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Ayman A. El-Desouky, *The Intellectual and the People in Egyptian Literature and Culture: Amāra and the 2011 Revolution*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 160 pp., \$67.50 US (hbk), ISBN 9781137392435.

El-Desouky's timely study, *The Intellectual and the People in Egyptian Literature and Culture: Amāra and the 2011 Revolution*, intervenes in a much needed scholarly conversation on the role of the intellectual in the Arab world today. The recent events of the "Arab Spring" have divided writers and intellectuals in their various readings of the event of revolution: some writer-intellectuals (Edward Said's term) such as Bahaa Taher and Elias Khoury perceive of the Spring as a revolutionary moment; others such as Elizabeth Kassab view the events of 2011 as a foundational moment comparable to 1967; still others like the poet Adonis do not find any revolutionary impulse in the recent people's movements. Engaging those various readings, El-Desouky's book asks the difficult questions: What is the role of the Arab intellectual on the ground today? What does intervention look like and is it possible without making room for the voice(s) of the people in Tahrir? Bringing attention to the role of the people on the ground especially during the 18-day uprising of 25 January – 11 February 2011 in Cairo, El-Desouky's book explores the materialist conditions of the speech of the people—as it emerges in the square—as a direct challenge to the authority of the abstract speech of the intellectual. "Speaking truth to the people" is the organizing motto of El-Desouky's book which purports to explore the confrontation between the voice of the intellectual on the one hand, and the truth produced and spoken by the people in the act of revolution on the other. As such, the book challenges ontological theories of the event, relaying emphasis on the *site* of the speech of the people. El-Desouky's main concern is not only a re-articulation of the role of the intellectual, but also a re-contextualization of Edward Said's imperative in *Representations of the Intellectual* that the intellectual speak truth to power.<sup>1</sup> El-Desouky opens his book asking the most basic question: "Who really are 'the People'?" (ix).

The study departs from the postcolonial role of the intellectual as speaking for and to the people their own truth (2) into an exploration of "how the collective imaginary speaks" (3). Rather than focus strictly on the role of the intellectual, El-Desouky examines the people's production of what he calls *amāras*—"the verbal and visual expressions, as well as body gestures and movements...of the gathered individuals" in Tahrir Square—that come to create cultural memory in the present through resonance across the various social and religious strata of the Egyptian people involved in the revolutions. In this scene, as we will

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<sup>1</sup> Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

see later in the book, the social and the cultural become the political as the people's unmediated speech in Tahrir begins to act as political intervention (Preface, x). This new intellectual exists outside Julien Benda's humanist project or Gramsci's and Said's social cartography; s/he is part of a different category altogether, cohering to face the challenge of "articulating modes of resonance in social relationality as modes of knowledge and modes of speaking that are already at work in the social life of the collective" (3). Remapping Said's intellectual imperative to "speak truth to power" (5) unto Tahrir, El-Desouky invites us to consider forms of the "imaginaries of the intellectual" specifically as they are now compelled to converse with the *amāras* produced by the people in Tahrir Square.

The book is divided into two parts with an introduction that situates the theoretical position of the intellectual from postcolonial discourse in Tahrir Square. The first part of the book—"The Intellectual and the Quest for Amāra"—explores the role of the intellectual in relation to the articulation and transmission of *amāras* in two chapters: "Amāra: Concept, Cultural Practice and Aesthetic" and "Signature or Cartouche? Dilemmas of the Egyptian Intellectual." The first chapter studies the literary work of Yusuf Idris (1927-1991) in considering what becomes of *amāra* as an artistic form (7); *amāra*—as "the grey zone between thoughts and deeds"—inevitably straddles the worlds of the literary and the poetic, as well as the political defined broadly in the book as participatory actions of resistance and defiance. The second chapter analyzes narratives by Egyptian intellectuals to position the mediatory role of the intellectual between speaking truth to power and social filiation. Part II, "The People and the Amāra of Connective Agency," focuses on the role of the people in relation to the creation and transmission of *amāras* also in two chapters, "The People Already Know: Positionality of the Intellectual, Connective Agency and Cultural Memory" and "The Amāra on the Square: Some Reflections Post 25 January 2011." These chapters examine specific expressions of *amāras* as collectively shared knowledge, which could constitute the terms of a collective identity through connections that exceed the limits of conventional textuality, as they reach back to (shared) past horizons of interpretation.

In the introduction, El-Desouky explains how postcolonial theory informs his methodology, which he grounds in the specificities of the historical moment of the 2011 Egyptian uprising. Contemporaneous as he seeks it to be, El-Desouky's method does not purport to be a full literary or cultural analysis. Rather, he reads short cultural texts (oral and written) in order to point to the single organizing form of his analysis—the *amāra*—that becomes the definitively unmediated speech of the people up against the dissociated voice of the intellectual. In his analysis of the evolving role of the intellectual from the *Nahda*—the Arab cultural "renaissance" or revival that extended from the nineteenth into the middle of the twentieth century—through the Nasser Revolution until today, El-Desouky singles out the common denominator between the object of the Left and that of the modern state as the "people" who are "the constructed signifier destined for salvation or for emancipation and enlightenment" (10). The "people," or the masses, played a very particular role in the imaginary of the *Nahdawi* intellectuals, who imagined the "people" as *fallahs* or "peasants," as opposed to people's role as rebels in the 'Urabi Revolt and the 1919 Revolution (11). After Tahrir, the "people" have begun to author their own role: Today, according to El-Desouky, the crisis of the intellectual comes about specifically in the confrontation with the uneducated masses who demand a type of speech "that signals the resonance of the singularity of the intellectual's position with the shared imaginary of the collective" (11).

In El-Desouky's book, the intellectual's speech is confronted during the 18-day revolution with the real and unmediated speech of the people, "well beyond the referent of the political theoretical 'real,'" and towards a distinctly "new type of 'movement

communism” (11-12). Against Alain Badiou’s abstract “Idea” of the event, El-Desouky pits the language of *amāra* as the “collective expressive force that is at once an aesthetic of resonance and an ethic of solidarity” (12). Such *amāras* resist easy appropriation into the familiar terms of conceptual or sociological discourse or theories of populism (12). However, it is difficult to see from his analysis early on in the book how this comparison holds since the historical moments and the approach to the masses vary radically across the different revolutionary moments in recent Egyptian history. The “newness” of this movement could use some further elaboration in the book, especially in comparison with previous people’s movements in Egypt.

Part I of the book analyzes the function of *amāra* in two short stories, Mahmoud Tahir Lashin’s “Hadith al-qarya” (“Village Small Talk,” 1929) and Yusuf Idris’s “Hammal al-Karasi” (“The Chair Carrier,” 1968), focusing on the voice of the intellectual in communicating literary *amāras* to (and of) the people in the “tension between representation and intervention” (20). *Amāra* is a highly transformative construct in El-Desouky’s analysis, because it can appear in multiple forms across various cultural texts as long as it creates resonance with the people. In this part of the book, El-Desouky traces forms of *amāra* that appear in Tahrir, from the verbal to the visual and the gestural, and includes “popular practices, the subconscious of traditions, the cumulative force of historical experience, transactions of the everyday, the social spheres of religious practices, [and] the horizontal leaps of faith (vs. vertical metaphysical)” (22). Such forms resonate across the collective Egyptian imaginary thus creating “a typology for the intellectual’s image of voice, the signature and act of intervention” (22). It remains unclear at this point of the analysis, however, how *amāra* comes to offer a typology for the intellectual—it is also unclear if *amāra* is a trope, a performative, a linguistic or social construct, or a discursive site. El-Desouky suggests that it is a form that resonates across the collective imaginary but does not issue necessarily from the collective all at once; it could come from individual citizens, even intellectuals, but then resonates with the collective imaginary in such a way that it could very well be its pure product, in other words, a pure instance of the speech of the people. At least two questions necessarily come up here: how do these *amāras* form an image of the intellectual and what analytical tools can we use to both identify and “read” them?

El-Desouky isolates three encounters between the intellectual, the *amāra* and the people: two in the quest for new narrative styles and techniques for self-intervention in Lashin’s and Idris’s stories, and a third moment of intervention in the public life of the intellectual in the case of Professor Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd in the late 1990s (23). In the first two instances of literary analysis, El-Desouky again does not provide the reader with the proper tools, firstly, to identify the *amāras*, and, secondly, to read their influence as acts of intervention in the political and social spheres. Does the intellectual produce these literary *amāras*? How do they appear in the literary idioms of the text and what are the conditions of their legibility? In simpler terms, how accessible and popular were these stories that he singles out, whom did they address (the people or the literate sectors of society), and how are we reading them *today* as acts of intervention in the social sphere? El-Desouky’s analysis in both cases hinges on the ultimate failure of the intellectual to reach the people: while the character of the Sheikh in Lashin’s short story uses *amāras* to create resonance with the “hearts” of the people, the intellectual’s discourse is too particular to create resonance. El-Desouky then generalizes this reading: “This rift in communication would reach its heights in the realist and committed literature of the 1950s, receive new aesthetic treatments in the 1960s, move to the public sphere in the 1990s, and finally reach an all encompassing national level with the accession to power of the Muslim Brotherhood and President Morsi in 2012” (29).

El-Desouky repeatedly contextualizes this rift in the encounter of the intellectual with himself in the public sphere, referring specifically here to the confrontation between the late Professor of Arabic Literature Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Muhammad ‘Imāra, a sheikh representing the intellectual right (37). Abu Zayd was expelled from his position as university professor and sent into exile. Reading the television encounter he had with Sheikh ‘Imāra on *al-Jazeera* in the late 1990s, El-Desouky notes a repetition between the episode and the intellectual in Lashin’s story: both sheikhs perform traditionally resonant *amāras* in their performative dress and voice in order to sway public opinion (39). Abu Zayd, in El-Desouky’s reading, identifies a crisis of the intellectual rather than one of the culture, which is unjustly perceived to be pre-modern as compared to the western notion of modernity. Such an opposition, El-Desouky summarizes from Abu Zayd, is telling of the larger failure of the modernizing initiative of the *Nabda*, a “failure [which] reached its most critical point in the aftermath of the 2011 January revolution” (40-41). Now that the Muslim Brotherhood’s real prerogatives have been exposed, the intellectual is forced to recognize the ontological limitations of his or her own discourse because “collective social realities have their own modes of speech and of knowing that must alter the theoretical terms of the game and enter the arena on equal footing” (43).

In the second chapter of Part I, El-Desouky continues to explore the role of the *Nabdawi* intellectual from Rifaat Rif‘at al-Tahtawi, Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi, Butrus and Salim al-Bustani, and ‘Abdallah al-Nadim to ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi. He focuses especially on al-Nadim (1845-1896) as “the exemplary case of an intellectual coming from within the ranks of the people” (51). Al-Nadim used local “registers” of expression to communicate the local issue while situating it in relation to an “imagined whole” (52). El-Desouky uses the position of al-Nadim to highlight the failure of Egyptian intellectuals in 2011: al-Nadim’s vision came from below, while since Nasser, educating the people in nationalism has been a “top down vision” (56). Although al-Nadim’s case is both historically and contextually intriguing, it is difficult to derive such a radical conclusion from one example on the speech and agency of the people. Questions that naturally arise in reading this part of El-Desouky’s analysis are: What would it actually take to produce agency in the people? Why are we assuming that speaking to the people in their language is actually going to encourage them to think for themselves? After all, for such speech to be possible at all, the intellectual must “translate” his or her own position in the social body in relation to those they claim to speak for (56).

The intellectual’s struggle with the image of his or her voice is especially evident in the transition from “conventional and discursive modes of writing to the literary mode proper” (57). This is not a formalistic issue, El-Desouky explains; rather, “the new modes of narrative themselves were symptomatic of the pressing need to revolutionize—which is to say, historicize—traditional forms of expression” (57). He refers to Richard Jacquemond’s classification of Egyptian intellectuals in his book *Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State and Society in Modern Egypt*.<sup>2</sup> In current descriptive genealogies, the classification of intellectuals follows key political events such that they are represented at once as pioneers of and as major influences on the lingering image of the intellectual today. Jacquemond argues that the representation of intellectuals should be studied in relation to the state, the social field, and the international field. El-Desouky extends Jacquemond’s conclusion to the undermining of these three fields in the events of 2011 and with them “the symbolic status of the intellectual” (60) as well as the very nature of intellectual work (discussed in Chapters 3 and

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Jacquemond, *Conscience of the Nation: Writers, State and Society in Modern Egypt* (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 2008 [originally published in French in 2002]).

4). Since the *Nabdda's* induction of the struggle between the modern and the traditional, the self-positioning of the intellectual has been determined strictly “in relation to power, including also the disembodied power of ‘the people’ (localized only in the discursive imaginary of the peasant or the worker as a national and political economy), rather than in relation to social and demographic formations” (63). In this trajectory, such mappings ignore other forms of cultural productions as different sources of historical and political knowledge.

These forms become the subject of Part II of the book, “The People and the Amāra of Connective Agency,” which moves us from the position of the intellectual to the role of the people. Since *amāras* are collectively shared, they compel us to look beyond the mere conditions of conventional textuality towards a type of reading that necessarily involves the past in mapping the trajectory of reception of these forms of expression. Focusing on narrative discontinuities in recent works of literature such as Ahdaf Soueif’s memoir *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution*,<sup>3</sup> El-Desouky situates the playful temporalities of these *amāras* in relation to the particular process of individuation as self-affirmation that emerges in Tahrir: such a process is importantly “an aesthetic experience of resonance” (75). Chapter 3 examines such “self-affirmation” as an aesthetic experience specifically in the people’s imaginary, suggesting a mode of knowledge that creatively exceeds or at least exists outside of hegemonic discourses of power. Such forms of *amāra* are also embedded in cultural remembering and as such “radicalize conventional textuality,” precisely because their interpretations calls on the text’s “pastness” as well as its reception “beyond tradition and the immediacy of the communicative spheres of collective memory” (78). By creating resonance as forms of a shared cultural memory, *amāras* remain distinctly the possession of the people. Interestingly, he gives Mahfouz’s *Children of the Alley* as an exemplary text that locates the *amāra* in the collective memory of the people and cultivates a vocation for the intellectual as the storyteller coming from within the ranks of the people and sharing their experience. However, the common “people” were not the ones reading Mahfouz’s controversial novel when it came out and was immediately banned by al-Azhar. If El-Desouky’s book opens with the laden question of “Who are the people?,” I would ask an even more pressing one of “Who is the reader?”

Such forms of cultural remembering are, post-Tahrir, significant not in their content but in their form, in the ways that they appear “at once subversive of official memory and resonant on the level of an inclusive collective imaginary working in and on the present” (79). What they achieve formally, in El-Desouky’s analysis, is an aesthetic experience that transforms the public sphere socially because it demands a shared knowledge (80). This form of cultural memory El-Desouky locates in the work of Jan Assmann; it exists radically outside of historical record and continuously in a process of constituting itself in the sphere “beyond the institutional and the traditions of transmission.” The aesthetic in the social thus becomes a paradigm of critical analysis within which “ready translatabilities between tradition and memory and the religious imagination and cultural memory” can be challenged. If the mistake of the *Nabdawi* intellectuals of the early twentieth century was precisely in performing such easy translations of western modernity to challenge tradition and propagate their liberal projects, then this approach to cultural memory as essentially collective, outside of hegemonic discourse, would not only outdo their liberal agendas but also challenge the rampant and limited “ideological secular approaches to the public sphere” we have today (82-83). Nonetheless, El-Desouky finds a continuity in “such practices of socially cementing *amāras*” outside of official historical and intellectual accounts from *Nabdawi* journals into the

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<sup>3</sup> Ahdaf Soueif, *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012).

recent events of the Egyptian revolution wherein the social spheres “of the communal cementing everyday practices, language and action” of the people is also the sphere of cultural memory (87-88). This part of the project would have benefitted from closer reading of these forms of cultural memory. El-Desouky importantly reads these aesthetic forms as radically transforming the social sphere and appearing as political acts of intervention in it; insofar as he defines the political in the introduction as an “act” on the social sphere, the conflation of the social and the political seems to happen quite smoothly in the aesthetic. While he does return to this conflation in the postscript, insisting again on the material interventions of the *amāras*, it is still not very clear how to identify these radical forms of cultural remembering in the present and on Tahrir Square.

Chapter 4 continues to expand on this aesthetic intervention that radically transforms the social sphere and creates new possibilities for the political beyond functionary politics and state and party institutions, and thus moving us even more smoothly from cultural production into the social sphere and then the political arena. In a very optimistic and positive reading of the events of 2011 and 2013, El-Desouky maintains that the collaboration between the people and the army to oust Morsi happened in chants that posited no “rigid single master narrative or ideological construct...other than the will to claim agency, social justice and freedom” coagulating into “a kaleidoscopic vista of a suggested wholeness in the process of following news of the separate occurrences, taking place in different spaces” (95). He distinguishes between previous creative revolutionary practices and the events of Tahrir but focuses on the “event-concentrated spheres” emphasizing “the differentials in collective expressive powers, their chosen media and the participatory impulse” (97). In this scene, the chant becomes “a linguistic *event*” that represents the collective mode of knowledge production of the people, one with a markedly political premise that “highlight[s] the crucial and promising differential between the older practices of a politics of aesthetics and the promise of what might be termed a *radical aesthetics of the political*, an aesthetics of social resonance as it comes to bear on questions of equality and the social collective and that reveals a fundamentally connective agency” (97). This radical aesthetics of the political does not empty the political of its interference in the social sphere; contrarily, it marks its multiple interventions in that sphere. In this sense, this radical aesthetics exceeds the social realism of the 1950s which now “suddenly stood for traditional leftist intellectual and artistic practices and for a generational and gendered divide” (97). While I agree with El-Desouky’s criticism of the social realism of the 1950s especially in its blatant separation from the realm of the social and the voices of the people, we do not have enough new texts and cultural forms to make such a radical claim in favor of this novel radical aesthetics of the political. For instance, El-Desouky could have addressed some of the literature being produced in Egypt today that engages directly with forms of mass media and online networking specifically, as in the works of Youssef Rakha, Abdo Khal, Khaled Al-Khamissi and others.<sup>4</sup> A comparison between the new literature’s transmission of *amāras*

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<sup>4</sup> See for examples Rakha’s *Kitab al-Tyghrab* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2011) and his blog, *The Arabophile* <<http://yrakha.wordpress.com/tag/youssef-rakha/>>; Khal’s Twitter account was hacked in 2012 because of his controversial novel *Tarmi bi-sbarar* [“She Spews Sparks”] (Beirut: Manshourat al-Jamal, 2009); and Khalid Al-Khamissi’s *Taksi: Hawadith al-mashawir* [Taxi] (Cairo: Dar Al-Shuruq, 2006) which appropriates street language in representing the people’s movements and exposes the government’s illicit agenda. All these examples and more have mediated the relationship between the intellectual and the street and in many ways anticipated the people’s movements of 2011 and after. Moreover, these writers became the target of hacking, coercing them violently into a public intellectual role.

and those produced in Tahrir would be a very productive way to link the two parts of the book together.

El-Desouky concludes that these new forms of cultural expressions or *amāras* produced in Tahrir form a “connective agency”—a term borrowed from Assmann (100).<sup>5</sup> The political becomes the radically transformed social order as the people are now deploying this connective agency to re-author symbols of collective memory rather than simply coming together as desubjectivized and abstracted masses (98). This language of the people retains the social in the political, for unlike the revolutionary language of the 1950s and 1960s, now we have a language that still heeds the communal and the collective (99). In describing the radical aesthetics of the political (perhaps against the concerning possibility of the aestheticization of the political), El-Desousky combines Jacques Rancière’s thought on the exercise of the right to speak for those outside of recognized social and political orders with Alain Badiou’s reading of the Egyptian Revolution as “the site...whereby the Idea, still fluid, encounters popular genericity” (as cited on p. 101).<sup>6</sup> Combining these two approaches, El-Desouky locates in Tahrir a “new spatial politics” and a “new language” that “derive[s] [its] force from what might be called a poetics of the collective differentials (always in excess of established discourses of representation...)” (101).

In my reading, a problem remains, however, with the conditions of legibility of this new language and the event of Tahrir as a specifically “*linguistic* event.” The aesthetic is precisely formal, representing the speech of the people, by the people or the intellectual, to the people or to the world. If mediation is the very condition of the aesthetic, and Tahrir is a properly linguistic event, how do we maintain the radical aesthetics of the political? How do we read from now on? El-Desouky attempts to resolve this problem: “The *power* to speak is a question of representational discourse; the ability to speak must be here reconceived as the *ability* to articulate from within the spheres of resonance with the whole, the connective agency of *amāra* practices” (102). The idea is that, if this representational power would come from within the connective agency of the people, then we could overcome the problem of mediation or representation in a language other than that of the people. To locate the impetus of this representational power, El-Desouky relies on the analysis of cultural forms referred to in the work of Walid El-Hamamsy and Mounira Soliman such as practices of “artistic street engagements,” including: national songs from collective memory bursting with spontaneous creativity on the scene; “artistic street emulation,” whereby the revolution begins to produce its own songs; and, finally, “artistic street mobilization” which “aimed at mobilizing the masses and commemorating and celebrating their achievements” (102-103).<sup>7</sup> Such street manifestations of *amāra* might link Rancière’s program for a radical aesthetics with Badiou’s vision for new possibilities in the social sphere as in the example of the army slogan’s emphasis on the “fundamentally aesthetic” modes of knowledge production (106-107).

El-Desouky is trying to resist readings that would reduce the aesthetic either to an instance of materialist historical conditions, or to a purgation of political agency, by using street manifestations of *amāras* as connective agency: *amāras* would create a continuity for the

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<sup>5</sup> Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, trans Rodney Livingstone (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> For the original see: Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Time of Riots and Uprisings*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2012), 86.

<sup>7</sup> See: Walid El Hamamsy and Mounira Soliman, eds., *Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa: A Postcolonial Outlook* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

people between their pasts and their present in such a way that the people remain resolutely present and fully in possession of their speech rather than being spoken for. Such a collective form of presentness would make it possible for the part to speak in the name of the whole outside the reductionist impulse of the aesthetic (108), as we perhaps see in the social realism of the 1950s. This political event of the aesthetic divulges “an ontological dimension of the collective” made possibly only through “the aesthetics of the collective modes of speech and of communication” (109).

In the Postscript, “*Iḥnā al-maṣriyyīn* and *al-sha‘b*: The Untranslatabilities of Conceptual Languages,” El-Desouky importantly brings up untranslatability as a fundamental problem of reading the events of Tahrir and the *amāra*’s promise to remain the resonant speech of the people. Focusing on the untranslatability of the two terms “*Iḥnā al-maṣriyyīn*” (We the Egyptians) and *al-sha‘b* (the people), he brings together the recent work of Emily Apter and Barbara Cassin to reassess the theoretical corpus of Rancière, Badiou, Judith Butler and others—focusing on these two terms in their untranslatabilities as *amāras* to readdress the ontological and epistemological limitations of political thought on these movements.<sup>8</sup>

Exploring the problem of the untranslatable particularly in the context of representing the people, their speech and their agency in their manifestations as crowds, multitudes and other collective forms, El-Desouky also puts the work of Rancière and Ernesto Laclau in conversation with recent articulations from the Arab world on the people’s movement specifically in Tunis and Egypt. He spends a considerable part of the conclusion discussing Andrea Khalil’s book *Crowds and Politics in North Africa: Tunisia, Libya, Algeria*, which pits the language of analysis (academic) against the “speech acts” of the crowds that understand the “tricks that have been used to exploit and humiliate them” (cited on 123).<sup>9</sup> From this conversation, El-Desouky derives his own theoretical reading of the events of Tahrir, namely, the “move from ‘language’ to knowledge in the crowd’s collective modes of speech and action,” indeed suggesting that such a move “transcended categorical thought of ‘the crowd,’ ‘the masses,’ ‘the multitudes,’ or the ‘people’” (123). As an “aesthetic of resonance,” collective *amāra* becomes a social form of communication as well as a political “name for that which expresses the multitudinous as the law of being, the social speaking politics beyond the processes of subjectivization which constitute the forms of visibility of the common”—that last reference is to Badiou’s *The Rebirth of History*.

According to El-Desouky, these forms of cultural memory located in *amāras* exceed hegemonic conditions of subjectivization in both the social and political spheres, an important gesture towards the self-affirmation he notes earlier in the book. However, one of the issues left unanswered by the book is the question of how to read forms of *amāra* outside of discourse and outside of language politics. El-Desouky’s optimistic reading of the people’s cultural voice in Tahrir is very promising, and indeed uplifting, an approach he shares with several writer-intellectuals in the region. However, given the immediacy of the event and its unfolding narrative, we do still not have enough of a corpus to work with, and it might be more prudent to suspend making conclusive assertions on how such street articulations in fact transcend normative processes of subjectivization and avoid being subsumed by them. Moreover, as Khalil suggests and El-Desouky corroborates, we want to avoid the tools of analysis that render the voice of the people ultimately invisible, we also must be aware of the fact that we are still employing such tools of discursive and theoretical analysis to approach

<sup>8</sup> See: Barbara Cassin, *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, translation edited by Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra and Michael Wood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Andrea Khalil, *Crowds and Politics in North Africa: Tunisia, Libya, Algeria* (London: Routledge, 2014).



the events of Tahrir and the speech of the people since the critic is not one of the people as al-Nadim, El-Desouky's hero-intellectual, was. Such a necessary distance of the critic and the intellectual does not, however, have to be a disengaged position at all, and the criticism of theoretical models of the people and their voice is still necessary to make room for speech acts outside of both the state and the academy. However, we need more examples of such street articulations before we call for a body of work that consolidates resonant forms of cultural memory to challenge hegemonic and abstract representations of *al-sha'b* and to set this new "emerging" people in El-Desouky's analysis apart from the crowds that came before them both in Egypt and in different parts of the world. The untranslatability of the term "the people," and the problems it incurs in thinking about the people as a singular or as a plural, morphologically let alone politically and socially, is one that should remain complex and in a sense untranslatable from one event or place to another. Cultural *amāras* should also remain untranslatable so that they can persist as a challenge to the politics of state legibility. And we do have to remain careful in conflating the social and the political, even through a radical aesthetics of the political as El-Desouky suggests, until we know for certain that the part does in fact engage the whole and this is indeed the people's language and that the tools of analysis that we use as critics to read such language is not just another gesture of silencing it.

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