Friederike Pannewick and Georges Khalil together with Yvonne Albers:
Commitment and Beyond: Reflections on/of the Political in Arabic Literature since the 1940s

Dina Heshmat: Egyptian Narratives of the 2011 Revolution: Diary as a Medium of Reconciliation with the Political

eISBN: 978-3-95490-613-0
Egyptian Narratives of the 2011 Revolution: Diary as a Medium of Reconciliation with the Political

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By the time this contribution is published, more than four years will have passed since the euphoric eighteen days of Tahrir (from January 25 to February 11, 2011) which forced President Mubarak to step down. As the Egyptian revolutionary process has unfolded, there have been moments of intense political mobilization as well as moments of bloody repression and deep depression. Throughout those years, youth organizations and broad political fronts have continued to organize demonstrations and sit-ins, despite the hostility of an aggressive state apparatus. Persistent walk-outs and strikes have shown the vitality of the workers’ movement in the face of still unfulfilled economic and social rights. All these groups, along with many individuals, are trying to preserve the dynamic and memory of these first extraordinary eighteen days, an endeavor that seems all the more complicated by the intervention of the military in the political process and the growing polarization of public debate.

Literary and artistic narratives are part of this turmoil. In addition to the huge number of literary accounts produced around the process, slogans and portraits of martyrs of the revolution have been immortalized in the street art that has blossomed throughout urban centers in the country. Characters of diverse backgrounds on both sides of the barricades feature prominently in visual narratives. In short, a range of artistic narratives are part of the ongoing struggle to frame and understand what happened during those eighteen days and what its implications are for today and for the future. As Samia Mehrez puts it, referencing Umberto Eco, “both the revolution and its translations remain ‘open texts’ at the literal and semiotic levels” (*Translating Egypt’s Revolution*).

In this paper I analyze narratives of the first eighteen days of the Egyptian revolution on Tahrir written by two novelists from the 1990s generation. I argue that these two texts represent a rupture with the themes otherwise associated with writers of this generation—themes of alienation in the public sphere and distrust of political narratives. Specifically, I argue that the format of the diary, a genre I discuss at length below, and the authors’ use of intertextuality, come together to provide a means through which both writers convey not only their own personal reconciliation with the political, but also the broader renewal of the political taking place through the events of the revolution.

*Māʾat kaṭwa min al-thawra, yawmiyyāt min Maydān al-Tahrīr* (*A Hundred Steps from the Revolution, Diary from Midan al-Tahrir*, 2011) by ʿĀḥmad Zaghīlūl al-Shīṭī (henceforth, al-Shiti) and *Ismī thawra* (*Revolution is My Name*, 2012) by Muńā Brīns (henceforth, Mona Prince), are two narratives recounting the first eighteen days of the Egyptian revolution. Born in Damietta, al-Shiti now lives in Cairo, where he also works as a lawyer in an investment company. He is well-known for his dark short stories which have received critical acclaim as iconic narratives for the 1990s generation. His first novel, *Wurūd sāmma li-Ṣaqr* (*Poisonous Flowers for Saqr*, 1990), features a tortured main character who is unable to deal with contradictions linked to the division of the society into social classes.
Prince is associate professor of English literature at Suez Canal University; prior to Ismī thawra, she has published two novels, Thalāth ḥaqā’īb li-l-safār (Three Suitcases for Departure, 1998) and Innī uḥaddithuka li-tarā (I Speak to You so that You May See, 2008), as well as two collections of short stories. In addition to her work as an academic and a novelist, she is also a translator and a public figure. Following her involvement in Tahrir, in a symbolic gesture she decided to become a candidate in the presidential election in March 2012. In 2013 she was accused of “contempt of religion” by one of her students and had to face disciplinary measures from the university’s administration (Committee on Academic Freedom, MESA).

Both authors are considered part of the so-called 1990s generation—a generation that various authors have characterized as displaying a reluctance towards engaging the political and the ideological, an aversion expressed in short, fragmented writings focusing on the self. As one of the first critics to welcome this new generation of authors, Hafez defines their narratives as “novels of the closed horizon,” tracing “a series of homologies between the formal characteristics of the new Egyptian novel and the haphazard nature of the ‘third city’” (“The New Egyptian Novel” 61). Echoing the novelists’ own description of their writings, he describes the narratives as relating a crisis “in which the I is unable to identify with itself, let alone with an ‘other’ or a cause” (62).

This reluctance vis-à-vis grand narratives does not mean however that these authors’ texts can be dismissed as depoliticized. Though wary of the political, the writing is still political in a sense. In a study of May Telmissany’s (Mayy Talmisânî) Dunyâzâd (1997) and Somaya Ramadan’s (Sumayya Ramâdân) Awrâq al-Narjis (Leaves of Narcissus, 2001), Hoda Elsadda shows how the writing of the body, the personal, becomes political (146). More generally, as Marie-Thérèse Abdel Massih puts it, “‘political’ came to signify the subversion of all fixed meanings arising out of state policies and social mores. In this writing there is always a conflict between self and community, spontaneity and social order.” (22–23). Echoing these remarks, Mehrez identifies “contemporary Egyptian avant-garde fiction” as sealing “the death of the family as a literary icon that represents the Egyptian national imaginary” (Egypt’s Culture Wars 143); the collapse of the family or national icon in reality announces not the birth but the untimely death of the individual, where “the very act of writing becomes the only remaining possibility for salvation” (127).

In his study of Ahmad Alaidy’s (Aḥmad al-‘Āyidî) An takūn ‘Abbâs al-‘Abd (Being Abbas el Abd, 2003), El-Ariss goes so far as to read texts by the 1990s generation “as contributing to a clockwork of change, incrementally and locally intervening in discourse and ushering in new ideas and aesthetic and political practices” (165). While hacking away against modernity, Alaidy produces a text that defies state discourse, says El-Ariss. He dismantles old narratives, puts on trial previous genres and ways of writing, breaking with the “generation of Defeat” and interrogating “its project of modernity, the failure of which was merely exposed in the 1967 war or Naksa” (155). El-Ariss continues:

Arising from texting and blogging, Alaidy’s work recuperates a new mode of experience that appropriates nonverbal communication in order to shake up and awaken the common person from his/her torpor, urging him/her to take action and re-experience his/her environment in new ways. (154–55)

But while An takūn opens and closes on an injunction to call the cell phone number on the mall’s lavatories, reproduced in the text “call me” (Alaidy 9–10, 125–26), urging the reader to take positive action and enter into a network of relationships transcending urban isola-
tion, the kind of exchange being encouraged remains cynical and unfulfilling. The first sentence in the last chapter is significant: “he wasn’t a corpse yet” (125). Characters in *An takūn* are struggling to survive, but only in a stage of pre-death. The novel’s rejection of dominant institutions—political, literary and familial—is difficult to define as ushering in new “political practices” (El-Ariss 165) in any meaningful sense.

Indeed, like most narratives published in the 1990s, *An takūn* still expresses defiance vis-à-vis political grand narratives and any kind of collective practice. It does not aim to shape a collective, alternative understanding of history, as Mehrez argues narratives of the 1960s had: “Whether it be through that which is articulated or that which is silenced, writers are effectively participating in a process of rewriting the dominant historical record from (an)other point of view” (*Egyptian Writers* 7).

The sense of alienation that dominates *An takūn* nurtures a feeling of impotence that structurally hampers the capacity to actively intervene in any social process or shape “new political practices.” Though it differs from 1960s narratives in terms of its distancing from political grand narratives, like most texts of the 1990s generation, *An takūn* does share in the sense of alienation that defines post-1967 narratives. As analyzed by Hafez, the 1960s novels present “a group of fertile variations on the character of the outsider, from alienation to nihilism, passing through loss, rejection of life, alarm, and insecurity” (“The Egyptian Novel in the Sixties” 79). In those texts, alienation might be ‘mild,’ expressed in a sense of non-belonging as in *Mālik al-hażūn* (*The Heron*, 1983) by Ibrahim Aslan (*Ibrāhīm Ašlān*), in which the narrator is torn between his native popular neighborhood, Imbāba, and the center of the city, feeling at ease in neither place; or alienation might manifest as in *Sharq al-nakhīl* (*East of the Palms*, 1985) by Bahaa Tahir (*Bahāʾ Ṭāhir*), where the narrator is unable to fit in with the ways of his native rural village and lives on the margins of society in the capital. Protagonists in both novels get involved in collective protests but are either unable to chant with the protesters (*Mālik al-hażūn*) or end up participating only by coincidence (*Sharq al-nakhīl*). This sense of loneliness within a political group is also central in Latifa al-Zayyat’s (*Laṭīfa al-Zayyāt*) *Ṣāḥib al-bayt* (*The Owner of the House*, 1994), where gender dynamics cause the main character, Samiyya, to feel ill at ease in the leftist organization to which she belongs. Feelings of alienation in society are depicted in a more violent way in *Sunʿallah Ibrahim*’s (*Ṣunʿ allāh Ibrāhīm*) *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* (*The Smell of It*, 1969), considered one of the iconic narratives of the 1960s generation. Leaving prison after serving a five-year sentence, the narrator finds himself unwelcome at his sisters’ and friends’ homes. His daily life is emptied of meaning and described in a minimalist way. In a later novel, *Al-lajna* (*The Committee*, 1981), Ibrahim offers an even more extreme metaphor of alienation when the main protagonist, subjected to a surreal trial by a jury in a language he struggles to understand, ends up eating himself.

Feelings of alienation, then, have featured prominently in narratives by the authors of the so-called 1990s generation. Yasir ʿAbd al-Latif (*Yāsir ʿAbd al-Laṭīf*) and May Telmisany have, each in their own way, expressed a desire to retire to the space of the suburb in *Qānūn al-wirāṭha* (*Law of Inheritance*, 2002) and *Heliopolis* (2000). Unable to build a sense of belonging within the contemporary megacity, both narrators reinvent a closed space, the cozy realm of the youth *shilla* in *Qānūn al-wirāṭha* or the familiar idealized childhood neighborhood in *Heliopolis* (Hishmat 263). Alienation in public space or political gatherings is also key to understanding the first novels of both al-Shiti (*Wūrūd sāmma li-Śaqr*) and Prince (*Thalāth ḥaqāʾ ib li-l-safar*).
Alienation and Disillusion

*Wurūd sāmma li-Ṣaqr*, a short, dark novel considered al-Shiti’s masterpiece, begins with the death of the main protagonist, Saqr, a brilliant and tortured mind incapable of overcoming his sense of alienation and injustice in a class-divided society. His death triggers flashbacks for the four main protagonists of the novel: his best friend Yahya, Saqr himself, his lover Nahid, and his sister Tahiyya. Yahya is an activist involved in leftist circles; he is presented by Saqr as being “a true man” who evolves in “a real world,” and belongs to groups “who believe in him and love him” (67). But the narrative reveals his voice to be that of a stereotyped language, constantly challenged by Saqr’s sarcastic tone, and depicted as obsessively repeating the same things over and over again in a flat and overtly didactic style, regardless of the changing conversations (68–69). Saqr’s lover Nahid, from a middle-upper class family, throws light on their relationship from her point of view, recounting his aggressive expressions of sexual desire and his sarcastic attacks. Tahiyya, a simple and candid girl, works as a saleswoman at a grocery store while still studying; she is in love with Yahya but doubts that he will marry her.

While at the beginning of the text the reason behind Saqr’s death is not clear, as the story unfolds the multiple narrative voices gradually shed light on the event that both inaugurates and closes the novel. The chapter in which Saqr himself speaks ends with him realizing that his relationship with Nahid is over: “intahā kull shay’” (al-Shīṭī, *Wurūd sāmma li-Ṣaqr* 57), as if it signifies the collapse of his universe. As Saqr and Nahid are from different social backgrounds, the relationship is depicted as likely to be a short-lived one, but it nevertheless shapes Saqr’s inner life. The social gap between them obviously haunts him, for he is repeatedly referring to the status of Nahid’s father, a judge and car dealer. He further elaborates on this gap when he learns about his lover’s decision to get engaged to someone else: “Her father a judge, a car dealer, a cabin in Ras al-Barr, a groom Assistant Professor, contractor, tourism, member of the National Democratic [Party], a rising Infitah star. And I am Saqr ‘Abd al-Wahid, even if I were the Shakespeare of my time, I am nothing” (63, partly repeated on 65).

The name of the main protagonist is significant: al-Saqr means falcon, a lonely bird flying high in the sky, a proud outsider. Similarly significant, the title of the novel refers to a recurrent nightmare in which Saqr repeatedly sees a face of porcelain approaching him while wooden hands hand him “poisonous flowers.” The face is never identified as belonging to anyone in particular, but the character might be read as a metaphor for Nasser, handing Saqr poisonous flowers representing the youth of the country’s failed dreams of overcoming class barriers. The failure of the Nasserist state and later social and political developments not only form the historical background, they actually shape the characters’ development in the novel. The death of the *zā‘ām*—“bābā Gamal” as the kids’ teacher calls him (55)—in 1970 takes place while Saqr and Yahya are still adolescents. The city mourns and is so empty that Yahya asks Saqr: “Did everybody die?” (*Hal māta kull al-nās?*) (38), thus associating Nasser’s death with that of the whole nation. Later, the failures of the state are condemned when Yahya’s brother, Fathi, comes back from the front in 1973 with an amputated leg and is granted the scant recognition and reward of a job in public water closets (40). The limits of the regime’s success are underlined by Fathi himself when he says to his brother: “We need another crossing” (*Naḥtāju ila ‘ubār ākhar*) (40).

The rise of the *Infitah*’s nouveaux riches is personified by Nahid’s father and fiancé, a judge who also operates as a car dealer and a tourism employee, both members of the then
ruling National Democratic Party. Saqr’s revolt against what Nahid represents is equally directed against his own mother, particularly when he discovers that she deals in clothes and other goods bought at the free zone of Port Said. His revolt is at once political and driven by desperation; but while his anger is flamed by a deep understanding of the class contradictions at stake, it has no chance of effecting real change, and so ends, ultimately, with the character’s death. Saqr’s death—it is not clear whether he commits suicide or not—is the result of a depression that has engulfed him upon realizing the impossibility of a cross-class relationship, leaving him feeling more and more alienated in a society that has no place or need for people like him. At the end of the novel, Yahya, the teacher and principled activist, chooses to leave the country and work in Qatar. Both characters thus ultimately fail in their projects, be it on a personal or political level.

In Thalāth ḥaqāʾib li-l-safar the narrator has decided to emigrate and flee a depressing reality. While packing her personal belongings, photos and old dresses trigger flashbacks to family bonds and brief love relationships. An overwhelming sense of loss engulfs her as she looks at the family pictures, for half of her relatives have died since the pictures were taken (Brins, Thalāth ḥaqāʾib 13). The chapters in which she delves into scenes of grief and mourning lead her to express a sense of suffocation in her relationship to her mother and father. The flashbacks to her relationships, in particular with ‘Abd al-Rahman, a history lecturer, evokes memories of brief moments of political activism against the war on Iraq in 1991. For the first time she participates in a demonstration (45) but is afterwards confronted by the fact that she “didn’t realize anything” (47). All the characters around the narrator take desperate actions to flee a desperate reality; her cousin Sami emigrates early on to Canada, propelled by feelings of “non-belonging and alienation”: “I have no place here. I am leaving. I hate this country” (16); her friend Samira gets married because “there is no other choice” (56). Her colleague Yusuf, a desperate poet, plunges into alcohol and neglects his studies (64–68). Her friend Safaa is urged to resign from her job as a teacher because she refuses to force pupils to take private lessons and then leaves for the Gulf (71–72). Even a young man she meets on a bus by chance tells her that he is aware that his smoking will eventually lead to his death: “There is no other thing I can do. Yes, I am committing suicide” (51). She ends up with an overwhelming sense of helplessness and depression. In her extensive study of the novel, Mehrez shows that “through the constant shift in narrative point of view, from the first-person narrator in the past to the third-person narrator in the present, Munira’s alienation from both icons, the familial and the national, is sharpened and intensified” (Egypt’s Culture Wars 129). Intertextual references, first to the song “Waṭānī ḥabībi, waṭānī al-akbar” (“My Beloved Nation, The Greatest Nation”) and then to Latifa Zayyat’s novel, Al-bāb al-mafṭūḥ (The Open Door, 1960), subsequently turned into an iconic 1960s film, are borrowed moments of glory from the successful nationalistic movement of the 1960s. The references underline the present “Egyptian nation’s actual disgrace” (Mehrez, Egypt’s Culture Wars 128).

Diaries of the Revolution

In comparison, these feelings of non-belonging and alienation, death and dead-ends are largely absent in al-Shiti and Prince’s narratives of the first eighteen days of the revolution, as both authors/narrators conceive themselves as insiders to the ongoing political battle in Tahrir. Both al-Shiti’s Māʾ at khāṭwa and Prince’s Iṣmī thawra cover the same period of time, beginning just before January 25 and ending on February 11, 2011. But unlike other
publications, such as fictional representations of the eighteen days sit-in on Tahrir (for example, *Sabʿat ayyām fi-l-Tahrīr* [Seven Days in Tahrir] by Hisham al-Khishin [Hishām al-Khishin], 2011) or documents focusing primarily on the events themselves (for example *Al-thawra al-ān* [The Revolution Now] by Saʿad al-Qirsh [Saʿd al-Qirsh], 2012), al-Shiti’s and Prince’s narratives focus on the authors’ personal experiences in Tahrir. As al-Shiti puts it at the beginning of his account, he is “hunting moments that are personal to [him], with [his] eye, not that of a video camera or even the story of eye-witnesses” (*Māʿat khaṭwa* 19).

Prince’s *Ismī thawra* is divided into fourteen chapters, plus the introduction. The title of every chapter is a date or an important event, such as “Friday of Anger” or “The Battle of the Camel,” with the exceptions of chapter thirteen, which encompasses an entire week, and chapter three, which deals with events in the city of Suez. Similarly, al-Shiti’s *Māʿat khaṭwa* is divided into twenty-three entries which correspond to either a date that covers an entire day or a portion of the day, or a breaking news headline; the exception here is the third entry, which brings together and recounts the events of a number of days.

The structure of these narratives invites us to qualify them as diaries—a genre characterized by its presentation via daily accounts. This diurnal form conveys a sense of immediacy: “There is no foreshadowing, no plot development.” A diary has no beginning and no end, and moreover, the diarist presumably writes down all that goes through his or her head, without previous selection work (Sinor 191).

The diary is not a prominent genre among Egyptian autobiographical writings. The autobiographic novel is a well-established form in Egyptian literature, from Taha Husayn’s (*Ṭāḥa Ḥusayn* Al-ayyām [The Days, 1926–1929]) to Radwa Ashour’s (Raḍwā ʿĀshūr) *Ath-qal min Raḍwā* (Heavier than Raḍwā, 2013). Many novelists have published memoirs that can be read as narratives of commitment and imprisonment, such as Sherif Hatata’s (Sharīf Haṭata) *Al-nawāfīd al-maftūha* (The Open Windows, 1993), Latifa al-Zayyat’s *Ḥamlat taf-tīsh: Awrāq shakhṣiyya* (The Search: Personal Papers, 1992) or Sunallah Ibrahim’s *Yaw-miyyāt al-wāḥāt* (Diary from the Oasis, 2004), which all relate experiences of leftist political activism between the end of the 1940s through to the 1980s, including accounts of long years of detention in the Oasis Camps after 1959. Though not organized or presented as daily entries, Sunallah’s text is the only one in which unpolished notes constitute the main part of the narrative, thus fitting the category of the diary. The book, by the already respected author of *Tilka al-rāʾiḥa* and *Dhāt* (1992), was published four decades after his release and included the notes he made on cigarette paper during his five-year internment. Apart from that text however, publishing a journal or daily notes has not been very popular among Egyptian novelists. Commenting on the absence of the diary genre in the texts of the 1960s generation, al-Shiti reveals that his own literary education instilled in him the belief that writing about ongoing events was a sign of immaturity, as the writer was supposed to let events ripen before writing about them (al-Shīṭī, personal interview).

Although al-Shiti’s *Māʿat khaṭwa* and Prince’s *Ismī thawra* respect and recreate the form of the diary in that they are divided into chapters or entries with dates as titles, they were in part written after the actual events described and cannot be considered as ‘pure’ diaries. Prince’s narrative, as it is revealed at the end of the text, was entirely written after the events, between March 2011 and February 2012. Al-Shiti begins to write on a daily basis only on February 1. The parts concerning the preceding days are written afterwards and assembled in chapter three. Moreover, these narratives, unlike “real” diaries that may remain unpublished, are formatted for publication. As such, it is probably most accurate to consider these texts as a hybrid genre that combines elements of *diary, autobiography*—a
“connected prose narrative” of the self that is more stylistically crafted than the diary, and memoir—a kind of writing that “does not purport to tell the whole life story” (Waites 379). In other words then, we might call these, as Hala Kamal puts it, “autobiographical hybrid texts” (586).

Of the three genres, the diary offers the most potential in terms of conveying an “accurate ‘metaphor of self’” (Sinor 191). Felicity Nussbaum shows that “the discourse of diary is particularly open to a series of coterminous and contradictory subject positions” (129). Because of its particular treatment of time, creating “a record of the past” as well as “a crisis of attention to the present” (133), its private nature makes the diary a particularly favorable medium for self-reflection—notwithstanding social media’s blurring of the boundaries between private and public. “The diurnal form allows the contradictions of the self to exist on the page. By recording daily life, the diarist creates both a continuous sense of self—what Nussbaum calls ‘an enabling fiction of a coherent or continuous identity’ (134) and a discontinuous, changing self—I am not the same as I was yesterday” (Sinor 191). And it is this notion of a self in transition that I argue is at stake in al-Shiti’s and Prince’s narratives. By exploring the potentials of the diary genre, both authors document the process of transformation from someone deeply ambivalent about the political to someone participating in the events they are describing.

Moreover, by practicing a form of testimonial writing—as “autobiography is a form of witnessing which ‘matters to others’” (Anderson 126)—both authors express a desire to contribute actively to the memory of an extraordinary historical moment. By publishing their texts and thus engaging with a large public, the authors aim to share a personal experience that is inextricably intertwined with political events. In these particular circumstances, the process of writing itself reveals a desire to transcend one’s own self as a subject and produce a kind of writing beyond that which “only matters to oneself” (al-Shidi, Māʿat ḥatwa 37). By describing the self in dialogue with the revolutionary process, these texts display a deep involvement in the political movement as well as an active interaction with its actors, characteristics entirely new to the 1990s generation.

Reconciliation with Political Action

At the beginning of the narratives, both authors express their skepticism towards the growing protest movement. Al-Shiti recalls having participated in a sit-in of writers and artists protesting the bombing of the al-Qiddīsain church in Alexandria on January 1, 2011 (al-Shitī, Māʿat ḥatwa 13) that left more than twenty dead. His depiction of the small sit-in, symbolically cornered in a dead-end street near to Talaat Harb Square, closes with a sentence typical of the minimalist reifying aesthetic (“esthétique chosiste et minimaliste,” Jacquemond 486) usually characteristic of the writing of the 1990s generation: “I entered the atelier. I needed a warm cup of tea” (al-Shiti, Māʿat ḥatwa 16). With this abrupt sentence, al-Shiti distances himself from the events and returns the focus to his self and his daily routine. The sit-in in itself is portrayed as a short moment in time, something to be put between brackets.

Similarly, though Prince goes to Shoubra on January 25 in time for the start of the demonstrations, she only joins the march a few hours later. First, she expresses her reluctance, noting: “I don’t like crowds. I don’t like shouting, nor do I like vulgar chants” (Ismī thawra 4). Even once she joins the demonstration, her position within it remains reluctant. She writes: “I started to move with the crowds, not quite with them, but near them. They were in the middle of the street and I was on the side, near the sidewalk” (24).
In this way she communicates a sense of being an intellectual who walks with the crowds without really mingling, a feeling that turns into an apolitical posture. But ever so slowly, she begins to join in, chanting the slogans with the other demonstrators and merging with the marching mass. From this moment she definitively abandons her position of outsider on the sidelines. The transformation is expressed by the change in the use of personal pronouns: abandoning the third-person plural (they), Prince shifts to using the first-person plural (we), now including herself in the moving crowds she was so careful to distinguish herself from at the beginning.11

Admiration and fascination for the young leaders of the demonstration encourages Prince to take this step. Al-Shiti expresses similar feelings: the young (shubbān wa fatayāt) (Māʾat khaṭwa 7) are identified as possessing a simple, evident genius (al-ʿabqariyya al-basīṭa) (112). They are depicted as a generation of action that has rid itself of a sterile ideology and managed to overcome the diseases and the obsessions of the preceding elites (amrād al-nukhab al-sābiqa) (ibid.), the older, professional, activists (muhtarifā al-ʿamal al-sīsī) (8) whose verbiage is considered old-fashioned. This new generation is presented as the subject of the action. At the beginning of the narrative, these youths set a clear aim: promoting “bread, freedom, social justice,” as the slogan goes, and forcing the president to step down. Both texts end with scenes of collective delirium welcoming the resignation of Mubarak, thus closing on the moment the second aim is achieved and marking the birth of a collective hero capable of setting aims and achieving them—a sharp contrast to the 1960s hero who is “an anti-hero, hesitant, achieving only small victories, if any” (Hafez, “The Egyptian Novel in the Sixties” 79).

For both of these authors, then, admiration for the youth participating in the revolution opens the way for a reevaluation of their own previous rejection of political commitment. Their personal reconciliation is thus mirrored and spurred by the emergence of new political dynamics embodied and expressed by new political actors. What remains intact is the disavowal of the political elites, and specifically, their political discourse, now criticized as langue de bois.

This reconciliation with the very idea of collective political action is made possible by an evolution in the sense of alienation and isolation in the public space, a recurrent theme in the writings of the 1960s and 1990s we analyzed in the first part of this article. In contrast to the gloomy mood and sense of alienation expressed in earlier literary productions, public space, embodied by the midān, is here described as a space of individual well-being, where an extreme sense of solitude, of disconnect between self and others, ceases to exist. Communication between the writers and the individuals they encounter on the maydān is fluid, and most importantly, sincere and spontaneous. The narrator thus shifts from the position of outsider, typical in most 1960s and 1990s narratives, to a position of insider in the public space of the midān.

In Prince’s Iṣmī thawra, the narrator identifies the midān as a second home in the very first chapters, and this is confirmed throughout the narrative. She feels comfortable in the crowd, and identifies herself as one of the demonstrators, holding on to the first person plural. She herself becomes an activist, distributing sandwiches and tea to the demonstrators staying overnight (96), or participating in the popular committees lijān shaʿbiyya mediating access to the square (137). Her vouloir-faire is mixed up with that of the demonstrators. The dynamics of gender alienation and oppression are even muted here, making public space feel more open for women. Prince does not describe the square as a space totally free of sexual harassment, as other narratives have naively and inaccurately asserted; indeed, she
recounts still being confronted by such harassment, but also notes that these events are rare and even present an opportunity to engage in discussion with potential “harassers.” Most importantly, it is a space in which she is able to experience and live out spontaneous happiness. She describes herself getting involved twice in a circle of masculine dancers without encountering any negative reprehension or judgments (132).

In al-Shiti’s Māʾ at khaṭwa, the osmosis of the narrator-author with the crowd in the square is not as clear, nor as immediate. Al-Shiti’s lingering hesitation is symbolized by the balcony from which he observes Tahrir. The balcony provides an ideal standpoint to observe and be present, without being physically involved in the events. Its positioning above the square remains symbolic of al-Shiti’s sense of distance, which takes longer to erode than that of Prince. The balcony represents, in Sansot’s words, being torn between “a sense of loneliness and the happiness of communication” (364).

Linguistically, this relative distance is symbolized by al-Shiti’s enduring use of “I” in his narrative—in contrast to that of Prince, where her gradual osmosis with the collective is expressed through her shift to the first-person plural. For al-Shiti, the happiness of communication expresses itself when the narrator feels that the multiple signs in Tahrir address him personally. He writes:

I remember a sign I saw in the square. ‘Pardon me my God, I was afraid and didn’t speak out against oppression for thirty years.’ I wanted to say that maybe I was depressed and silent, writing my short texts that don’t bother anyone but those who are like me. (Māʾ at khaṭwa 37)

Al-Shiti describes the sign not simply to report on the signs present in the square, but to explain his own process of reflection. The sign, in a sense, mirrors his own thoughts: he expresses the guilt he feels for remaining silent for over twenty years, although for all these years he had witnessed torture, a police station located right next door to his house in Damiette: “I wake up at night at the sound of torture through hanging on the doors, or through electrical shocks on the testicles, or through plunging the head into sewer water” (Māʾ at khaṭwa 21). Importantly, however, al-Shiti does not simply reproach himself for his silence; he also questions his stance as a creative writer, identifying his previous writings as elitist in the negative sense of the term.

Intertextuality with the ‘Text of the Revolution’

I wish to turn here to discussing how these authors use intertextuality to produce a less elitist form of writing. Both texts make extensive intertextual references to what Mehrez calls “the text of the revolution,” a “multilayered text” that has to be read as “layers of narrative and fields of meaning that are at once open and dynamic” (Translating Egypt’s Revolution 1). Intertextuality here is used in its broadest sense of interaction with and quotation of texts of different genres: both Shiti and Prince introduce bits and pieces of Facebook statuses, reproduce signs on panels, bring in testimonies by demonstrators, and quote breaking news headlines. Most of their chapter titles are popular expressions that refer to well-known events of the revolution.

In this way, both the bodies and the structures of the texts reflect the collective consciousness of the demonstrators on the midān and their supporters during the first phase of the revolution. The narratives thus transcend each author’s own personal, individual narrative of the eighteen days by integrating parts of the collective narrative.
Prince makes extensive use of testimonies by frontline actors. Descriptions of the square and events taking place are introduced via the direct discourse of the actors themselves. Testimonies are integrated as such, in colloquial terms. She thus introduces stories she has not directly witnessed—stories of spaces beyond the square or even outside of Cairo, or those of youth at the frontlines of the battle with the police. In particular, *Ismī thawra* includes accounts of violence acts against the police, like the youth who recall seeing officers and soldiers being beaten on January 28:

I went to Friday prayer at the Mosque of Sayyida Aisha with some friends. The imam had barely finished the prayer when someone stood up and started chanting, ‘The people demand the removal of the regime.’ Just as we were about to leave the mosque, the riot police started shelling us with teargas and rubber bullets. We kept saying, ‘Silmiya, silmiya,’ but they just went on with the shelling. We tried to find a place to hide as the gas and rubber bullets continued to rain on people’s homes. Suddenly, the people of the neighborhood came out chanting ‘Mubarak, you mother-fucker; dirty government, you sons of bitches! Illegitimate, you sons of bitches . . . .’ They all had hatchets and pocketknives and they stabbed every officer and policeman they could get their hands on. (51–52)

The text thus unsettles dominant representations of the revolution as “a youth, non-violent revolution in which social media (especially Facebook and twitter) are champions” (El-Mahdi), as conveyed in both Egyptian and international mainstream media after February 2011. This intertextuality with the parole of frontline actors functions not only to document Tahrir from multiple perspectives, but also enables the author-narrators to produce a less elitist form of writing.

Al-Shiti describes passionate discussions on February 10, after Mubarak’s famous speech in which he once more refused to step down. People discuss the possibility of leaving Tahrir and organizing a demonstration to march to the presidential palace. While listening to the arguments of other demonstrators, al-Shiti gets personally involved and uses the first person plural for the first time: “I shouted: ‘If we leave Tahrir for any place we won’t be able to come back again’” (Māʾat khatwa 141). These moments of personal involvement culminate in the final scenes when he shares the joy of the people dancing in the square. While standing on the balcony, he “screams with the strongest voice [he] imagined [he] possessed addressing [his] screams to those rushing in direction of Tahrir square, raising his arms strongly, intoxicated by victory: a…b…d…i…c…a…t…i…o…n” (151). The narrator has thus clearly changed from someone deeply ambivalent about any collective struggle to someone emotionally involved in the outcome of that struggle. Similarly, Prince ends her narrative by describing herself dancing in Tahrir, quoting “The Color of Life is Pink,” a famous 1970s hit sung by Soad Hosny (Suʾād Ḥusnī) in an iconic film (*Ismī thawra* 244). Prince goes even further in her personal evolution by describing her own reason for writing the book as political, a desire to counter the distorted discourse prevailing in the media after the revolution: “I had to write; it was for me a way to document what happened” (Brins, “Al-adab”). She further acknowledges the deep change the eighteen days has had on her: “These were the most beautiful days of my life. I got out of the cocoon I used to live in” (ibid.).

Both narratives could thus be deemed “narratives of an open horizon,” in a reference to Hafez’ early characterization of 1990s novels. The genre of the diary permits the expression of a self in transition, and the shift from the third-person singular to the first-person plural includes the narrator in the crowds of protestors—crowds that represent youthful, active
subjects capable of achieving a positive aim. The intertextual references constituting the structure and flesh of the narrative further lead the narrator to transcend his/her own personal self. It is still too early to affirm whether these texts mark a definitive break from the themes of alienation that previously characterized the work of the 1990s generation, but as al-Shiṭī puts it, it certainly seems that writing, like so much else after the revolution, “will never be the same again” (al-Shiṭī, personal interview).

Notes
1 This paper was first presented at the eleventh EURAMAL (European Association for Modern Arabic Literature) conference on “New Geographies and Genres: The Function of Literature” held at the Universidad Autonoma de Madrid, Madrid, 7–10 May 2014.
5 Sābry Ḥāfez describes it as “a real new novel as it contains what can be called the taste of the eighties novels; it is a text emerging from the heart of the 1980s deceptions and from the 1970s costly ruins that killed all hope of revolt” (Ḥāfez, “Wurūd sāmāḥ” 107).
6 Unless otherwise stated, translations are mine.
7 This is also the case of Ibrahim Abdel Meguid’s (Ibrāḥīm ʿAbd al-Majīḍ) Li-kull arḍ mīlād: Ayyām al-tahrīr (Each Land Has its Own Birth: Days of Tahrir, 2011). Abdel Meguid’s narrative of Tahrir is not part of the focus of this article as he is not a member of the 1990s generation.
8 It is interesting to note that the Tahrir sit-in in 2011 moved a number of writers, in addition to al-Shiṭī and Prince, to publish diary-like texts about the events. Examples are Sa’d al-Qirsh’s Al-thawra al-ʿān (The Revolution Now, 2012) and Ibrahim Abdel Meguid’s Li-kull arḍ mīlād, ayyām al-tahrīr.
9 “Characteristically, the focus of the memoir is on the external events or culture in which the writer lives, and the self is discussed, revealed, and explored relative to those events or that culture. Unlike the conventional autobiography, the memoir does not purport to tell the whole life story. Rather, the memoirist tends to focus on a slice of her life and the ‘others’ that populate it. One might characterize the memoir as an insider’s subjective view of a historical moment or moments” (Waites 379).
10 All the quotes of Prince’s Ismi thawra are Samia Mehrez’ translation in Revolution is My Name.
11 That shift can also be noticed in ‘Abd al-Magīd’s narrative: from describing himself as a spectator to the ongoing battle (a lā tāfūtūnī al-furja’ alā mīṣr wa-liyya tāstāqīz, 50) he begins to use the first-person plural and includes himself in the crowds fleeing the police attack launched during the demonstrations of January 28.
12 Even though, sadly enough, several incidents of outsiders being shot while watching the demonstrations from their balconies have been reported.
13 “Les balcons existaient par rapport à d’autres balcons et surtout par rapport à la rue. Du balcon, l’homme apercevait d’autres personnes postées à leur fenêtre, il suivait du regard les promeneurs que parfois il reconnaissait. Le balcon invite à une attitude toujours un peu théâtrale ou du moins à une attitude où les relations d’homme à homme interviennent—tristianien, déchiré entre la distance et la proximité, le sentiment d’être isolé et le bonheur de communiquer. Il relève davantage de l’espace public que de l’espace privé. Nous y sommes déjà dans la rue et même en vue dans la rue” (Sansot 364).
Contribution by Mona Prince in a panel discussion at Cairo University that took place during the International Summer Academy Aesthetics and Politics: Counter-Narratives, New Publics, and the Role of Dissent in the Arab World organized from September 16–27, 2012 at the American University in Cairo in cooperation with the English Department of Cairo University and the Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies of Philippus University Marburg, Germany. The Summer Academy was part of the research program Europe in the Middle East—The Middle East in Europe (EUME) of the Berlin-based Forum Transregionale Studien and the Center for Translation Studies of the American University in Cairo (AUC).

Works Cited


—. Personal interview. 13 Aug. 2014.

