point of no return. Almost always it is marked off by a huge and all-inclusive repression which engulfs all sectors of the colonized people (Fanon 1966: 70).

The Syrian people are now at Fanon's point of no return.

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End Notes

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meaning of what is said as its form of articulation. Sociologists and cultural historians routinely cite slogans, though they tend to focus on the context in which they are employed (Abdallah). What matters in this account is not the form of articulation, but the meaning of the slogan in its context and as evidence of a demand being made by a social movement. Even though these approaches diverge from one another in significant ways, the tendency is to treat the slogan primarily as a semantic text.

As I spoke to activists, I began to think about slogans differently. First, slogans are not spontaneous expressions of collective will, but they are authored so as to appear that way. Slogans are performative in the sense they are deliberate compositions intended not so much to reflect collective will but to create it. But more than that, slogans also reveal something about the contentious processes of meaning-making within movements that produce them. For instance, there are slogan leaders (hattafin) in activist groups, known for their strength, capacity for improvisation and charisma. And there are also people known for their talents as slogan composers (mu‘allifin hitatif). As I began to ask, activists described a set of informal and formal processes that go into making slogans. This almost always involves drawing on a known corpus of older protest slogans (some going back decades), along with a known corpus of rhythms and songs. Composers invent new slogans from these bits and pieces, adding and revising and improvising all the time. Far from anonymous, some Egyptian activists—like Ashraf Khalil and Kamal Abu Eita—are quite famous as slogan composers (Mughith; Yusuf). The issue of composition thus underscores the unsurprising fact that slogans have histories.

These dynamics also tell us something about the peculiar nature of the slogan as a speech genre that is intended to circulate as an authorless text. Indeed, one index of a slogan’s power is the degree to which it can detach itself from the specific conditions of its initial composition, and the degree to which it circulates as if it were the anonymous expression of a collective will. The rhetorical and social construction of spontaneity in slogans also sheds light back on the narratives of revolutionary surprise told by activists in Egypt and beyond (Polletta).

Second, slogans and chants may be composed of words, but they are not merely linguistic texts. Rather they are part of something that can only be called public performance. Thus the meaning of revolutionary slogans cannot be reduced to any semantic content, nor can it be translated as set of linguistic statements. And this is true for two reasons: 1) slogans are chanted, shouted and sung by embodied people moving, often in coordinated ways, in and through public spaces; and 2) these movements and actions are not mere context for the production of slogan meaning, but are part of the text itself.

Performance studies scholarship has been incredibly useful in this regard and offers terms and methods for expanding beyond a textualist approach not just to slogans but to protest culture more broadly. Performance also opens up a set of concepts shared and overlapping with social theory. The concept of repertoire helps anchor the study of slogans and protest culture in both social history and theater theory (Bayat; Taylor; Tilly). Likewise, theories of theater as process—such as the concepts of rehearsal, warmup and aftermath (Schechner)—open up avenues for thinking critically about activist strategies (Graeber). The embodied, scripted aspect of performance (Turner; Kapchan) intersects meaningfully with ethnographies of protest (El-Ghobashy), as well as methods and questions from crowd studies (Cannetti; McPhail).

Third, ambiguity is key to the study of slogans and slogan performance. It is true that many of the central slogans of the Egyptian Uprising were composed so as to offer a clear message to a range of audiences. It is also true that activists regularly describe their conscious decision to state their demands as unambiguously as possible. Yet even so, this process is never secure. As an example, we might consider the case of the slogan “aysh, hurriyya, ‘adala igtimaim‘iya,” one of the first and most persistent chants of the uprising. Given the contested nature of the terms “bread,” “freedom,” and “social justice,” and given the contentious context in which the slogan was performed by disparate groups of activists, it is doubtful whether there ever was any agreement about what it meant in concrete terms. Sometimes just the fact of repetition can introduce ambiguity into the reception of a slogan, as happened with the famous slogan “The People Want” (Colla). These are cases of ambiguity arising despite the intentions of activists to create clear slogans. The situation becomes more complicated when we consider the revolutionary slogans that were deliberately ambiguous. Some of the most creative and memorable slogans of the uprising were especially playful and relied on pun and double-entendre. Far from hindering the production of meaning in slogans, ambivalence is a rhetorical strength, though one with dangers.

Innovation
As I worked, one of the things that most intrigued me was the emergence of particular slogan repertoires within Egyptian protest culture—how slogans appear in a particular moment, how they disseminate locally or regionally, only to then disappear or reappear months later. The emergence of inventive slogans was particularly compelling in this regard, since it is a story of innovation, and the partial rejection of a longstanding skepticism, on the part of oppositional groups, toward using negative and ironic rhetoric in slogan performance. Despite this wariness, inventive slogans became, after January 25, a core part of slogan composition and performance during protests, especially in moments of direct confrontation with the state.
Invective against Central Security Forces (al-'Amn al-Markazi), the police, and the military is especially widespread and serves a critical role, according to some activists, in sharpening the lines of conflict, and thus helping to ensure that “the revolution continues.” The FuckSCAF slogan is such an example of this. It appeared alongside another meme, NoSCAF, modeled on the familiar commodity logo “Nescafé,” in Fall 2011 as the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) escalated the use of official and unofficial violence against public protest. As the protesters were killed in brutal fashion, this simple and inelegant phrase of disgust became a surprisingly articulate—or at least effective—slogan for those rallying in solidarity with the activists in the street fighting against SCAF’s rule. It circulated as a spoken slogan on streets, and as a graphic posted on walls concrete and electronic. And, like much revolutionary invective, it does not hesitate to employ homophobic and misogynistic figures of gender, sexuality, and power.

But how does such a phrase work as part of protest repertoire? What demand does it articulate? Who is the public it addresses? As a rhetorical statement, it does not make an appeal: it would not move anyone who did not already share its stance toward the target. In this sense, it tells us quite a bit about the kind of protest repertoire it belongs to—one that is closed rather than open. What needs to be emphasized is that when considered as part of Egyptian protest culture repertoires, invective is not just new—it runs counter to most of the discursive conventions employed by political activist groups in the years leading up to 2011. Until then, invective was a marginal, and often absent form of rhetoric for opposition groups.

This is a point that has been made to me by activists. Older activists underscore the idea that demonstrations are opportunities to articulate specific demands in positive terms. Protests are part of a deliberative public process to create norms and frame issues. In such repertoires, negative and jokey phrases like “FuckSCAF” are anathema.

As other activists have explained: because the Mubarak state attempted to monopolize the framing of all political discourse issues, it was incumbent upon activists to respond effectively. This entailed countering the state by communicating a clear counter-analysis of the country’s problems, an alternative set of positive values, and concrete demands that were rooted in everyday life. As activists put it, because they are attempting to address a potentially general audience, the rhetorical tone most appropriate to the task of protest is one specific, serious and sincere: specific, in its demands and vision; serious, to offer an alternative to the state authority; sincere, to highlight state mendacity. Examples of this abound in graffiti as well.

We might turn again to the slogan “'Aysh, hurrîyya, 'adala ǧitma'îyya” to see a mainstream example of the rhetorical conventions of activist appeals in the years predating the revolution: it is positive and concrete; specific (bread), serious and sincere. And even if it is vague about its meaning, it does articulate a set of values that might be embraced by any Egyptian.

**Genre and the A7A Moment**

A brief survey of slogan genres can shed light on what is unique and innovative about invective slogans. Most of the slogans that protesters chanted during the eighteen days were rhymed couplets—with regular metrical and musical patterns (though not those of the classical fusha tradition). As compositions, revolutionary slogans diverge from other poetic forms, particularly in terms of size. Nonetheless, this poses no problem for conceptualizing them as poetry. Like other genres of Arabic poetry, colloquial and classical, these slogans are shaped by the main formal conventions of rhyme, meter and purpose.

While there is some variation in the topics and sounds of these slogans, the majority of the slogans performed during the Egyptian revolution were of two genres, the first more or less corresponding to the classical mode called hamasa and the other to hija’, or invective (Van Gelder).

Hamasa slogans might be called slogans of “zeal,” and classically, the mode in classical poetry is associated with bravery and resolve during war. Examples from January 2011 would include:

- Ya ahlina, indammu 'alayna
  (People! Our people!—come join us!)
- ‘Alli, ‘allī, ‘allī-s-sot/illī yihtīf mish haymot
  ‘Alli, ‘allī, ‘allī kaman/illī yihtīf mish gaban
  (Raise, raise, raise your voice; he who shouts will never die!
   Raise, raise, raise it again; he who shouts is not a coward!)

Hamasa poetry encourages one side in a conflict and champions those who take its cause. These slogans speak to positive, solidarity values, and they form the backbone of protest culture from before the revolution. They name the community (the people, the nation), and they extol its virtues. What was radically new about these slogans was not the words, but their performance in a march, and this performance testified to a solidarity that was not only the theme of the slogans, but their instantiated goal. Indeed, participants in the Egyptian Revolution routinely testify that the act of joining the demonstrations fundamentally altered their feelings and understandings of themselves, their communities and the possible. Some descriptions of revolutionary feeling bring to mind Victor Turner’s concept of “communitas,” or Emile Durkheim’s
be taken back, and there are repercussions for its utterance. Now, as before
the revolution, there are legal consequences for engaging in insulting public
figures (Carr). Examples from the uprising would include:

-Huwwa Mubarak ‘ayiz eh?/kulli-nas yabos riglayh?
-La Mubarak, mish hanbos/bukra ish-sha’b ‘alak haydos!
(What the heck does Mubarak want?/Everyone to kiss his feet?
No, Mubarak, we won’t kiss/Tomorrow the people will be walking on you!)
-Ya Gamal ‘ul l-abuk/kulli-masriyin biyakrahuk!
(Hey Gamal [Mubarak], tell your father/Every Egyptian hates your guts!)
-Irhal ya’iri imshii / Ya-lili mayafahmshi!
("Depart ye" means "get lost"/You thick-headed idiot!)
-Hadrat al-sada al-zubbat’/ala idaykum kamm wahid mat?
(Respected officers, Respected Siirs! /How many people have you killed?)
-Gamal Mubarak, batil!/Suzanne Mubarak, batil!/Ahmad ‘Ezz, batil/Habib
al-‘Adli,
batil/Batil, batil, batil!
(Gamal Mubarak, useless!/Suzanne Mubarak, useless!/Ahmad Ezz, useless!
/Habib al-Adly, useless! /Useless, useless, useless!)

Some observations could be made. First, the
choice of targets—Mubarak, his family, business
associates, top figures like Ahmad ‘Ezz and Habib
al-‘Adly, and the repressive state apparatus in
general. Each was associated, in the opposition
media at least, with the most egregious aspects of
the Mubarak regime. When the Mubarak regime
(minus Mubarak) reconstituted itself in the form
of SCAF, the army assumed the mantle of target.

The claims made against these targets, theft,
corruption, murder and illegitimacy, are also
not surprising, since all are well-founded and
longstanding complaints about the crimes of
the Mubarak regime, still unprosecuted by
courts of law. As the Mubarak regime was tried
incompetently in court from 2011-12, invective
helped to stage carnivalesque trials in Tahrir
Square.

While each invective emanates from a legal and/or
moral norm, its relation to that norm is negative
or ironic. These slogans do not seek to rectify a

Figure 1. Sincerity in verse, Arbein Police Station, Suez. “Each time I walk
past you, O Arbein Police Station / I listen to cries and complaints coming
from inside you / I see water on your walls and wonder: / Is this water,
or the tears of those you have mistreated?” Riyad el-Helwani (Suez Poet,

Figure 2. “Gaban [Coward] Mubarak: Where’s my Daddy?” Image from Egyptian Revolution
Protest Manual (How to Protest Intelligently), 2011. (http://
publicintelligence.net/egyptian-revolution-protest-manual-
how-to-protest-intelligently/)
broken norm. Rather, they seek to hurt the one who has broken it.

The literature on invective stresses that it does not intend to correct a situation so much as it means to harm the honor of a target. As a political weapon, it strikes at the legitimacy and rectitude of the powerful. Here we can begin to make sense, if that is the right word, of the invocation of very familiar terms used to impute inversions of power and rectitude by way of familiarly regressive categories of masculinity and femininity, sexual activity and passivity, moral purity and filth.

One of the most unexpected accomplishments of the revolution has been the normalization of the term *aha* (usually transliterated in the Arabeezi characters, a7a) in public discourse. A uniquely Egyptian word, a7a means, roughly, “fuck that,” or “fuck it.” It is by no means a new feature of idiomatic Egyptian Arabic. What is new is the ubiquitous use of the word in public discourse—it is shouted at demonstrations to communicate disdain, scrawled across walls, typed across social media. The word has a semantic meaning—again, of disgust or contempt—but more importantly, its appearance in popular public spectacle signals a break with prior structures of politeness, a reminder (or threat) that the rules of language itself might themselves be overturned by revolution. Part of its significance, in other words, has to do with the embodied experience of enunciating the taboo word in public.

### Repertoires

The most important thing to say about invective is that it appears as part of a wider set of performances. And the context of performance demands that we consider slogans not just in terms of linguistic meaning or as discursive genre, but also as embodied actions taking place in particular situations. There are also props, tools, posterings, and giant puppets, to borrow from David Graeber, and rough music, to borrow from E.P. Thompson.

The occasional quality of such performances may suggest a near-infinite number of renditions, but as Charles Tilly reminds us, the repertoires of contentious performance are in fact limited. For Tilly, “contentious gatherings”—such as public assemblies, demonstrations, marches, and strikes—are the primary actions that form a social movement. With each action, activists attempt to build upon and learn from the successes and failures of previous actions. Tilly calls this process of learning, revising and improvising a “repertoire” and stresses that this repertoire plays a role in standardizing and limiting the nature of contentious performance.

To illustrate how scripted the performance of invective can be, we might turn to an infamous video from May 2011 (White Nights Media, “Mish nasyin al-Tahir”). The scene is a “dakhla” or “tifo,” a rowdy spectacle performed by Ultras (hardcore fans) at the outset of each half of a match featuring Zamalek and Ahly, the country’s two largest football teams. Here we can see a couple thousand members of the Zamalek White Knights Ultras club delivering
an insult to the police who are stationed in the foreground. The particular insult has to do with bragging to the police that it was they—the Ultras—who beat them soundly in street fights during the uprising. You can hear the warm-up-the chant (“heidy-ho!”) at the beginning of the clip. This is significant—it is a regular warm-up exercise that Ultras use to get large numbers of participants into sync with one another.

Other football clubs have composed their own invectives—and some of these slogans have entered the catalog of famous revolutionary chants, particularly when there are bloody skirmishes between revolutionary and police. During protests, you can still hear revolutionary—many Ultras, many not—singing these songs. So too has the ubiquitous phrase, “All Cops Are Bastards,” found mainly in the abbreviated graffiti meme, A.C.A.B., spread beyond the confines of ultras subculture.

As Muhammad Gamal Bashir has described, this sort of performance is not spontaneous, but practiced and ritualized. It is an authored composition—we might even call it poetry. I have heard very complicated song performances that go on for five or ten minutes, with hundreds of young men singing intricate lyrics, with nothing but drums and song leaders (“capos”) to keep them in line. It takes a lot of organization and communication for participants to perform such songs in unison. The performance demands rehearsal, warm-up, cool downs. There is nothing that is not deliberate in this scene: the

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**Videography**


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**Staging Tahrir: Laila Soliman’s Revolutionary Theatre**

Brinda Mehta

*Mills College*

If one day, a people desire to live,
Then fate will answer their call
And their night will then begin to fade,
And their chains break and fall.

"Will to Live" Abū al-Qāsim al-Shābī

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One of the most inspiring aspects of the Egyptian revolution was the outpouring of creative expression that accompanied the uprisings' social and political movements in the form of protest songs, poetry, slogans, chants, graffiti and installation art, street theatre, cartoons, among other forms of artistic inventiveness. Creative dissidence has always been an integral part of protest movements, as argued by Iraqi poet Sinan Antoon (2011):

Poetry, novels and popular culture have chronicled and encapsulated the struggles of peoples against colonial rule and later, against postcolonial monarchies and dictatorships, so the poems, vignettes, and quotes from novels were all there in the collective unconscious. The revolution introduced new songs, chants and tropes, but it refocused attention on an already existing, rich and living archive. Contrary to all the brouhaha about Twitter and Facebook, what energized people in Tunisia and Egypt and elsewhere, aside from sociopolitical grievances and an accumulation of pain and anger, was a famous line of poetry by a Tunisian poet, al-Shabbi.

Antoon evokes Abū al-Qāsim al-Shābī, whose poem "The Will to Live," referenced in the epigraph, symbolized the battle cry of Tunisians in the