: "Ethbat Makanak" ("Hold Your Ground"). Again, Eid makes another reference to "the voice of freedom," but this time, he signals that it is fading due to the increasing pressures of military censorship.

Hold your ground, this is your place
 Fear fears you and your conscience has never deceived you
 The light of the sun will return
 It is better to die standing than it is to live kneeling
 Hold your ground, your eyes have seen the evidence
 Walk away and let the walls fall in on them
 Hold your ground, the heart of the motherland is wounded
 And the voice of freedom is fading. . .

Military Critiques and Memorialization of the Uprising in Cyberspace

Anthropologist Victoria Bernal reminds us about the elastic space that the Internet offers. It is one that exposes the limits of territorial sovereignty, she writes, and makes the mechanisms of censorship all

⁶¹ *Al-Faruq*, literally "one who distinguishes between right and wrong," is likely a reference to the figure of 'Umar ibn al-Khattab. The second Sunni caliph and companion of the Prophet Muhammad, he is remembered as an effective leader. A close companion, Prophet Muhammad called him Al-Faruq for his sense of justice and truth. See John Esposito, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁶² Cairokee, "Matloob Zaeem" ("A Leader is Needed"), uploaded January 23, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=273&v=f1NGUMY9v_I.

the more visible and audible as people share their stories online:⁶³

The transformative power of the internet is not that it allows access to information, but rather that it provides a public venue that allows ordinary people to question official discourse, to tell their own stories, to recontextualize existing knowledge and official narratives, and to create their own special networks for sharing ideas and analyzing information, rather than depending on mainstream media and official sources.⁶⁴

More importantly, the Internet allows for the virtual and unauthorized memorialization of events and people, where members can grieve the loss of those forgotten by the state and express their critiques of national narratives. To do so, argues Bernal, is to take powers away from the state to remember and forget in strategic ways.⁶⁵ In their virtual memorialization of the 2011 uprising, Cairokee insists on remembering jailed and silenced (elite)activists in their videos, and the constant grief for the lost utopic moments that first inspired "The Voice of Freedom." By doing so, the band seizes the infopolitical powers from Egypt's authoritarian state. Infopolitics, Bernal goes on, draws attention to the importance of the relations of authorization and censorship that govern the ways knowledge is produced, accessed, and disseminated.⁶⁶ Indeed, many of Cairokee's texts critique Egypt's centralized media and its strategic memorialization of the 2011 uprising. More importantly, for many middle-class youth activists, Cairokee casts light on their marginalization from the country's internal post-revolutionary politics and how many have had to self-censor and depoliticize themselves due to trauma and risk.⁶⁷ Cairokee's alternative virtual worlds offer new cyberspaces to remember the January 25 uprising that contrasts with the military's strategic instrumentalization of the dead as nationalist martyrs for the state.

Beginning in 2016, Cairokee began to step out of the clever simulacra in their earlier videos. Instead, the band member's faces returned with full force, replacing caricatures, cartoon faces, masks, and screen-within-screen effects for close intimate shots of the band as they perform. Their ironic collaboration with popular comedian Abo Hafiza in February 2016 with the song "The Revolution Did Not Take Place" also launched a series of brazen music releases, arriving at a particularly tense time in Egypt. It was the same month that an Italian student from Cambridge University, Giulio Regeni, was brutally tortured and murdered—likely at the hands of Egypt's security military—and whose gruesome death garnered widespread international attention to the forced disappearances and torture of thousands of Egyptians.⁶⁸ One month later in March 2016, Cairokee released their most overtly political song, titled "Akher Oghneya" ("Last Song"), on their Facebook page. Its title alone implied that, given the current political climate, they were next in next line to forcibly disappear. Many fans and interlocutors admitted to me that

⁶³ Bernal, *Nation as Network: Diaspora, Cyberspace, and Citizenship* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 2, <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226144955.001.0001>.

⁶⁴ Bernal, *Nation as Network*, 9.

⁶⁵ Bernal, *Nation as Network*, 28.

⁶⁶ Bernal, *Nation as Network*, 2.

⁶⁷ Vivienne Matthies-Boon, "Shattered Worlds: Political Trauma Amongst Young Activists in Post-Revolutionary Egypt," *The Journal of North African Studies* 22, no.4 (2017): 620–644, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2017.1295855>.

⁶⁸ "Giulio Regeni's Murder Throws Spotlight on Fate of Egypt's Disappeared," *Egypt Solidarity; An International Initiative Against Repression in Egypt*, last modified February 8, 2016, <https://egyptsolidarityinitiative.org/2016/02/08/giulio-regenis-murder-throws-spotlight-on-fate-of-egypts-disappeared/>.

they were holding their breath, waiting for the dreadful headlines.⁶⁹ I too remember holding my breath the first time I listened and watched the video of this song.

Figure 4: Video still from Cairokee's "*Akher Oghneya*" ("Last Song"), 2016.

Watch video: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0014.103>.

The video opens with a single sentence stenciled in Arabic against a black screen: "There is no freedom with fear." Amir Eid, guitarist Sherif, drummer Tamer, keyboardist Sherif, and bassist Adam, emerges from the dark, though the entire band is stripped of their instruments. Instead, along with a borrowed sample from Coolio's "Gangsta's Paradise" (1995), they use a handheld camera to film themselves walking down an empty train track in the wealthy neighborhood of Heliopolis as if through the "valley of the shadow of death" while they directly critique the military regime out in the open. Their walk is also frequently interrupted as the screen struggles to load, a hint at the cyber surveillance that Egypt's Interior Ministry openly announced on June 1, 2014.⁷⁰ It was as if the third reality of their strategic simulation was threatening to lose signal, eclipsing the liminal spaces between "the real" and the virtual worlds that Cairokee had long created in their videos. In Linda Herrera's words, the very digital tools of citizen vigilantism that were used against state power also turned on them as "mammoth virtual panoptical."⁷¹ Despite these acknowledged threats, the song is directly combative, almost goading security forces to arrest them, mirroring activist efforts that arrived to Tahrir wearing provocative stickers with the slogan "A Martyr is Available." Cairokee not only openly critiqued Egypt's surveillance state here, but also, they directly name the internalization of such surveillance on its listeners. They sing "We've been raised to

⁶⁹ Just two months later, a young actor, Ezz Eddin Khaled of the troupe Atfal al-Sahwara (Street Children) was arrested for his participation in a viral video that criticized the recent crackdown on the Journalist Syndicate and called on military president Sisi to "Leave!"—the very chant used against Hosni Mubarak and Mohamed Morsi; See "19-year-old Actor Arrested from Home for Online Videos," *Mada Masr*, May 8, 2016, <http://www.madamasr.com/en/2016/05/08/news/culture/19-year-old-actor-arrested-from-home-for-online-videos/>.

⁷⁰ Ahmed Ezzat, "'You are being watched!' Egypt's Mass Internet Surveillance," *Mada Masr*, September 29, 2014, <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2014/09/29/opinion/u/you-are-being-watched-egypts-mass-internet-surveillance/>; also see Linda Herrera, "Citizenship Under Surveillance: Dealing with the Digital Age," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47, no. 2 (2015): 354–6, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743815000100>.

⁷¹ Herrera, "Citizenship Under Surveillance," 355.

be careful for walls have ears / OK, turn the music down. . ." Indeed, the music briefly mutes after this line, and the screen cuts to black again. It returns with a fierce sonic defiance as guitarist Sherif El Hawary looks directly into the camera and flashes a wide and contemptuous smile. Eid sings the final verse before the last chorus:

Guess what! They say I'm afraid
Move aside and put [on] lipstick
There is a perpetual revolution inside me
The dream keeps on living with me, my speech is free
I sang all these times and I was the voice when they wanted the world to be quiet
Freedom is an experiment that means sacrifice
I'm up to take responsibility, and will continue the journey
I'm not alone. I'm an idea you will conceal like a seed and tomorrow it will come forth
Take me to your prisons so I can see our youth
Real men live in prisons. . .⁷²

It is important to note that Cairokee's memorialization of jailed and living activists in this video stands in strong contrast to the state's memorializations and ongoing co-opting of the uprising's dead, specifically the dead from lower socio-economic backgrounds. In the fall of 2013, the Egyptian government unveiled two stone memorials, one in the center of Tahrir Square dedicated to the martyrs of the January 2011 uprising, and the other in the square facing the Raba'a al-Adawiyya mosque, the site of recent clashes with the Muslim Brotherhood when the military intervened and forcibly removed Mohammad Morsi just one month prior. In one day, human rights organizations have claimed that close to 1,150 people died in clashes with the military.⁷³ At this site, the memorial consists of two arms, one representing the army and the police, protecting a silver orb that represents the Egyptian people.⁷⁴ Mittermaier describes how many protesters saw these memorials as the strategic instrumentalization of the dead to cover over military responsibilities for creating them in the first place. The Tahrir memorial did not last the day. After it was unveiled to the brass jingle of the Egyptian national anthem on TV, angry protesters destroyed it, spray-painting slogans such as "Down with all that deceit, corrupt military, [and] the Brotherhood" on its crumbling foundation.⁷⁵

Martyrdom has a special significance in Egypt, given its religious roots for both Muslim and Christian believers. In both faiths, martyrs are revered for their actions as those who die witnessing for their faith, but this meaning can also be interpolated as "dying for the nation."⁷⁶ Given that "*shahīd*" or martyr shares the same root as *shahada* or witness in the Arabic language,⁷⁷ Cairokee critiques the state's dual role to create and then appropriate revolutionary martyrs. Instead, Cairokee focuses on the living. Many of the video's hidden scenes highlight the uprising's current political prisoners and victims: human

⁷² Amir Eid uploaded a public apology to his female fans on Facebook after receiving critiques about the gendered and misogynist language of one sentence in his lyrics, namely using a colloquial saying that equates fear with "putting on lipstick"; <https://www.facebook.com/AmirEid.Cairokee/videos/974404215941713/> (accessed October 25, 2017).

⁷³ "Egypt: Rab'a Killings Likely Crimes Against Humanity" *Human Rights Watch*, August 12, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/08/12/egypt-raba-killings-likely-crimes-against-humanity>.

⁷⁴ Amira Mittermaier, ed. *The Afterlife in the Arab Spring* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 14, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315561615>.

⁷⁵ Robert Mackey and Liam Stack, "Egyptian Protesters Destroy Square Monument Erected by Interim Government," *The New York Times*, November 18, 2013, <https://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/18/egyptian-protesters-destroy-tahrir-square-monument-erected-by-interim-government/>.

⁷⁶ Carolyn M. Ramzy, "To Die is Gain: Singing a Heavenly Citizenship among Egypt's Coptic Christians," *Ethnos* 80, no. 5 (2015): 649–70; Mittermaier, *Afterlife in the Arab Spring*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2014.943260>.

⁷⁷ Mittermaier, *Afterlife in the Arab Spring*, 2.

rights lawyer Mahienour el-Masry, who was sentenced for fifteen months in prison for allegedly storming a police station in 2013; activist Ahmed Douma, who is serving a life sentence for alleged clashes with security forces; Bassem Youssef and his cancelled show; Shaimaa el-Sabbagh who was shot dead in 2015 while laying wreaths to memorialize the dead of Tahrir Square; and famed blogger Alaa Abdel-Fattah, who just finished serving a 5-year sentence for organizing unauthorized protests. Other images, too quick for the natural eye, include the jubilant crowds in the Square from their “Voice of Freedom” video, as well as subversive graffiti that critique the return of authoritarianism in Egypt through its contemporary military rule. And, with every returning chorus, Cairokee nostalgically encodes the sounds of Tahrir’s cheering crowds. There, they explicitly evoke the very first song that catapulted them to fame, “The Voice of Freedom”: “If this is the last song that I will sing, I will sing about freedom. Say it with me in a loud voice: freedom!” An audience, dubbed from one of their own over packed concerts, loudly answers their call: “*Hurriyya*.” (freedom!)⁷⁸

The Revolution Did Not Take Place: Some Conclusions

In their work, Anastasia Valassopoulos and Dalia Mostafa argue that one of the most significant changes of Egyptian post-revolutionary music was its participatory aesthetics.⁷⁹ Such “street art,” ranging from popular graffiti to impromptu stand-up comics to song performances in the Square, was vital in directly engaging the working-class masses as cultural laborers and transforming them into political participants. Cairokee’s 2011 video for “The Voice of Freedom” directly engaged Tahrir’s participants in its making and paved the way for other popular engagements with the public. In their June video of “Matloob Zaeem” (“A Leader is Needed”) just a few months later, Amir Eid walked down the street of the famous and affluent Korba neighborhood with his band, as people from various class backgrounds joined in holding signs—“A Leader is Needed”—and singing the deeply politicized lyrics. While the video is a staged protest, it reflected the band’s slow turn to working-class issues that brought protesters to the streets: poverty wages, homelessness, and even forced conscriptions, among many others. In their 2015 video “Wallah Ma ‘ayiz” (“All I Want”) from the album *Nass wa Nass* (Some People), the song even imagined the simple requests of Cairokee’s underclass, from taxi drivers, kiosk sellers, to the lowest ranks of the city’s police officers. Over a simple piano melody, Eid’s poignant and exposed voice echoes: “All I want is 3 [Egyptian] pounds, for official paperwork, a warm cup of tea for the poor clerk. . . all I want is my ID, even if it has no address.” More importantly, it highlighted a simple request for dignity central to Tahrir’s demands of “bread, freedom, social justice.”

Yet, as I have illustrated here, despite Cairokee’s attention to working-class issues, their escape into the virtual realm mirrored the increasing class polarization following the 2011 revolution and a complicit elite that helped to put Sisi in power in 2013. Indeed, Eid’s 2016 satire on Abu-Hafiza’s show, “The Revolution Did Not Take Place,” wearily captured the revolution’s changing reality. Importantly, as Cairokee appropriated images and sounds of Egypt’s working class, they too excluded Egypt’s lower classes while singing about their perceived issues of drug use, poverty, and unemployment. For example, “El Kayf,” (“The Fix” on the album *A White Drop*), Cairokee and famed *sha’bi* singer Tarek el-Sheikh tackle a taboo topic of drug addiction, using classed street colloquialisms, swear words, and slang to bring the issue

⁷⁸ Amir Eid apologies to his fans: <https://www.facebook.com/AmirEid.Cairokee/videos/974404215941713/> (accessed October 17, 2017).

⁷⁹ Valassopoulos and Mostafa, “Popular Protest Music,” 643.

to light: “Hey Fix, screw you (*yikhrib bitak*). Because of you, I live in this world like a stranger, having no one. There’s a bastard (*ibn ḥaram*) living in my head, all deceit and I’m afraid of him.” But again, the delicate studio recordings, with synthesized accordion, strings, and piano stands in contrast to the electro *sha’bi* covers it has inspired.⁸⁰ Despite the kind of raw awareness “El Kayf” brought to the debilitating effects of drug use, Cairokee insist that it is safer to use drugs than directly meddling in contemporary politics. It is a message they repeat again, in another *sha’bi* inspired song on the same album, “Al Sekka Shemal fi Shemal” (“Wrong Way Blues”), “Don’t ask why they are rich or whence their daily bread. No politics—you’d best take drugs instead!” In other words, Cairokee’s use of electro *sha’bi* aesthetics and themes in their highly produced performances have mirrored the neoliberal and exclusionary aesthetic ordering that Winegar recognizes as complicit in the revolution’s failure, placing both political engagement and post-revolutionary music out of reach for *sha’bi* audiences; the band’s ticketed concerts come in at EGP 250 and EGP 450 for seating in the VIP section.⁸¹

Cairokee’s acquiescence, “quiet politics,” and apathy seems less and less feigned and more strategic as the band members’ careers progress, signaling the closing civic spaces that the 2011 uprising had momentarily opened, both on the ground on online. Importantly, their tone is quite different than the quiet defiance that burned in their earlier songs when they openly critiqued the hegemony of Egyptian state media and the pressure its actors exerted to forget the revolution. Indeed, following Sisi’s rise to power, allegations of corruption of state funds levied by the contractor turned actor Mohamed Ali have sparked few protests in the streets, but these protests have been brutally crushed with over 2000 arrests.⁸² Other activists and journalist such as Hossam el-Hamalawy, long critical of the state’s negligence in favor of amplified neoliberal corporate influences in Egypt have now fled the country. They too recognize the danger of any overt opposition and have retreated online.⁸³ While other bands and artists have been detained and arrested, I suspect that it is Cairokee’s fame and class that protects them, allowing them to take the kinds of calculated risks that they do. At the time of this writing, Cairokee’s officially banned album, *A White Drop*, is the top-selling album in Egypt online off of iTunes, and their studio session videos have risen to be their most viewed content on YouTube. In their refuge into ruse, humor, denial, and at times, just silence, Cairokee maneuvers Egypt’s current political and cultural climate that has more brutally threatened and quieted many other voices than ever before, specifically voices of Egypt’s underclass. Indeed, it is as if the revolution did not take place at all.

⁸⁰ Upcoming electro *sha’bi* stars like Ortega al-Suesy and the trio Nagar, Abu-Laban, and al-Saghir borrow the opening line, but add the distinct autotuned voice, synthesized *mizmar* (Egyptian folk reed pipe) and *tabla* or drum beats, and improvised lyrics that outline their own experiences. Ortega al-Suesy reinterprets Cairokee’s “El Kayf” here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QpVtabYGnyA>; Nagar, Abu-Laban, and al-Saghir offer another version here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bbsf_Yn8mT0.

⁸¹ Cairokee’s concert in Alexandria, Egypt, at the new Etihad Club was priced in two categories: 250 Egyptian pounds and 450 for the VIP section. See <https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/4419781?fbclid=IwAR2GXHGoGehFBRrZ519Rcq-YRPSIsYEJ0n8tg9J0dBZK7WubsaMorcAw6-0> (last modified November 15, 2019).

⁸² See the BBC report “Egypt Protests: The Unlikely Man Behind Rare Anti-Government Protests,” uploaded October 25, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPETFKD-Mlo>.

⁸³ See Hossam el-Hamalawy’s live video on Facebook discussing his retreat online, but importantly, the role of diaspora Egyptians in continuing their activism outside of Egypt: <https://www.facebook.com/elhamalawy/videos/10157309782956047/> (uploaded September 16, 2019).

Discography

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