

11 Book Reviews

The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World. By Marwan M. Kraidy. Harvard University Press, 2016. 304 pp. \$20.50.

The Naked Blogger of Cairo by professor of Communication Marwan M. Kraidy reframes the Arab Spring through an original narrative device: instead of looking at how technology mediated the revolution, Kraidy focuses on a different object of study and tool for mediation—the body. Following this theme, the author highlights key protagonists in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria who rebelled against systems of power. Methodically, Kraidy does several relatively short literary analyses of revolutionary performances as texts. While untypical of social or Media Studies approaches, this method is valuable to decrypt complex visual performances, and offer some interpretations of the protest art this generation of activists created. In that sense, *The Naked Blogger of Cairo* offers a new look at the events of the Arab Spring.

Kraidy spent thirteen months living in the region for fieldwork. To map out the different forms of protest art and body performances he witnessed and examined, he proposes the concept of “creative insurgency.” Kraidy identifies two kinds of insurgencies: one radical and spectacular, like setting oneself on fire in the case of fruit merchant Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia, and another, gradual and latent, which includes hunger strikes, graffiti and satire. In English, the term “insurgency” carries a certain connotation of armed uprising; it usually implies a negative portrayal of rebels against a system. I don’t think Kraidy intended this negative undertone. He explains that “insurgency” is about rising *up*, becoming *extra-ordinary* and *hyper* visual. In that sense, the concept is appropriate. The protest arts he describes are spectacular—sometimes in terrifying ways. They literally and metaphorically stand out from the crowd. I am less convinced by the distinction between gradual and radical, since most of the examples he describes combine an immediate dimension with a lingering social response. Isn’t the radical also gradual, as the initial shock ripples and escalates through the following days and weeks?

A point Kraidy stresses is that simpler distinctions between online and offline do not paint the full picture; the bodily spectacles he examines transcend the boundaries between physical and digital. The eponymous “naked blogger of Cairo,” Aliaa Elmahdy (the young woman who shocked Egypt with her nude self-

12 Book Reviews

portrait) is a good example of this: her art work is shared both online and as graffiti on the cityscape of Cairo. Kraidy argues that her portrait combines both a “radical” and a “gradual” insurgency, which confirms that these categories are not absolute. Unlike what the title of the book suggests, however, the monograph is not about Elmahdy but about a multitude of performances and young revolutionaries. A strength of the book is definitely the author’s memorable selection of characters and examples, and the tension between the title and the book cover is a good representation of the diverse insurgencies Kraidy describes: the fearless eyes of the veiled Muslim female superhero of the Qahera digital comic strips contrast with the evocation of Aliaa Elmahdy’s immodest performance of Western feminism.

In Kraidy’s monograph, the body serves as the allegory of the state but also as a canvas on which possible futures are imagined and represented. “The medium is the body,” (29) he explains in one of his pithy observations, typical of his clear and direct style. He insists that the body also functions as a metaphor of the people—a body that can suffer hunger (Captain Khobza), mutilation (Bouazizi), rape (Samira Ibrahim), or social death and exile (Elmahdy). The body of the dictator is also ridiculed as a wooden puppet (in Syria) or as an animal (in Egypt as a cow for Mubarak and a donkey for El-Sisi). What can be self-imposed (hunger strike, immolation) becomes a spectacle symbolizing state violence, thus empowering those oppressed with signifying agency and the potential to overthrow governments. In exploring and explaining these spectacular and dark moments of the Arab Spring, Kraidy remains very conscious of the victims’ integrity. His prose is respectful and self-aware; he notes the desperate and ironic “will for life” and “orientation toward the future” (52) of the martyrs of the revolution.

Kraidy relies on technical European theory on the body (Spinoza, Foucault, Merleau-Ponty) all the while keeping the book accessible and concrete. He applies savant frameworks onto recent examples that headlined media outlets around the world. I find this combination impressive and well-executed. However, some parallels felt exaggerated. I disagree with the analogy between Elmahdy’s naked self-portrait and the French Revolution painting *La Liberté guidant le peuple*. Though it is important to underline the French coding Elmahdy used and weaponized in her feminism, the Marianne allegory in the painting was

13 Book Reviews

neither sexual nor subversive against patriarchy: it was more of a mother figure whose half-nakedness has, I would argue, little in common with the Egyptian blog post. This lack of exactness is perhaps a downside of catering to a broad audience of both scholars and non-specialists: choosing striking references sometimes comes at the cost of precise scholarship. I did however appreciate the comparisons between the 2010s' insurgencies and the 1930s' to 1950s' decolonial jihads. Historical comparisons around the globe can feel fraught, but local historical retrospections are certainly relevant to point out in the transnational Arab context.

While some details of Kraidy's work can leave an expert reader dissatisfied, the overall rendering of the book is appealing and well-executed. In his effort to connect various tropes to his theoretical focus on the body, some passages are less convincing than others (like his argument that the eyes were a central symbolic element in the war between bodies). But ultimately, these arguments are valid if we understand the methodological context: *The Naked Blogger of Cairo* is not a Media Studies work *per se* but rather a textual analysis of the symbolic dimension of the revolutionary body. Kraidy's method is typical of a more vertical European scholarly tradition (looking at larger paradigms and ideological movements in order to generalize broad trends), and the reader expecting a more horizontal American method (emphasizing specificity and individual intentions) might be disappointed by this monograph. In the end, the 2010s Arab revolutions are still very recent, and Kraidy's more vertical and analytical gaze will probably be more typical of later retrospective studies. As a whole, this book offers an interesting and valuable example of how controversial or ongoing events can be read symbolically. I warmly recommend this work to advanced college undergrads and Master's students in the field of Middle Eastern Studies.

*Reviewed by Valentin Duquet
The University of Texas at Austin*