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Marwan M. Kraidy, *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World*, Harvard University Press, 2016, 293 pp., \$39.95 US (hbk), ISBN 9780674737082.

In November 2011, eleven months after Tarek al-Tayeb Mohamed al-Bouazizi self-immolated on a street in Tunisia, 9 months after hundreds of thousands of protesters physically occupied Tahrir Square, and 8 months after Syrian police arrested and tortured 15 young boys who were suspected of spray painting anti-Assad graffiti, another body became the focal point of heated debate that refigured already ambiguous fault lines around the parameters of resistance in the Arab world. Unabashedly staring intently at the camera, Aliaa al-Mahdy, posted a naked photo of herself on her blog, *A Rebel's Diary*. Was this unveiling of her naked body a forceful demand for an acknowledgment of revolutionary (gendered) selfhood? Or was it a titillating, inauthentic Western-inspired polluting of the revolution? Most immediate critical reactions to her public nakedness were condemning and dismissive (with a few death threats included). Although her naked body was viewed by millions and discussed widely at the time, al-Mahdy has become a small, marginalized footnote, lost in the sea of print that has been published on the rising and, depending on who is writing, cresting of the Arab Spring.

Marwan Kraidy, the Anthony Shadid Chair in Global Media at the University of Pennsylvania, however, places this “naked blogger” at the center of his astute and thought provoking book on creative insurgency in the contemporary Arab world. It’s a bold move to focus on the complicated and “messy” politics of al-Mahdy, but Kraidy refuses to blink: although the emphasis of much criticism on the Arab Spring—especially from Communications’ scholars—deal with social media and (virtual) networks of resistance, Kraidy single-mindedly centers resistance on the physical body. Whether analyzing *Top Goon*, a web-based video satire from Syria lampooning Assad, or commenting upon Ammar Abo Bakr’s numerous murals of martyrs on Mohamed Mahmoud Street, or examining the Rabea motto and symbolism as used by the Muslim Brotherhood, Kraidy is most interested not in the mediated images of these protests but locating embodied creative insurgency. A prolific, respected and engaging writer on Arab politics and the media, Kraidy, through this book, moves the conversation about the Arab Spring away from one that centers around mediated politics to one fully engaged in body politics. Yes, the book has numerous chapters on artists’ use of songs, TV shows, graffiti, web series and blogs as protest, but discussions of the way these mediated images are used are predominately secondary. Building upon a Foucauldian bio-political tradition, *The Naked Blogger of Cairo* is not so much a book about

media and the Arab Spring but rather an original, dynamic and essential examination of the way the human body is the (forgotten) source and target of creative insurgency.

Al-Mahdy's (naked) body, therefore, is crucial to Kraidy's argument as it intertwines what he labels "radical" and "gradual" insurgency. Radical insurgencies are "violent and spectacular" (18) transgressions that directly confront the ruling power, such as Bouazizi's self-immolation on a street corner in Tunisia. Gradual insurgency, on the other hand, is "incremental and cumulative" (18); a symbolic violence that slowly chips away at the power of the State, such as anti-government graffiti or satirical TV shows. Both, though, are aesthetic political responses that underscore the fact that revolutionary politics are experienced through, and created by, physical bodies. In his six short sections, each containing numerous chapters filled with examples and context from throughout the Arab world, Kraidy transitions between radical to gradual insurgencies before culminating with an analysis of a specific and graphic case that embodies both forms: a self-published photo of al-Mahdy menstruating upon a Daesh flag.

Each section of *The Naked Blogger of Cairo* discusses a specific act of insurgency before immediately contextualizing the act within an impressive, if somewhat dizzying, array of analysis. Section two centers on Bouazizi's self-immolation in Tunisia; section three on Mubarak and his image as a Laughing Cow throughout Egypt; section four on Syria and the TV show *Top Goon* that imagined Assad as a delusional puppet; section five on al-Mahdy's first naked image on her blog *A Rebel's Diary*; and section six on al-Mahdy and her anti-Daesh photo. All of these sections are informative and impressive for a number of reasons, but most especially in the way that Kraidy never loses the thread of his main argument: all of these examples of creative insurgency—regardless of place or circumstance—are centered upon the body. Tethered to this foundational premise, Kraidy then allows himself the space to contextualize the specific act of insurgency within a wide orbit of history and analysis (everything from France during the Napoleonic Era to the Vietnam War in the 1960s to Bahrain in the present day), moving further and further away from the original act to engage a larger macro-political argument.

Some of these moves are straightforward and it is easy to mentally follow Kraidy's many sophisticated explorations. For example, in the second section "Burning Man," a recounting of Bouazizi's spectacular act of radical insurgency is then compared to Buddhist monks self-immolation in Vietnam leading to a discussion of Bobby Sands and the Irish rebel's hunger strike to underscore the various ways that the body can be used as protest and/or as a bargaining tool to the State (and the difference that Kraidy highlights is wonderfully illuminating when he circles back to Bouazizi). Although the seven individual chapters within the section quickly move among different continents and eras, the point of these intellectual travels is never unclear and always insightful. Sometimes, though, the examples begin to pile up and the roadmap of how each chapter in the section is intricately related is somewhat obfuscated. For example, in section three, "Laughing Cow," what begins as a discussion of animal imagery and Mubarak moves quickly to a discussion of a well-documented Photoshopped image that attempted to place Mubarak as a central player in international politics in 2010 that is then immediately contextualized in a history lesson of how Mubarak consistently manipulated photos of himself since the 1970s to an examination of the "Kullina Khaled Said" (We Are All Khaled Said) Facebook campaign before sliding into an examination of the political comedy of Bassem Youssef and eventually culminating in an analysis of a dethroned and incarcerated Mubarak whose tears were discussed (or not discussed) by the media. Each individual analysis and chapter within this section is

informative with thoughtful new readings of the source material. With so many examples, however, the focus wavers and the parts of the section do not connect to a whole.

This incongruence is exacerbated by the structure of the book itself. There are numerous small chapters (some as short as two pages but most no longer than ten) within each section contextualizing the major moment of creative insurgency being discussed. For example, in the seven-page chapter that focuses on Ammar Abo Bakr's famous and poignant *Aliaa vs. Samira* stencil, Kraidy is able to brilliantly articulate the ways these two women's activism helped frame very different discussions of a gendered revolutionary body politic—the key for his analysis of *A Rebel's Diary*. The brevity of other chapters, however, can also be somewhat frustrating. For example, the chapter “Sextremism and Islamophobia” focuses on the actions of the group Femen, the reactions to Amina Sboui, a nineteen-year old Tunisian woman who posed topless on her Facebook page, and the creative insurgency of Deena Mohamed who created the feminist webcomic, *Qahera*. The point of this chapter is central to underscoring the way that non-Arab feminists often demonize Islam with unchecked xenophobia. Due to the chapter's brevity, however, the examples are not fully realized and the messy and uncomfortable politics of Femen are stripped of its complications and become one-dimensional. Perhaps they are, but since al-Mahdy has a tenuous relationship with Femen, sometimes working with them in her protests, a fuller reading of Femen would have helped frame al-Mahdy's creative insurgencies as she lives in exile in Scandinavia.

But my small frustrations are born from a desire that *The Naked Blogger of Cairo* would be double its size, allowing Kraidy the space to make all the connections he is striving to make. His analysis is always thoughtful and his writing is a pleasure to read, often bordering on the poetic. For example, Kraidy writes of the young men and women who offer their bodies in acts of creative insurgency, “Heroic bodies tend to be young, but some are not, though compared to dictators gone to seed, they look youthful indeed” (19). A beautiful sentence that celebrates the bodies of the insurgents while poking fun at the bodies of the dictators. In this way, Kraidy's wonderful scholarly book fits nicely into his own category of gradual insurgency.

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