RESEARCH ARTICLE

VOICING CHANGE
The popular subject of protest music in revolutionary Cairo (2011–2013)

Valeria Dessì
University of Cagliari

ABSTRACT: Since the outbreak of protests in January 2011, arts have been central to the ongoing Egyptian revolution. In this article, I focus on protest music in Cairo in between 2011 and 2013 as a way to capture a specific interplay of popular culture and political engagement. Through examples of popular protest music and chants, I unpack the cultural and political construction of *el sha'ab* (the people) as a process in flux throughout the ongoing protests. Performances of popular protest music and chants in the square voiced grievances and pride, built solidarity, and helped shape the ideal of a unified and leaderless collective "we" against the oppressive regime. Older and newly composed protest songs articulated a genealogy of the revolutionary popular subject that was at once cultural and political. The last section reflects on the post-2013 era, focusing on the different political genealogy deployed by the state to redirect the revolutionary "popular will" into an authoritarian project.

KEYWORDS: Egypt, Populism, Popular Music, Protest, Revolution

CORRESPONDING AUTHORS: Valeria Dessì, valeriadessi@libero.it

1. Introduction: a silent prelude

When the curfew was suddenly imposed all over Egypt in mid-August 2013 – a consequence of the reestablishment of emergency law after the horrific, bloody explosion of state violence against the pro-Morsy protesters camped in Rabea'a Square, a junction in Nasr City, eastern Cairo – it came with an eerie silence. I was in a café in my neighborhood of central Cairo when the curfew was announced. The radio was turned off, abruptly cutting off the smooth voice of Umm Kulthum (1898–1975), a mega-diva of Egyptian popular song. I walked home, the sound of my footsteps punctuating the buzz leaking from the air-conditioning units of the residential buildings around me in a rhythmic flow that was unusual insofar as I could hear distinctly. There was no traffic noise; for the first time since the beginning of my fieldwork on young women activists in Cairo eight months before, I saw hardly any cars or people. Was this the end of the collective protests and chants? The subsequent nights, uncannily dark and quiet after the rushed mornings of normalized life, brought a distant answer. A few times I heard a rhythmic banging: someone joining Masmou3 (Abdalla 2013), the leftist initiative that invited us to keep alive the protest against all authoritarianisms by banging on cooking pots at night from inside the homes we had all been caged in. As chants and collective protests were suspended or crushed and the violent polarization between pro- and anti-Morsy protesters dramatically intensified, these sparse sounds broke for a few moments into the pause that was a prelude to the celebratory tunes of a new, and yet familiar, militarist regime.

2. "I am the people, in march, and I know my way"[1]

The collective subject: music and politics

It is not sounds but their chilling forced absence at a time of halted protests that offers an opening into the intimate connection between music and popular protest in Egypt since the popular upheavals of 2011. Between 2011 and 2013, music, chants, and performances were central to the ongoing public revolutionary protests in the city of Cairo.[2]

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[1] The title quotes in translation the first line of the song *Ana al-sha'ab* ("I am the people") written by vernacular poet Fouad Negm and recorded by musician Sheikh Imam in 1985: *Ana al-sha'ab mashy we 'arif tariqi.*

[2] Looking at the revolution as a critical shift in social and political reproduction, I am aware of the difficulty of defining the Egyptian revolution as such. Nine years on, the current situation of full authoritarian

Anthropologists have documented how recent protest vocal and music performances can address oppressive power relations and define subjectivities (Manabe 2015, 2017, 2019; Sonevytsky 2016; Kunreuther 2014, 2018) looking at "the voice" beyond the political metaphor of participation and representation to include sounds, noise, silence, embodiments, materiality, affects (Weidman 2014; Kunreuther 2018). In this article I explore the sound of the popular Egyptian protests in between 2011 and 2013 - songs, chants, embodiments - to investigate affectively the cultural and political dimensions of the "voice" of "the people" (*al-sha'ab*) and its will (*iradat al-sha'ab*) during times of social and political unrest. The people's will was invoked in the synchronized chants of the protesting leaderless collective (Gerbaudo 2012; Chalcraft 2016). It was also called in by El Sisi to depose Morsy on the 3rd July 2013, and to announce his 2014 candidacy.

This preeminency of the popular will, an assumption ambiguously shared by democracy, populism, and nationalism alike (Laclau 2005), highlights the opacity of the "popular" in the production of cultural and political subjectivities. In Arabic, *sha'abi* means "being of the people", but also folkloric, populist, and enjoying great popularity. These semantic differences rest upon an affective interpretation of popular aesthetics as both representative of the Egyptian lower-class authenticity (*asala*), and rejected by elites and state institutions for its anti-modernity and vulgarity (Mitchell 1991; Armbrust 1996; Jacobs 2011). *Sha'abi* musicians in the last century have exploited this ambivalent aesthetic discourse (Armbrust 1992, 1996) to produce music on everyday life as a tool of political dissent (Grippo 2006).

Popular protests between 2011 and 2013 affectively reactivated a popular aesthetics of anti-regime dissent through protest songs and performances whose embodiments, feelings, symbols and materialities were integral to the political and cultural subjectification of "the people" - highlighting how the "constitutive role of aesthetics in politics" (Mazzarella 2019, 51), which populism as a political-cultural style underlines (Ostiguy 2017), is affective. The blurring of the boundaries between art and politics in between 2011 and 2013 (Mehrez 2012; El Hamamsy and Soliman 2013, 157; Tripp 2013a, 2013b; Valassopoulos and Mostafa 2014; LeVine and Reynolds 2016) is also a blurring between unmediated and mediated political and cultural experiences. The popular upheavals,

restoration is the exact opposite of the popular demands for social justice, freedom, and dignity that overthrew Mubarak in 2011. In all of the accounts I collected from the activists I met during my fieldwork, January 2011 was uncontested as "the revolution" because (albeit for too brief a time) it had changed the ways of producing gender, politics, and national identity. Its affective persistence – political, cultural, and personal – endures, despite the absence of the substantial structural change implied by "revolution." For these reasons, I use the term "revolution" in this article to maintain the affective resonance of January 2011, rather than to denote the factual sociopolitical outcome of the protests. outcome of the protests.

with its sounds, music and voices, offered intense corporeal, unmediated experiences of the collective body as a political subject - a key characteristic of populism, again (Ostiguy 2017; Mazzarella 2019).

I argue that in between January 2011 and the rise of El Sisi, protest music, chants, sounds foregrounded the affective labor invested in the already-existing, and at times oblique, enmeshment of cultural and political labor. During this time of upheaval, popular music helped coalescing an affective repository of emotional and bodily experiences generated around the experiences and relations with other protesters, sites, objects - activating what Mazzarella (2019), in discussing populist mobilization, calls archives: "the potentialities embedded in shared histories, memories, and forms of life" (Mazzarella 2019: 53) - which vivified a particular type of political and cultural subjectivity: *el sha'ab* ("the people"). I focus on the "sound" of popular subjectification during the unrest in three affective aspects: as an affective training towards a collective body; as transgressions and familiarity; as a craft of popular genealogies. My analysis follows anthropologists working on the affective production of political subjectivities at the intersection of embodiments, senses, spaces, institutions, discourses (Mazzarella 2015, 2019; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Samet 2019), as well as on protests, affects, and sound in different contemporary contexts (Manabe 2015, 2017, 2019; Sonevytsky 2016; Kunreuther 2014, 2018).

These reflections are based on ethnographic observations of practices of protest, which I joined mostly in Tahrir Square in between late November 2012 and July 2013. Although my research in Cairo focused on an affective analysis of gender politics, the nation-state, and secular feminist and women's rights' strategies - for which I conducted in-depth, unstructured interviews with young feminist and rights' activists, attended events and protests, did digital ethnography - I became increasingly fascinated and affected by the sound of protests, recording my observations on protest songs in parallel to my fieldwork. As the field violently deteriorated, the "remote ethnography" ambivalently enabled by digital media (Postill 2017) led me as well as my collaborators and acquaintances to rely on digital material to join the protests: songs, once again, filled any spatial distance with the immediacy enabled ambivalently by digital media (Postill 2017). To reflect this shift in the field, I have examined about 50 videos on popular protest music uploaded on YouTube by media groups, individuals, and artists in between 2011 and 2013, and of 2013 songs celebrating El Sisi, focusing on their patterns of affective intensity and of popular recognition. I have also incorporated comments about protests and music made by a few of my collaborators during extended interviews, to offer reflexive insights about the affective relationships between popular protest music and political subjectification.

The collective subject: singing grievances and joys

To understand the affective intensity of popular protest music in the context of the ongoing revolutionary protests and of its popular subject, I place the 2011 protests and their demands in the context of grievances and constraints. The uprising began on January 25, National Police Day. The choice of day was not accidental. It worked on popular sentiment about abuses perpetrated for decades by members of the security forces – the police and army – in the everyday lives of ordinary citizens. The case of Khaled Said, a young Alexandrian tortured to death by police officers in June 2010, had coalesced a diffuse sentiment against wrongdoing a few months before the beginning of the revolts. Furthermore, young activists had been creating networks of mobilization since the early 2000s (Gunning and Baron 2013), bringing groups together to protest against social injustice and oppression. As noted by Chalcraft (2016), the long-standing work of a number of groups severely affected by the Mubarak regime – the political Islamist group the Muslim Brotherhood, Copts, the Ultras, groups of disenfranchised youth and the urban poor, workers' associations, women's and feminist groups, together with groups and organizations in the making – all converged into an active participation in the protests, without designating a leader since the leader were the people themselves.

Protest music during this period helped reshaping the people affectively: not only as a political subject of grievance, as in the Chilean double populism (Samet 2019), but also, at least until 2013, as a subject of enjoyment against the "otherness" of the state, which had inflicted violence and controlled enjoyment for decades. Protest showed that "the people" was inflamed by individual and social grievances, and by pride and love for its national heritage. But if at first it was a subject injured by Mubarak's crony regime, while proudly protesting, in 2012 it sided against the Muslim Brotherhood and its elected representative, President Morsy. The active expression of simultaneous pain and joy was a central feature of national belonging during the revolutionary struggle, as musical performances made clear, and was instrumental to the later counterrevolutionary strategies.

The collective subject: voice, body, spaces

To express collectively its grievances and pride, a collective subject needs to feel and move as one. In Tahrir Square – one of the key sites of the protests in Cairo, although not the only one – the chant I heard most often, from the first protests I attended in November 2012 onward, made this clear for me. It was *As-sha'b yurid isqat an-nizzam!*: "the people want the fall of the regime!" Although it was not sufficiently structured to become

ideological, its catchiness and simplicity offered an affective device that allowed people to navigate everyday life in a particular historical moment through the categories it expressed: *el sha'ab* against the regime. The protesters chanting and identifying themselves as the people formed a diverse multitude, from children to old men and women, from deprived urban youth to famous intellectuals and the sellers of *V for Vendetta* masks. The ordinary, "authentic" nuances of "popular" (*sha'abi*) were displayed without classist inflections.

When the first anti-Morsy protests started be held on Fridays in November 2013, using a similar format and the best-known chants from the 18 days of January 2011, such as the very simple *irhal* ("leave"), the people in the square were expressing the wounded popular subject as representative of "true Egyptianness" against the foreignness of the Muslim Brotherhood, just as they had posited themselves as the people against Mubarak the year before: this time, the Islamists were not welcomed as protesters. The power of the collective voice remained mesmerizing. There were several moments of fatigue and rage in 2012 and 2013; music was difficult to hear, for instance, in several parts of Tahrir square, not least because moving was discouraged by the presence of paid thugs (*belt-ageyya*) who could sudden initiate violence. Yet, when someone started a known chant, even if it was repetitive, or if they began to chant following a known rhythmic pattern, it was impossible not to follow along and feel joy in the unity. Even the choice to call one short-lived 2013 initiative Masmou3, meaning "heard/listened to," implicitly assumed the strategic role of the angry, protesting collective sound – even if it was pure wordless noise – in the process of political subjectification: the process of becoming one body of sound in a dense crowd, learning, rehearsing, proposing musical performances, improvising with material constraints.

Seeing group singing and performing as a tactic (De Certeau 1988), beyond its content, placed it alongside more explicit tactics of resistance (such as forming human chains, distributing anti-teargas remedies, rescuing survivors of violence). It built a sense of unity, enjoyment, and solidarity among singers/protesters that was necessary to sustain the long-term struggle. As Abd El Hameed (2015) underlines in her study of the Al Ahly Ultras in Cairo, in this sense the voice is essential for identification with the group. For the Ultras, learning to sing in a synchronized manner is part of being a member of the community. Songs and chants, which are available online and on CD, create collective ties: "The fan learns how to fade into the group vocally. It is no longer his individual voice but rather the roar of the crowd" (Abd El Hameed 2015, 54). The sense of belonging overcomes the differences that may exist among Ultras such as class, age, or origin. Similarly, during the protests, the singers and chant leaders would change, and the practice

of collective voicing implied that chants were performed by a leaderless collective mass that was choosing its own choreography (Gerbaudo 2012).

As sound filled the protests, it accompanied each gesture: the clapping of hands, the movement of feet on the ground. When one entered the protests in Tahrir Square especially, this collective movement charged the spatial sense of organization: the individual level of choosing specific clothes (which ranged from ironic costumes to festive headscarves, from severe garments to military-inspired outfits), and the set-up of a museum of martyrs of the revolution and a stage for singers and speaker. The affective reappropriation of space as a protest site and shared place of joy and grievances led to its vernacular remapping. The sense of being part of a crowd, which one can experience when walking through Cairo, had expanded: it was no longer just the noisy city that gave meaning to the body, but the resonating, collective popular body now also gave meaning to the city, affectively redefining its political and social expansiveness. I still remember vividly the pavement trembling under the weight of the mass, the sound propagating its messages for a hundred meters, traveling outside of the square, transformed into ringtones, hummed in the streets. Whenever I was in a protest, surrounded by chants that I was invited to join, the impact of the mass of sound – the proximity of uncountable bodies moving together, their active movements, their heat, their volume and enthusiasm – was extremely touching.

This types of training happened in a less and less consistent manner as the months passed, and the rampant repression and political violence forced the protests increasingly to rely on known repertoires and improvisation, and to become more fragmented. Organization morphed into other shapes: a group of activists belonging to different initiatives decided to form emergency teams focused on square protests, named Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment. As the protest spaces continued to be filled with resonating bodies acting as one, particularly with shared chants and songs, terror was deployed institutionally. The visceral experience when musical, social, and political dimensions converged into a cohesive bodily and vocal expression (Turino 2008, 28–51; Manabe 2019) became much more frightening and deadly, further provoking the already enraged protesters to demand justice, but also disseminating mistrust. By breaking the unity among protesters and their collective body, the state and security apparatuses highlighted that the collective voice in the context of Egypt was embodied politics and culture in and of itself, intensely affective.

2. Power and "the people"

Between censorship and nationalism

The training of the collective body at the protests happened in the context of other complex cultural and political propaedeutic processes, which worked affectively around another collective body: nationalist unity and dissent. As the square was completely immersed in the sound of thousands of voices calling themselves one people, the nationalist unity was refracted in the Egyptian flags being sold and waved at different points, and in the many signs claiming a place in today's Egypt. The "popular" that emerged through the chants seemed to depict the authentic people versus the inauthentic regime. How has this been prepared?

The collective capacity to voice suffering and belonging simultaneously, especially through protest songs, assumes a different relevance when we think about the heavy policing, censorship, and cultural control that characterized Egypt under Mubarak. Political and cultural dissidents were forcibly discouraged; the government engaged with popular culture as a tool of the ideological apparatus. Institutional attacks against different genres and scenes painted as immoral or of low aesthetic quality, such as popular and "alternative" music, were deployed during the Mubarak era and continued under Morsy and El Sisi. When the protests broke out in 2011, singers close to the regime, such as Amr Mostafa, released songs in defense of Mubarak, going on TV to accuse demonstrators of espionage, immorality, and treachery. Accusations of immorality were regularly moved against survivors of political violence in between 2011 and 2013, as well as against opponents, from metal bands to the writer Ahmed Najji, to discourage and discredit political participation and divide protesters.

Transgressions opened other ways to feel the grieving and joyful popular body. Certain musical genres and performers had for some time already been responding to the concerns of the political hegemony and to injustice with bottom-up attempts at cultural transformation, particularly by adopting non-mainstream genres and various forms of group singing. Before the beginning of the 2011 protests, an initiative called the Choir Project focused on choral songwriting sessions for youth in Cairo as a subcultural vehicle through which they could establish their voice on personal and political topics. The plot of the independent movie *Microphone* (2010) by Ahmad Abdalla focused on the pre-revolutionary lively "alternative scene" of real-life rock musicians, including Massive Scar Era, one of the most famous Egyptian metal rock bands (LeVine 2008), as well as hip-hop artists, street artists, and skateboarders in Alexandria. The Egyptian band Eskenderella was founded in 2005 to revive the tradition of historical political songs. The band's

repertoire focused on Sheikh Imam and Ahmed Fouad Negm's songs, on the communist poets Fouad Haddad (1927–1985) and Salah Jaheen (1930–1986), and on original compositions by Haddad's son and grandson. Eskenderella's leader, Hazem Shaheen, released a solo album in 2009 celebrating new political songs. Such practices were propaedeutic to the mass protests in that they cultivated a challenge to dominant ideologies while forming their own repertoire and content as a way to flip the cultural game, already political, and struggling, before the revolution.

Music and transgressions

Once the protests exploded in January 2011 as a result of these processes, bringing up the sense of a popular collective unity defying the regime, protest music in the squares of Cairo in 2011 highlighted further transgressions that would be sanctioned by moral, social and political censorship. Music developed themes that were common to other contemporary ongoing protests (Anderson 2018; Manabe 2017). The slogans chanted rhythmically in Tahrir Square – especially "bread, freedom, social justice" (*'aish, horreya, 'adalah egtema'eyah*) and "the people want the fall of the regime" – focused on two main aspects: redistribution and social justice, and the right to free, direct expression of the popular will, which was antagonistic to the political regime. The specificity of Egypt developed from the convergence of these threads. The sound of the collective voice in chants and songs was both a weapon of resistance and an act of artistic and political affirmation as much as of subjectification, corporeality, affect.

"I played the drums like a man," Nahla told me proudly and joyfully during a meeting in late 2012. She was a young, prominent feminist activist who would play giant drums at the marches in 2011 and 2012, and who helped founding Operation Anti-Harassment. Leading the protesters' voices and movements by beating the tempo of chants and slogans on a massive drum marked a momentous political, social, and cultural experience of collective and individual subjectification. For many like Nahla, this experience of collective belonging - whose voice was, at times, painfully gendered - was transformative, especially for young protesters who were receiving social approval for the first time. Nahla's comparison to manhood was not a rhetorical device. As other activists discussed with me, gender, age, class, and religious "transgressions" that would barely be tolerated in everyday life were often socially accepted at the protests in 2011. A construction of resistance, and of imagined political possibilities, could emerge in the chaos of the protests, even if only briefly. "I was staying in the same tent next to a Salafi man and a young liberal student, and we were singing, and the Salafi man was ok!" Aya,

another prominent young feminist, told me with joy and nostalgia at the beginning of my fieldwork, reflecting on the exceptionality of January 2011.

But in 2012 and 2013, the popular subject of protest music and chants was no longer so politically and socially transversal. It separated the opponents of the Islamist government from its minority of supporters, the subject of wrongdoings from the immoral perpetrators. The protests against Morsy, which had started as protests against constitutional reforms in November 2012, progressed into the anniversary of the 2011 revolution and throughout the spring with a strong anti-Muslim Brotherhood stance. Singing became a political statement against the conservative attitude. Maya, an older activist and educator I met at end of my fieldwork, explained to me that she carried a flag at the protests bearing a picture of Umm Kulthum, a legendary Egyptian musical icon whose image was often used on women's marches together with those of other women artists and famous feminists. To reluctant protesters Maya would explain that if they wanted to continue to enjoy listening to Umm Kulthum and to dance, they must protest. In these shifts of the popular will between anti-authoritarian and pro-militarist positions, protest music – together with other types of artistic and creative performance – continued to affectively enable possibilities that had hitherto been unthinkable, revealing the protests as liminal transitions created by a ritual (Turner 2017) that fostered processes of collective subjectification along the lines of individual and social grievance and enjoyment.

Turner (2017) theorizes ritual as a rupture in the temporal continuity of everyday life that allows a temporary suspension and reshuffling of the usual social structures. The performance aspects of the revolutionary rituals in the square were much less sacred, and much more spectacular and metamorphic, than Turner's original view (Tripp 2013a, 2013b; Abd El Hameed 2015; Levine and Reynolds 2016). These performance formed a wide and transversal range of acts (LeVine and Reynolds 2016) – from the Ultras and the Black Bloc, to feminist initiatives such as Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment and individual acts of bearing witness to political sexual assaults on TV – which also included the "audience" of protesters in a call-and-response to join, propose, create, and lead chants and songs. There was a liberating affective enjoyment, as people relieved the tension of their grievances and expressed them publicly, with nationalist pride, as a transgressive collective body: parents holding their children, showing them how to chant and how to record videos of the protests, were a familiar sight for me in 2012. After June 30, 2013, El Sisi became the embodiment of the popular will: he promised to deliver the justice demanded by the revolutionaries. In June and August 2013, this nationalist joy was expressed instead by taking family pictures with tanks, by omnipresent songs celebrating the Army, and, more often than not, it passed through the individual consumption of El Sisi-branded commercial products.

Music transgressions in the square thus flagged up the disruption of established power and social hierarchies, as well as of imposed cultural choices. It voiced a historical rearrangement of age, class, religion, gender, racial divisions, and socioeconomic and cultural trajectories. At the same time, this porosity relied on two competing affective repositories, rooted in familiarity: the revolutionary experience, whose transgressions marked a transformative subjective and collective moment especially for the youth; and the attachment to a nationalist history shaped by the military intervention. Ultimately, the divisions within the seemingly neutral popular subject were symptomatic of the ambiguity of the popular and of its affective relationships to nationalism and immediacy, which could be mobilized toward trajectories of the political restoration of the status quo ante in the name of the revolution itself.

3. Familiar genealogies: lines and turns

The familiarity of protest songs

During the uprisings in 2011, and until at least the first half of 2012, newly written and older protest music made possible for these transgressions to become not only accepted but also incredibly familiar. In late 2013, a young and engaged activist, Marina, who worked for a large NGO and had co-founded a local women's rights' group, commented during our interview that by joining the protests she felt she was doing what her grandmother had done before her, bringing back to life a political change she had only read about in history books. The anthropological ear could not miss the reference to reimagined genealogies, which are the very substance of nationalism (Anderson 2006). Following a similar trail, the historical pan-Arab and nationalist slogans led by the drumming groups, and the songs performed onstage and often recorded on cell phones, had the capacity to evoke renewed genealogical arrangements by referring to previous struggles (Swedenburg 2012b; Valassopoulos and Mostafa 2014). Grievances and pride were thematically prevalent in the chosen repertoire: the origin and continuity of the popular subject. Songs dedicated to martyrs, such as *Baladi ya Baladi, ana bahebek ya baladi* (My country, my country, I love you my country), now reclaimed as an anti-regime song, and *Folan El-Folany* ("anonymous person"), underlined nationalism both as kinship and as loyal, sacrificial (and prevalently masculine) love. Other performances included Sayyed Darwish's *Oum, ya Masri* ("Rise, oh Egyptian") – the anthem of the 1952 revolution, written in the early 1900s against the British colonizers, which calls on Egyptians to rise up and confront the enemy.

Throughout the winter of 2012, songs such as these were sometimes listened to in crowded but quiet moments during the square protests on Fridays, when the recordings would be played onstage, and at times briefly improvised in small groups at night. One afternoon in 2013, in a less hectic moment during the anti-Morsy protests, I happened to see a seemingly popular singer, surrounded by a small group of protesters, singing *Baladi ya Baladi* accompanied by the clapping hands of the people around her. During quieter moments on the recurring Friday protests, I heard playing Mohamed Mounir's pop-rock song *Ezay*, about nationalist love and the thirst for justice.

South el Horreya ("voice of freedom") had emerged as one of the first successful songs performed in the square and inspired by the events. In 2012, however, I never heard it during the protests, although it remained a beloved song among the young activists I met. A pop-rock ballad with background vocal effects, the song had been born out of a collaboration between Amr Eid – lead singer of the band later known as Cairokee – and the producer of the band Wust el Balad. The official video for the song was shot in the square among the protesters, ordinary Egyptians who sang along with the song from lyrics on posters. This video is familiar to anyone who has been in the square: the posters, the cheering children and families, the clashes, the batata sellers, the activists, the flags, the street art, the energy of the people moving, praying, and singing together, the security controls. There is no distance between the artists and the audience: they are all protesters. The diverse groups in the square sing, united in nationalist solidarity, with the same collective voice of freedom

The choice to use older and newly composed political chants and songs, and the more limited uses of other, genre-crossing instruments and languages – such as the hip-hop song *Rebel, Rebel* by the Arabian Knightz, released in February 2011 (see also Swedenburg 2012b) – helped to publicly trace a long tradition of revolutionary political song, thematically driven by grievances and nationalist pride, as part and parcel of the history of Egypt. The lute, a traditional instrument, was played regularly by Eskenderella members, and also featured in Cairokee's postrevolutionary song *Ya El Midan* ("Oh, Square"), a nostalgic piece about the bygone days of the square. The well-known group Al Tamboura performed regularly in the square (Swedenburg 2011) in 2011 with a *symsyiia* (lyre) and musicians from the traditional music center El Mastaba. But while I saw many drummers several times, such traditional performances were a rare sight, at least in my experience, during the very violent protests of 2012 and 2013. There was simply a different sense of urgency and constraint; even if the streets and squares were the same, when access to them was not blocked, the times were different – and the digital uploads were a revealing symptom of that. Injuries were always imminent; protesters, activists and passers-by lived the angst of not knowing if the protesting neighbor was a thug.

Familiarity articulated through music did not disappear, however: it was reoriented differently, inside the exclusions promoted under the nationalist unity, claiming with increasing anger that the protests in 2013 were part of the same genealogical line the 2011 revolution had established. The bonds of kinship between different singers and eras meant redrawing generational ties, not hierarchically but as equally important. Art was engineered to promote political projects and to raise the flag of creative emancipation, with differing degrees of sophistication and professionalism, but still shaping the individual capacity to use tools of resistance and invention.

The craft of genealogies

As the construction of Egyptian identity was musically connected to popular nationalist protests, this imbued the current culture with political significance. It located politics and culture within a common historical matrix of subjectification. The birth of the revolutionary subject was reshaped by an event: the 2011 revolution became an opportunity to free oneself from being "just" an individual subject of wrongdoing, and to potentially become part of a collective subject committed to a cause. The unifying process of subjectification was a sort of craft: the cause advanced by the "popular will" varied in between 2012 and 2013, with protests against the new Constitution followed by anti-governmental insurgencies, as did music and other artistic performances. Discussing visual street art, El Hamamsy and Soliman (2013) categorize performances in the square as artistic street engagement (mostly spontaneous), assimilation (elaborations on previous artists with some original incorporations), and mobilization, where "art is taken to a higher level of consciousness raising, mobilization and social criticism, and the goal here is to ensure the continuation of the revolution, constantly reminding the masses that what was achieved is considerable but not yet complete" (El Hamamsy and Soliman 2013, 252).

Certainly, the level of sophistication depended on professionalism and (albeit not absolutely) social and cultural capital. However, in the 2011 square and protests more generally, the fluctuation in the levels of these factors was continuous, and different performances could be enacted simultaneously, depending on the moment of the day and the activities done on that day: the affective texture of the moment was crucial. There was no predetermined aesthetic, but rather the different types of sound – drums, pop/rock, rhythmic chants, older protest songs, new ones – beat the rhythm of the square, where different groups mingled by learning and chanting.

Within the different aims of the respective protests in 2011 and 2013, and the multiple types of protests and groups joining the uprisings, the mix of genres heard and repeated by the crowd always privileged forms that could be easily sung, remembered, shared, and repeated: both to form and familiarize again with a "revolutionary subject", and to legitimize the current protests. Popular protest music, like street art, took into account elements to facilitate sharing and recomposing differences, and these elements were familiar to the activists I met in the square: an improvisational aspect, due to the precarious and temporary nature of the protests; simplicity of form, sometimes as simple as a rhythmic pattern; the use of familiar icons, patterns, slogans or melodies performed as they were written or assembled together to craft a new piece, as in the case of contrafacta.

This popular dynamic relied on a number of familiar and already established themes – the pharaonic past, popular cinema icons, Ultras' strategies – to carry messages artistically, since these messages affectively exceeded verbal forms and analytical discourses. Activists often scavenged music lyrics to create poster and street art pieces, such as in the the gender-inflected line *Al-bint ezay al-walad* ("a girl is like a boy"), originally sung in 1985 by actress Soad Hosny in a popular Egyptian TV series, *Howa wa Heya* (Him and Her) and stenciled by the NooNeswa collective in 2012 for their project *Graffiti Harimi* (Female Graffiti) against gender discrimination, which included quotes by singers Umm Kulthum and Shadia. The Egyptian singer and Nasserist supporter Umm Kulthum was probably the most common artistic icon at feminist and women's protests. Popular culture in this way built an idiom of belonging to the nation that opposed, at least until the rise of El Sisi, institutional discourses, not as an alternative but by creating its own legitimacy in the spaces of protests. The power of popular protest music, and of street art, included a variety of genres and musicians under the same collective subject. Their definition of revolutionary culture did not depend on institutional imposition or legitimization: it challenged that frame by creating its own.

Contrafacta – familiar songs whose lyrics have been rewritten, in part or entirely, to suit the contingent situation – were part of the protest repertoire in 2011 and 2012 in Cairo, a feature shared with other protests historically (Manabe 2017). Singer Salma Sabahi, daughter of Nasserite presidential candidate Hameed Sabahi, shared a contrafacta of a famous song online: *Al Soura* ("the picture"), which had been performed during the Nasserite era by the star singer Abdel Halim Hafez, and had been written by the vernacular poet Salah Jaheen, a supporter of the revolutionary ideology. The original song had celebrated the unity of Egyptian social classes in their struggle for freedom and justice, and it brought back deep-seated collective memories of the 1952 revolution. Sabahi's version compared the picture described in the original version with the new picture of

police and army brutality against protesters (Valassopoulos and Mostafa 2014). Looking at crafted lyrics, playing jokingly with the most famous slogan in Tahrir Square, and on the everyday needs of the urban poor, two popular *mahraganat* artists, DJ Amr Haha and DJ Figo, released a piece entitled "The people want five pounds of phone credit" (Swedenburg 2012a): the artists sung live at Tahrir Square celebrations for El Sisi in 2013.

Ramy Essam, the most famous singer of the 2011 revolution, wrote a celebrated contrafacta. A student from Mansoura, north of Cairo, and a member of the metal scene, he joined the protests in Tahrir Square on February 2, 2011 (LeVine 2012). He composed his most famous song, *Irhal* ("leave"), using chants from the revolution as lyrics: "Leave; the people want the fall of the regime [*Al sha'ab youreed isqat al nizam*]; he must go, we will not leave [*Howa yemshi, mesh hanimshi*]." As the "voice of the revolution," Essam – despite being tortured in March 2011 – captured the infectious syncopation of the chants, providing a simple yet effective acoustic accompaniment with his guitar. Giving the chant a frame, the song transformed the familiar single chants into a newly structured piece, facilitating its circulation while building on a sense of collective construction. Its use of repetitive harmonies and its distribution online made it accessible and easy to repeat for a crowd, but still open to incremental innovations from vernacular revolutionary practices.

The selective, "crafty" reuse of genealogical protest songs, icons, and slogans, underlined that the bonds of kinship between different singers and protesters meant redrawing generational, cultural and sociopolitical ties, not hierarchically but as equally important. This connected the 2011 revolution to a previous affective repository of peoplehood, reviving its potentialities. Art was engineered to promote political projects and to raise the flag of creative emancipation, with differing degrees of sophistication and professionalism, but still shaping the individual capacity to use tools of resistance and invention. The composite character of this craft allowed, however, for its reappropriating and reuse, as it revealed the affective stitches - thus, potential breakages - in the fabric of the apparently compact popular will. This was the case, for instance, of the clapping and whistling typical of Ultras' performances, used both to incite, mourn, complain, and express joy. The Ultras' presence in the square remained a recognizable spectacle, but it was not as dominant in 2012 and 2013 compared with 2011. While initially they had brought the same vivacious spirit to the 2011 protest (Abd El Hameed 2015, 78), by June 30, 2013 some elements – the whistles, chants, trumpets, and flags – had been learnt and incorporated into a different scenario directed by the army, where flying helicopters and green lasers interacted with the choirs of joyful protesters.

The genealogical turn of authoritarianism

The songs introduced in this article were enveloped in the affective power of familiarity, nurtured and crafted by practicing, listening, and rehearsing in the streets and in private spaces. The sense of continuity and familiarity with the 2011 revolutionary struggle permeated the very different waves of anti-Muslim Brotherhood protests in 2012 and 2013, which led to the toppling of the government led by Morsy and returned the military to power. Once again the square and the streets were filled by different groups, united as the people against the elected government, and now led by Freedom and Justice, the political party of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood. The excessive control over enjoyment and the horrific level of violence at the protests, coupled with heavy privations (electricity cuts, a lack of basic necessities such as subsidized bread, the unavailability of gasoline) and patriarchal measures, led to calls for a new revolution.

Ramy Essam's song *Irhal* was sung again a few times in 2012 and 2013, resonating with the widespread *Inzil* ("go down"), the slogan of the 2013 Tamarrod poster campaign and chants. The Tamarrod campaign claimed to have collected millions of signatures demanding the ousting of President Mohammed Morsy, and it called for the mass protest on June 30, 2013. Through a performative repetition of the 2011 revolution, the largest postrevolutionary uprising witnessed the continued singing of the same chant. The atmosphere in the square seemed festive and brave, but fear was equally palpable, and it was impossible to forget that the road to it was paved with sexual assaults, mass rapes, and the infiltration of plainclothes police and thugs in the square. The counterrevolutionary forces learnt the same lesson to play a different tune.

Although it was framed as a second revolution whose acts had been choreographed in 2011, it followed a different playbook. The familiarity of practices of protest, including chants, was exploited by the security forces, who played on the heavy affective power of populism and on the lack of leadership. The actions on June 30, 2013 ended what had begun on January 25, 2011, as was explicated in a government campaign for a yes vote on the 2014 Constitution. The four days that led to the fall of the government, the ousting of President Morsy, and the rise of the Minister of Defense, now President El Sisi, did not allow the same number of performances.

The performative repetition of familiar chants and protest tactics followed another trajectory of political and cultural familiarity. Instead of a singer with a ponytail voicing the popular will as a protester among protesters, Minister of Defense El Sisi stepped up, promising to put the popular demands into action. Rather than presenting himself as a figure of political resistance, he deployed affective continuity and political kinship with the legendary figure of President Nasser, and introduced himself as the people's guide:

a paradoxical representative of the political immediacy and unmediated presence of the popular will experienced during the protests. It was a quick maneuver, which prevented the protests to coalesce into something more threatening for the institutional powers and did not leave enough time for new songs to be written and performed. It required the mobilization of a revolutionary genealogy strong enough to capitalize on the popular experience of 2011 and to obtain widespread support for the military intervention: to leverage affectively on the ambiguity of the popular will, which had been shifting considerably during 2012 and was angered by the lack of electricity, gas, primary goods. The familiar figure of the first Egyptian President Nasser, whose old-fashioned posters were always visible during the protests I attended, catalyzed a different genealogy. The love for the masculine, military leader articulated grievances and pride as a passage of power between the people and the army against the terrorist Islamists. The ambiguous primacy of the popular will shifted into a delegative, uneven modality, inscribed into a patriarchal hierarchy of power. Proclaiming himself the fatherly leader who listened to the will of the people, El Sisi deposed Morsy and called the protests to a halt. The popular subject was lured towards a patriarchal militarist stance that claimed to side with its quest for social and political justice, and promised at once violent crackdowns and celebrations.

Only then came music. A number of celebratory songs about the army in Egypt flooded digital spaces and radios, using techniques already familiar to the singing protesters. Two songs in particular put the ultimate seal on the future president's masculine mystique. The first song, *Teslam al Ayadi* ("bless your hands"), was a contrafacta (described as an operetta) by the singer Mostafa Kamel, the head of the Musicians' Union. It depicted gratitude toward the army with lyrics over the melody of a well-known 1960s song about the holy month of Ramadan, subtly adding a mystical undertone. It could be heard everywhere, from shops to phone ringtones, taxis, and wedding parties, to celebrate in every moment of the day the new nationalist rebirth under the military leadership. The second song, *Fawadnak* ("we delegate you"), written by the singers Gharam and Hanin, exalted the popular leadership of the army as a decision taken by the popular will. These popular political songs rearticulated a familiar presidential genealogy that gave the people a supporting role in the celebrations by mobilizing the affective capital of Nasserism together with the specter of Islamist terrorism. Nationalist grievances and pride were declined as a matter of (patriarchal) family love and as self-defense against a perceived threat to the national body, whose violence was popularly reconciled by celebratory songs like *Teslam al Ayadi.*

4. The afterlife of protest songs: a finale?

Geneologies imply death. Was that the end of protest songs in Egypt? Over nine years have passed since January 2011, seven years since the 2013 protests and subsequent coup, and six years since the election of President El Sisi. The revolution is unfinished. The more the government led by Field Marshal El Sisi turns to populist, militarist authoritarianism, the more the disenfranchised, the working class, the young, and the poorest strata of society (Kandil 2016) will make economic demands on him and the military. New protests and their suppression in late September 2019 proved that the government was not strong enough to survive without heavy violence and repression. The silence that accompanied the beginning of the curfew in the summer of 2013, described in my introduction, turned into a large-scale plan of oppression against dissenters and simple citizens alike.

With legal bans on protests, assemblies, and concerts, and continuous abuses, performances of protests songs survive differently. Already in 2013, Soraya, an artist and outspoken activist against gender-based violence, joked on artistic resistance: "People now ask me about my activism, but I am a musician!". The band supported by Nazra for Feminist Studies, Bnt al Masarwa, has worked on feminist music until 2018, despite the heavy crackdown on feminist and human rights' organizations.[3] Metal and the "alternative scene" resist the attempts to erase them culturally, economically, and politically, and there are new *mahraganat* records. Ramy Essam left Egypt and lives in northern Europe, from where he releases online new songs highly critical of the current regime. Bands such as Cairokee keep writing political songs, which are released online since their albums – such as their last one, *The Ugly Ducklings* – are not approved by the censors. "Sing cheesy songs, your voice is muffled, or even better make it unheard," says one of the lines in *Kan Lak Ma'aya* ("We have lived the most beautiful love story"), an electropop piece that uses a distorted sample from a romantic hit by Um Kulthum to talk about the revolution as a lost love. Struggling performers feel the pressure from commercial brands that approach them as sponsors to capitalize on their popularity. The afterlife of protest music continues on the ground and especially in digital spaces, fighting against the loss of the gleaming possibilities and potential that were glimpsed during the protests.

With the global rise of right-wing populisms, and the responsibility of anthropologists and social scientists in offering critical approaches to it, the terrain of the struggle seems to be defined by whatever affectively orientates the popular toward certain genealogies,

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[3] Since 2017 Nazra was imposed an asset freeze. Her Director, Mozn Hassan, is banned from traveling.

repositories and forms in culture and politics, shaping the substance of its subject: the people. If it is suffering, or joy, or both, whose are these? What fosters them on the ground? While protest music and chants did not provoke a revolution, the Egyptian revolutionaries showed that the cultivation of censored and subcultural genres, together with a familiar repository of protest chants and songs, is instrumental in mobilizing and giving shape – tactically, bodily and especially affectively – to a seemingly homogeneous collective popular subject connected to the frame of nationalism. I have suggested in this piece that the crafty use of music and songs from other eras of political protest in Egypt – simultaneously with new music and musical practices – charged the presence in the square with the affective weight of a transgenerational, horizontal history of political rebellion producing a different popular subject. This genealogical value was also key to the counterrevolution in 2013, when then Minister of Defense El Sisi presented himself as a successor to President Nasser, the mythical father of the nation. This form of "masculinist restoration", as Kandiyoti (2013) put it - by claiming to rectify the wrongdoings of the previous government and defeat terrorism - for the love of "the people" - led to a violent, hyper-controlling patriarchal authoritarianism.

In this article, what marked the substantial differences among January 2011, the anti-Morsy protests, and the 2013 celebration of El Sisi was that this familiarity was affectively capitalized under different terms on by the authoritarian power embodied by the army to reinforce its own legitimacy and recover from the popular distrust towards it. The familiarity of protest songs and chants had fostered a popular sense of what the people were, building a much-needed sense of safety and solidarity outside of the policing imposed by the regime. To give birth to "the people" thus required performing acts and trainings - such as singing and writing protest songs - whose efficacy depended on their affective qualities and on the activation of their repositories of experiences, stories, memories, embodiments. But it also needs attention to the affective excesses that other, competing repositories may activate, as happened with the intervention of the charismatic figure of El Sisi and its reclamation of the 2011 revolution.

The vivacity of popular protest music emphasized the historical legacy of political art in Egypt and it experimented with creative outputs to ground the legitimacy of the people outside of the established order. The affective labor of protest – with its emotional solicitation of gestures, of bodily movements in urban spaces – leveraged this enormous preparation and knowledge that had been formed over time in everyday life. Culture in the square, as in other areas of the Middle East and North Africa region revealed performances as political training (Tripp 2013a), by means especially of affects. Protest songs highlighted the instability and malleability of political and cultural formations that seemed rock solid: the regime of Hosni Mubarak, the first elected Egyptian government,

the subjected people. Revealing the fragility of these apparently unbreakable structures, they used impermanence as a tool for mobilization. When I was in Cairo, the square changed its face with every protest. Tahrir Square was filled with temporary museums to revolutionary martyrs, stages, tents, visual art in the surrounding streets, spilling over into other areas. It was a laboratory of performances (Tripp 2013b) that culturally renegotiated the social order. The upload of songs online also came from the sense of celebration and the need to preserve, and possibly reproduce, a fleeting moment of historical change in its urgency, immediacy and emergency (LeVine and Reynolds 2016).

I interpret these creative, intrinsically artistic forms as more than mediums, as exceeding the plain verbal articulation of discontent and solidarity: they were performatively effective acts against a prolonged political exceptionalism. These acts understood popular culture to be the affective core of political struggle. The flux of composition, performance, and sharing was the only constant, with frequent online releases and playlists that overcame the obstacles of censorship or radio control motivated by political or commercial concerns. Articles collecting the best protest songs surfaced online, demonstrating the popularity of the phenomenon and its enlarging repertoire to such a point that it required selection. The formidable mix of joys and grievances – of revolutionary ideology and institutional oppression – put music at the center of the body politic, where familiar and less familiar songs were shared together with newly composed ones. Learning and teaching songs to sing together was a fundamental part of being, becoming and *feeling* as a protester for most participants, notwithstanding the resistance of ultra-conservatives and the demagogical misuse of culture (Sabry 2010).

The social and political demand for change brought about by the revolution emerged in a variety of cultural efforts and are not forgotten by those who experienced them. These experiences, which are deeply political, enrich analyses of art and activism in the Middle East, such as those by Jessica Winegar (2006). Winegar underlines that the aesthetics of art pieces in Egypt is discursively framed in different ways by artists and audiences (Winegar 2006, 13) – but always consistently using the trope of the nation as a stylistic tool. It can often be the case, as aptly Winegar (2006) comments, that the use of familiar iconographic idioms belonging to the nation is not meant to express special nationalist sentiments, and is more of a practical device for an artist to find an alternative "place" between colonialism, authenticity, and modernity. Yet, in the seemingly identical repetition of genealogical cultural and political forms during the protests, nationalism and its subject – the people – are, I would add, neither stable nor neutral. While artists narrate their own memories and experiences in order to connect affectively with a wider community, as shown by genealogical lines traced by protest music, the gendered, race and class discourses that subtend these narrations and cross conscious and unconscious

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values, unspeakable symbols and affects, cannot be overlooked, especially in the light of the violent events attached to nationalist love after January 2011. The practicality of nationalist idioms is to be artistically questioned and challenged as part of the creation of alternatives to all patriarchal authoritarianisms, neoliberalisms and repressive populisms.[4]

In this tense and still complex context, where also geopolitical, transnational interests have an enormous impact which needs to be considered critically, politics – and the conflict between different cultural-political dimensions – continues to be part of the fabric of everyday life. Although the control over protests and the policing of society is tighter than ever, the (mostly digital) existence of popular protest music flags up the possibility of a critical space to give shape to the popular will, and its affective repositories, while producing what the people can be. The engagement between popular culture and politics fostered affectively by protest songs created a version of the popular will, and of its collective body and genealogy, as a crucial element of contemporary political subjectification in Egypt, which is still present, even if we cannot hear it, and whose future performances are being prepared.

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AUTHOR'S INFORMATION:

Valeria Dessì is a musician and anthrop-ologist. She received her Ph.D. in Gender Studies at SOAS, University of London, in 2017. Her ethnographic PhD thesis, based on a one-year fieldwork in Egypt in between 2012 and 2013, loo-ks at the interplay between gender-based violence, young fe-minist and women's rights initiatives, and the nation-state in post-revolutiona-ry Cairo. She is cur-rently a Research Fellow at the Department of Anthropology of the University of Cagliari.