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Egyptian Movement Poetry

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Abstract

Poetry has long had a central place in the repertoires of modern Egyptian protest movements, but just as social science accounts of these movements downplay the role of expressive arts (such as poetry), literary studies of colloquial Egyptian poetry have downplayed the performative dynamic of this poetry, as well as its role within social movements. This essay develops the concept of "movement poetry" within the Egyptian social movements, with a special focus on the protest cycle of 1968-1977. In so doing, it discusses the work of Abdel Rahman el-Abnoudi (ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Abnūdī), Ahmed Fouad Negm (Aḥmad Fuʾād Nijm), Samīr ʿAbd al-Bāqī, and others, and considers the conventions and repertoires that extend to Egyptian activists in the present.

Keywords

Egypt – colloquial Arabic poetry – social movement – Ahmed Fouad Negm (Aḥmad Fuʾād Nijm) – Abdel Rahman el-Abnoudi (ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Abnūdī) – Samīr ʿAbd al-Bāqī

While colloquial poets have long worked at the center of modern Egyptian social movements, scholars have tended to treat the "politics" of this poetry in terms of topos.[1] The political themes of Ahmed Fouad Negm or Fuʾād Ḥaddād's poetry are unmissable, as are their political contexts. But comparatively little has been said about the performative aspect of these poets' art: how such poetry exists not for the page, but for live performance and how it does not merely *speak about* politics, but *generates* politics through live events that mobilize,

1 Transliteration keeps to the spoken dialect, as the article is about Egyptian colloquial slogans, poetry, and other forms of popular activism.

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focus, and sustain "contentious politics."[2] In separating poetry from the context of social movements, scholars have treated these two fields of activity—poetry and contentious politics—as if they were autonomous. Yet poetic practices and performances are so entangled in the repertoires of modern Egyptian social movements that there is often no line between these activities.

To address this gap, this essay seeks to conceptualize "movement poetry" as a coherent field of aesthetic/political activity in itself.[3] By "movement poets," I mean those Egyptian poets, and activists who compose poetry, who are active in political parties and social movements and practice their craft within the organizations, goals, and contexts of those movements. In this essay, I will focus on the student movement of the 1970s, but as will become apparent, the conventions of movement poetry transcend particular generations of activists as well as their specific sectors of action. Some movement poets, such as Ahmed Fouad Negm, are firmly established within the national literary canon. Others—such as Samīr ʿAbd al-Bāqī, Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn Fuʾād, Sayed Hegab, Yusrī Khamīs, Fuʾād Qāʿūd, Muḥammad Sayf, and Maḥmūd al-Shādhilī—are well known as "political poets," a phrase which suggests that the literary quality of their work is overshadowed by their political stance.[4] Still other poets—Kamāl

2 On this term and its significance in social movement theory, see Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 8-15.

3 The term is adapted from Rob Rosenthal's research on "movement music" in the United States. See: Rob Rosenthal, "Serving the Movement: The Role(s) of Music," *Music & Society* 25: 3-4, 11-24; and Rob Rosenthal and Richard Flacks, *Playing for Change: Music and Musicians in the Service of Social Movements* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2012).

4 Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn Fuʾād is author of many collections of poetry, including: *il-Ḥilm fī il-sign* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Khaldūn, 1978); *Mīn illī yiqdar sāʿah yiḥbis Maṣr* (Cairo: al-Hayʾah al-Miṣriyyah al-ʿĀmmah li-l-Kitāb, 2012) and *Wishsh Maṣr*. (Cairo: al-Maṭbaʿah al-Fanniyyah al-Ḥadīthah, 1972). Sayed Hegab (1940-) is a colloquial poet, playwright and children's story writer. He worked at *Samīr* magazine, and was a founder of the avant-garde literary journal *Gallery 68*. He wrote the lyrics to Sheikh Imam's (Shaykh Imām or Imām Muḥammad Aḥmad ʿĪsā) song, "*Ḥaṭṭah yā baṭṭah*" as well as songs for Shadia, Ali El Haggar, and Mohamed Mounir. His scores appear in many Egyptian television and films, including *el-Kīt Kāt*, *Layh yā banafsag*, *il-Arāgōz*, and *Mercedes*. Yusrī Khamīs (1937-2011) was born in Dan ̄ūshir (al-Maḥallah al-Kubrā). He worked as a veterinarian and translator from German. He was also a prolific poet, playwright and screenwriter, and the creator of the children's television show *Būgī wa-Ṭamṭam*. While the colloquial poet Fuʾād Qāʿūd (1936-2006) did not join any political group, his poetry widely circulated within activist groups. His poetry collections include: *il-Iʿtirāḍ* (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat New Savoy, 1977); and *il-Mawāwīl* (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-Muʿāṣir, 1978). Muḥammad Sayf is author of *Ghanāʾiyyāt* (Cairo: Maṭbūʿāt al-Ḥayāh al-Jadīdah, n.d [c.1973]). Maḥmūd al-Shādhilī is author of many collections, including: *Ḥikāyāt il-darb il-aḥmar* (Cairo: Markaz al-Maḥrūsah, 2009); *Min khaymah fī il-Taḥrīr: ashʿār Maṣriyyah* (Cairo: Markaz al-Haḍārah al-ʿArabiyyah, 2011); *Raṣāṣ il-kalām: ashʿār Maṣriyyah* (Cairo: Dār al-Sharqiyyāt li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzīʿ, 2002).

Khalīl and Kamal Abu Eita (Kamāl Abū al-ʿAyṭah)—are widely recognized as virtuoso artists *within* their movements, but not commonly thought of as poets outside.[5] But these figures are only the tip of the iceberg: thousands of other poet activists have labored semi-anonymously in the street, campus, and factory to make politics with poetry.

My goal is not to argue for the inclusion of *texts* within the existing literary canon, but rather to outline a field of vibrant, popular literary *activity* that is taking place on different terms than those offered by traditional literary study. Similarly, I do not seek to argue simply that the rhetoric of movement poetry creates a discursive context that enables and fuels contentious politics or, in the language of social movement theory, that poetry works to "frame" insurgent politics by thematizing issues, articulating complaints, and setting demands.[6] Foundational accounts of modern Egyptian colloquial poetry have achieved this purpose.[7] Instead, my goal is to shift focus from the purely linguistic and semantic aspects of poetry to the other dynamics at play during collective performances and repertoires. Movement poetry is not just about what poems say, it is also about what poems and poets *do*. In this sense, movement poetry contributes centrally to the labor of (micro) mobilization.[8]

To accomplish this, I will make a number of separate, but interlocking arguments. First, movement poetry demands to be studied both as a set of social practices and as works of language arts. Methodologically, this entails seeing

5 Khalīl is widely acknowledged to be the premiere slogan-composer (and song-leader) in the country. See below, and also his memoir: Kamāl Khalīl, *Hikāyāt min zaman fāt: sīrah dhātiyyah min khilāl al-aḥdāth* (Cairo: Bayt al-Yāsmīn li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzīʿ, 2012).

6 For an overview of the social movement theory scholarship on framing, see: Sidney Tarrow, *The Language of Contention: Revolutions in Words, 1688-2012* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 29-32.

7 Joel Beinin, "Writing Class: Workers and Modern Egyptian Colloquial Poetry (*Zajal*)," *Poetics Today* 15: 2 (1994), 191-215; Marilyn Booth, "Colloquial Arabic Poetry, Politics, and the Press in Modern Egypt," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 24: 3 (1992), 419-40; Marilyn Booth, "Exploding into the Seventies: Ahmad Fu'ad Nigm, Shaykh Imam, and the Aesthetics of a New Youth Politics," *Cairo Papers in Social Science* 29: 2-3 (2006), 19-44; Marilyn Booth, "Beneath Lies the Rock: Contemporary Egyptian Poetry and the Common Tongue," *World Literature Today* 75:2 (Spring 2001), 257-266; Clarissa Burt, "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: The Canonical Sieve and Poems from an Egyptian Avant Garde," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 28:2 (July 1997), 141-178; Hala Halim, "Aḥmad Fu'ād Najm: Speaking Truth to Power," in *I Say My Words Out Loud: Ahmed Fouad Negm* (N.P.: Prince Claus Fund, N.D.), 44-; Richard Jacquemond, "La poésie en Égypte aujourd'hui: état des lieux d'un champ 'en crise'," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 21 (2001), 182-231; and Noha Radwan, *Egyptian Colloquial Poetry in the Modern Arabic Canon: New Readings of Shiʿr al-ʿAmmiyya* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

8 Doug McAdam, "Micromobilization Contexts and Recruitment to Activism," *International Social Movement Research* 1 (1988), 125-154.

them as mutually constitutive. As Steve Caton has argued with respect to the political performance of poetry in Yemen, "[a]rtworks as practices are active agents, not just passive reagents, in history."[9] Second, authorship in movement poetry is often collective rather than individual. Thus, our definition of poetry needs to be broad enough to encompass the slogan genres most commonly employed in social movements.[10] Indeed, slogan genres and more conventional genres of poetry circulate alongside each other within protest cultures in symbiotic ways. Third, while movement poetry is often attributed to individual authors, some of whom are well-known, much movement poetry circulates in an anonymous form. Fourth, it is the performance of poetry that matters most for grasping its circulation and impact. Crucially, these performances are ones in which audiences participate actively. Indeed, the collective experience of singing or chanting poetry together is as significant as the words themselves, if not more so. Together, these dynamics create a collective, lively ethos.

In the first section that follows, I will sketch how widespread poetry performance has been within the activities of modern social movements in Egypt, with particular reference to organizations on the left. In the second section, I will develop what I mean by the collective and performative aspect of movement poetry. In the third section, I discuss one movement poet, Samīr ʿAbd al-Bāqī, whose career highlights the ties between movement politics and poetics in modern Egypt.

Egyptian Movement Poetry: An Overview

While not all Egyptian social movements have employed literary forms to the same end, it is remarkable how consistently prominent poetry has been with leftist and Nasserist movements and organizations.[11] This is because poetry is not something that is merely employed during assemblies and demonstrations, marches, and occupations. Poetry is so central to leftist repertoire that during many actions, there is no difference between the performance of activism and

9 Steven C. Caton, *Peaks of Yemen I Summon: Poetry as Cultural Practice in a North Yemeni Tribe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 250.

10 See Kamāl Mughīth, *Hitāfāt al-thawrah al-Miṣriyyah: wa-nuṣūṣuhā al-kāmilah* (Cairo: al-Majlis al-Aʿlā li-l-Thaqāfah, 2014); and Elliott Colla, "The Poetry of Revolt" in *The Journey to Tahrir: Revolution, Protest, and Social Change in Egypt, 1999-2011*, eds. Jeannie Sowers and Chris Toensing (New York: Verso Books, 2012), pp. 47-52.

11 A separate study of the place of poetry in modern Islamist movements in Egypt is warranted, since neither the Muslim Brotherhood nor Salafists employ poetic forms in the ways described in this paper.

the performance of poetry. This is true in the most ordinary sense: Egyptian activists almost always at some point engage in poetry—declaiming, chanting, and singing—when they go to the street, when they hold events, when they stage strikes or sit-ins, or when they do battle with the police.[12]

One can grasp this by surveying official state responses to the mass protests of January 18-19, 1977.[13] Two things stand out from this material: first, how central and vexing poetry appeared to state intelligence as they attempted to suppress student and labor movements; second, how many people were implicated in the production and circulation of poetry. Consider in this regard the testimony of a police informant who describes a student action that took place on the eve of the mass protests:

> At about 1PM on 17 January, there was a gathering at the pathology lecture hall of the Veterinary School of Cairo University. The singer ʿAdlī Fakhrī[14] was present, as were the poets Ḥamdī ʿĪd[15] and Fārūq Ḥajjāj. ʿAdlī Fakhrī announced that the government had raised the prices on some commodities.... The students goaded those present at the event to take a stand against these policies, trying to create an atmosphere of chaos and hostility toward the government by various anarchistic tactics. Then Ḥamdī ʿĪd stood up to recite some provocative poems, like the one in which he ridicules Sadat:
>
> في عيد ميلادك يا صاحب السعادة
> حنشرب جميعاً كيزان قهوة سادة

12 Examples of this abound in the video archives of The Mosireen Collective (https://www.mosireen.com), as well as in the memoirs of the 2011 Uprising. See: Ibrahim Abdel Meguid (Ibrāhīm ʿAbd al-Majīd), *Li-kull arḍ mīlād: ayyām al-Taḥrīr* (Cairo: Dār Akhbār al-Yawm, 2011); Mona Prince, *Ismī thawrah* (Cairo: n.p, n.d. [2012]); Saʿd al-Qirsh, *al-Thawrah al-ān* (Cairo: al-Kutubkhān li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzīʿ, 2012). Aḥmad Zaghlūl al-Shayṭī, *Maʾat khaṭwah min al-thawrah: yawmiyyāt min Maydān al-Taḥrīr* (Cairo: Dār Merit, 2011).

13 These accounts were composed for the state's spurious case against student and labor activists, charging them with conspiracy and incitement. Even so, it is significant that those who collected and published them have tended to be either activists themselves, or their lawyers. Read alongside movement memoirs they can help to reconstruct the various roles of movement poets within parties, organizations and even particular actions.

14 ʿAdlī Fakhrī (1940-1999) was a composer, singer and oud musician who collaborated often with movement poets. He is especially remembered for his work in Samīr ʿAbd al-Bāqī's musical plays.

15 Ḥamdī ʿĪd (d. 2018) wrote lyrics to the song "Naẓrah wāḥdah" (performed by Muḥammad Munīr) as well as the libretto to several musical plays, including *ʿAmm Gilgil* (1982) and *Filūs filūs* (1985).

ونطفي شموعك وندعى الهك
يحنن علينا ويقطعها عادة
اذا كان جميع الخلف يبقى زيك
فيا رب تستر وتلغى الولادة
وطلع عنينا
كانك مجاري
وطفحت علينا
وعايمين في فقرك لحد الإبادة

For your birthday, Your Highness
We'll drink down cups of bitter coffee
We'll blow out your candles and pray that your God
Goes easy on us and makes sure we never have to celebrate your birthday again!
If all offspring are to be like you
God protect us and get rid of procreation.
We've had it up to here.
As if you were a sewer
Spilling out on us
While we float on your poverty until we're eradicated …[16]

The Head of State Security for Cairo, for instance, notes how student and labor activists repeated slogans "to incite the man of the street to join their movement."[17] Picking up on this, Mamdūḥ Sālim, the Speaker of the Parliament, described a well-organized assault of words:

> Their activities are remarkably similar wherever they work, with respect to the content of their slogan-poems (*hitāfāt*) and written slogans (*shiʿārāt*), which they repeat to incite (*taḥrīḍ*) the masses to join them. It is useful to mention in this regard that we confiscated from the accused

16 The entire scene is taken from: "*Shahādat Muḥammad Ḥātim Zahrān*," in Ḥusayn ʿAbd al-Rāziq, *Miṣr fī 18 wa-19 yanāyir: dirāsah siyāsiyyah wa-wathāʾiqiyyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kalima, 1979), 236-7. While widely remembered, this poem has never, to my knowledge, been published. All translations mine.

17 "*Taqrīr al-sayyid al-liwāʾ mudīr amn al-Qāhirah*," in ʿAbd al-Rāziq, 201.

> many of these slogans, handwritten on loose sheets of paper, inside notebooks and on broadsheets (*majallāt ḥā'iṭ*).[18]

Other security reports list movement poets and artists—Negm and Sheikh Imam, Maḥmūd al-Shādhilī, and the activist and slogan-composer Kamāl Khalīl. The accounts are filled with descriptions of "problematic" activities—including concerts and poetry readings (*umsiyyāt*), salons (*nadawāt*), broadsheet postings, discussion circles (*ḥalaqāt al-ḥiwār*), slogan-chanting—all of which are tied up in the production and circulation of movement poetry.

The accusation of leading demonstrations was invariably tied to charges of leading slogan chants. Informant and police accounts routinely describe how activists were apprehended or photographed while "being carried on the shoulders of others"—i.e., while song-leading.[19] Just as activists became poets by composing slogans, so to did established poets join in the action of singing slogans. As the same informant quoted above describes:

> The demonstrations continued until Bāb al-Sha'riyya, where they were met by the poet Zayn al-'Ābidīn Fu'ād … He rode the wave of the demonstration and began to repeat some of the slogan-poems calling for class struggle, e.g., "We are students, standing with workers against oppression and exploitation, against the wealth of the few, at the expense of the many!" and "The poor live in hovels while ministers live in palaces."[20]

At one point, the informant's handler asks, "You have already mentioned that Sheikh Imam 'Īsā, Ahmed Fouad Negm, and 'Adlī Fakhrī attended the poetry and political events at various college campuses. Are they members of the Egyptian Workers Communist Party or one of the other other hostile clandestine cells?" The informant answers,

18 "*Ijābat al-sayyid ra'īs majlis al-wuzarā' 'alā ṭalabāt al-iḥāṭah al-muqaddamah min ba'ḍ al-sādah a'ḍā' al-majlis bi-sha'n aḥdāth 18 wa-19 yanāyir sanat 1977*", in 'Abd al-Rāziq, 150. Sālim's statement closely follows "*Taqrīr al-sayyid al-liwā' mudīr amn al-Qāhirah*," also in 'Abd al-Rāziq, 203.

19 For example, "The communist Ṭal'at Mu'ādh Rumayḥ… was apprehended distributing leaflets inciting the masses against the government, and he also is shown in security footage to be leading the demonstrations, while being carried on people's shoulders", "*Mudhakkirat mabāḥith amn al-dawlah 'an al-mukhaṭṭaṭ al-shuyū'ī al-sirrī wa-mas'ūliyyatihi 'an aḥdāth al-shaghab al-akhīrah*," in 'Abd al-Rāziq, 217.

20 "*Shahādat Muḥammad Ḥātim Zahrān*," in 'Abd al-Rāziq, 238.

> Ḥamdī ʿĪd and his poet friend, Samīr ʿAbd al-Bāqī, were composing poems and songs for ʿAdlī Fakhrī to sing. Their poetry is meant to inspire class struggle and to incite the working class, as they call it, against the other classes. Ḥamdī and ʿAdlī were always going to the universities and civic organizations together, ʿAdlī would sing, and Ḥamdī would recite his poetry. As for Sheikh Imam—Negm and the poet Zayn al-ʿAbidin Fuʾād would write the poems he would sing. Negm would be the one who would recite anti-regime poetry, and ad hominem attacks on the President of the Republic.[21]

These accounts provide a map of what might be fairly called poetic activities: poetry is being written and posted in wall magazines; poetry is being declaimed during salons; poetry is being sung at concerts where musicians and poets perform together; poetry is being chanted by crowds in the streets. Second, those declaiming, singing and chanting are not necessarily the authors of poems; more often than not, there is no clear line between "audience" and "performer" at all. The third point is that these activities are not separated from one another, nor separated from other forms of political activity.

The sum total of this activity is what I am calling the field of movement poetry. While movement poetry involves a spectrum of activities, it consists largely of two forms. The first is the slogan-poem, informally composed and presented as authorless, circulating as if it were a spontaneous improvised outcry. Slogan-poems are different from other poetic forms in terms of their size: many slogan-poems are quatrains, but the vast majority are couplets. But this poses no problem for conceptualizing them as poetry. Like other genres of Arabic poetry, colloquial and classical, these slogans are shaped by the regular conventions of rhyme, meter and purpose.[22] Like the epigram, its soul is brevity.[23]

In a major study of the phenomenon, Kamāl Mughīth has mapped the various rhetorics and genres of Egyptian slogans—championing and praising; invective and shaming; complaint and demand; elegy and exasperation—whose range and tenor are remarkable.[24] As Mughīth's study illustrates, there is a bias

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21 "*Shahādat Muḥammad Ḥātim Zahrān*," in ʿAbd al-Rāziq, 232.

22 See: Elliott Colla, "In Praise of Insults: Slogan Genres, Slogan Repertoires and Innovation," *Review of Middle East Studies* 47:1 (Summer 2013), pp. 37-48.

23 Adam Talib, *How Do You Say "epigram" in Arabic?: Literary History at the Limits of Comparison* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

24 Kamāl Mughīth, *Hitāfāt al-thawrah al-Miṣriyyah*. Other resources on the subject include: Ashraf Yūsuf, "*Fays-būk ʿalā kull ẓālim: al-hitāfāt wa-l-lāfitāt fī al-thawrah al-Miṣriyyah*," in *Kitāb al-thawrah: al-kitābah al-ukhrā* 2:2 (March 2011), 27-43.

in the historical record of slogan-making. While it is possible to find evidence of slogan-poems within Egyptian protest repertoires of the last century, documentation is fleeting and mostly confined to words. The result is that when slogans appear in memoirs or studies, they do so as lists of small texts, stripped of their performative context. Rare are the descriptions of how such poems were composed by movement participants, circulated among organizations, performed during actions, and revised and recycled over time.

For this reason, video recordings of the most recent protest cycle (2000-2013) are critical resources because, alongside published memoirs, police reports and eyewitness accounts, they allow us to see the extra-linguistic, performative aspects of slogan-poems, as well as the processes behind their composition and evolution. Over the course of the 18 days of the 2011 uprising, hundreds of these slogan-couplets were composed and sung by tens of thousands of people at the same time. The form was not new, even if the scale was: crowds of hundreds, and even thousands, might sing rhyming, musical slogan compositions that go on for many minutes, without having known the composition prior to the action and without the aid of amplification. Most slogan-poems have a very brief half-life. They are picked up one day and discarded the next. Others remain in circulation for much longer. Still others disappear, only to become recycled at a later date. As we shall see, this process of re-use can span decades.

While informal, this kind of movement poetry is not left to chance: groups routinely rely on individuals known for their knowledge of slogan traditions and wit. As part of the preparation for an event, "slogan composers" (*muʾallifīn hitāfāt*) are asked to compile lists of slogans for the group to use for that occasion. The process is informal and it is common for multiple lists to be created by many hands. During the 2007 Tax Collector strike, which featured a lengthy sit-in, a "Slogan and Poetry Committee" (*lajnat al-hitāfāt wa-l-shiʿr*) ensured a steady stream of new material.[25] Accounts of the Ultras describe similar patterns, with committees dedicated to producing slogans and songs, others for painting lines onto banners and signs.[26] Those who compose slogans draw on a well-known reservoir of discourse: famous lines of poetry or song; a phrase (*effeyh*) from a film or folklore; recent or timeless words of a public figure; and slogans from previous actions, with some or no modification. Originality counts, but only if presented in the form of familiarity. Often talented slogan composers win the *nom de guerre* (*ism ḥarakī*) of "poet" (*al-shāʿir*)

25 See: Jamāl Muḥammad ʿUwayḍah, ed., *Malḥamat iʿtiṣām muwaẓẓafī al-ḍarāʾib al-ʿaqārīyyah* (Cairo: Markaz al-Dirāsāt al-Ishtirākiyyah, 2008).

26 See: Muḥammad Jamāl Bashīr, *al-Ultrās: ʿindamā tataʿaddī al-jamāhīr al-ṭabīʿah* (Cairo: Dār Dawwin li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzīʿ, 2011).

for their efforts. Within activist groups, there are also individuals known for their loud voices, stamina and courage. A song-leader (*hattīf*) is given the task of leading the chants, sustaining them in difficult times, and knowing when to change course and adapt. The form is either call and response, or lead and follow. As one person's voice wavers, another steps forward to take up the slack. Sometimes the leader will use a script of specially-coined slogans but always, the main slogans will be based on ones already used successfully in a previous action.

The second, different kind of movement poetry is often indistinguishable from conventional *zajal* poetry in that it is formally composed and presented as the work of a specific named author. Like other forms of colloquial poetry, it can be written down and published. But given the intensity of its phonetic quality, the print format is clearly secondary. Some have a simple sing-song quality that goes flat on the page. Others are characterized by dense prosody, as well as thickets of internal rhyme, pun, and nonce. This kind of poetry shares three important things with slogan-poetry: first, it often (but not always) engages with explicitly political themes, demands and social critique; second, it circulates primarily in oral form, usually in the context of live poetry readings and musical performances; and third, its first audiences are movement cadres who take up their stanzas and lines—singing, declaiming, and speaking them as if the lines were their own. What makes this kind of poetry "movement poetry" is the dynamic, and performative way it circulates within social movements, which creates a sense of collective ownership and consciousness.[27]

Staged readings of poetry, with poets reciting their own compositions, are a regular event of many social movements in Egypt. As ritual events saturated with meaning, they are often remembered as a focal point of strikes, sit-ins and marches.[28] Readings are also a regular feature within organizational meetings

27 Salma Khadra Jayyusi's category of "platform poetry" is useful to recall in this regard, if by way of contrast. Jayyusi's focus is on poetry composed according to Khalīlian prosody (even if modified by modernists) in formal Arabic (*fuṣḥā*). This formality sets it apart from the colloquial poetry of Egyptian social movements, and not just in terms of register. The distance of formal idiom also seems to permeate the situation of performance itself: platform poetry is, in al-Jayyusi's account, one of (active) poets who recite to (passive) audiences. The dynamic of colloquial movement poetry is one in which poet-audience divisions break down and even reverse during performance. See: Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977).

28 This clearly has a long history, see: Mughīth, *Hitāfāt*; and *Hadīl al-yamām warā' al-quḍbān: mukhtārāt min qaṣā'id al-shu'arā' al-shuyū'iyyīn al-Miṣriyyīn fī al-sujūn wa-l-mu'taqalāt fīmā bayna 1945-1965*, ed. Samīr 'Abd al-Bāqī (Cairo: Dār al-'Ālam al-Thālith, 2008).

and political assemblies.[29] Similarly, poetry readings and song performances of poems set to music have been a regular feature of small and large-scale occupations of Tahrir Square—in 1972, 1973, 2003 and from 2011-3.

Student activists of the 1970s commonly pursued political work by way of such literary events, whether within administration-approved affinity groups or by way of clandestine cell organizations.[30] A culture of wall-magazines flourished on Egyptian campuses, featuring original, topical poems as well as lines and adaptations from the literary canon.[31] Poetry readings were not just cultural events; they were also occasions for gauging support among the wider student body and for testing the resolve of regime officials and their campus supporters. Accounts of this period never fail to mention the central, notorious place of concerts and poetry events featuring Ahmed Fouad Negm and Sheikh Imam.[32] With those activist groups, consciousness-raising committees (*lijān al-tawʿiyah*) made sure that the performance of poetry and song was on the agenda for conferences, strikes and sit-ins.

The oral dynamic of these two forms of movement poetry is unmistakable. Yet, since the 1970s, there has been a concerted effort to publish movement poetry of the more formal, composed kind. Thus movement poetry pervades the official organs of the state-sanctioned left—from state-sponsored magazines such as *Majallat al-Ṭalīʿah* (1965-1977) and *Sanābil* (1969-72), to party publications, such as *Adab wa-Naqd* (1984-), and more radical activist ventures, such as *al-Muwājahah*, the publication of the anti-normalization movement, *al-Lajnah li-l-difāʿ ʿan al-thaqāfah al-waṭaniyyah*.[33] Despite the fluctuating

29 On the place of poetry ritual within Yemeni political culture, see: Caton, *Peaks of Yemen*.

30 Aḥmad Bahāʾ al-Dīn Shaʿbān, *Anḥaztu li-l-waṭan: shahādah min jīl al-ghaḍab: safaḥāt min tārīkh al-ḥarakah al-waṭaniyyah al-dīmūqrāṭiyyah li-ṭullāb Miṣr* (*1968-1977*) (Cairo: Markaz al-Maḥrūsah, 1998), 55-7.

31 Student memoirs attest to the existence of a lively and free "media culture" of newspapers, magazines and broadsides. Throughout the 1970s, Sadat repeatedly voiced his frustration with the culture of wall-magazines (*majallāt al-ḥāʾiṭ*) that had emerged in Egyptian campuses, where students would report and comment on current events without asking for permission from university officials. Hand-scripted or typed, mimeographed or printed, these broadsides might be torn down immediately or remain in place for hours, long enough for thousands of students to peruse them. In its day, these broadsides functioned effectively as a social media platform for the unfettered exchange of information, claims and views.

32 See, for instance Ahmed Abdalla's groundbreaking study, *The Student Movement and National Politics in Egypt, 1923-1973* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008); Salāḥ ʿĪsā, *Shāʿir takdīr al-amn al-ʿāmm* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2007) and Aḥmad Bahāʾ al-Din Shaʿban, *Anḥaztu li-l-waṭan*.

33 Some of the most lively independent literary journals of this period, such as *Jālīrī* (*Gallery*) *68* (1969-71), *Iḍāʾah* (1977-88), and *Adab al-ghad* (1983-4) were founded and

size and strength of these social movements, they managed to support not just vibrant literary initiatives, but others as well, such the semi-independent group of writers, *Kuttāb al-Ghad*, and the publishing house *Dar al-Thaqāfah al-Jadīdah*.

Collective Performance and Micromobilization

As a common feature of social movement conferences, meetings, and rallies, poetry is first and foremost a kind of performance. The Egyptian poet and activist Aḥmad Ḥasan describes his participation in a meeting of Ḥizb al-Tagammuʿ in Helwan in late 1977.[34] At this meeting, the poet Abdel Rahman el-Abnoudi—a leading movement poet of the 1960s with unimpeachable left-nationalist politics—had been specially invited to read a new poem, "*Sūq al-ʿaṣr*" ("Today's Market"). This poem employs the language of markets to condemn the tired American-Soviet terms of the Cold War and to tug on the discursive openings of the post-Nasser moment. Yet, in the context of Sadat's Infitah (*infitāḥ*), and the neoliberal valorization of free markets, el-Abnoudi's choice of the market metaphor was too ambiguous for some. Before el-Abnoudi could begin, the crowd began to boo. Then people began to loudly declaim well-known lines from el-Abnoudi's rival, the poet Ahmed Fouad Negm:[35]

الثوري النوري الكلمنجي
هلاب الدين الشفطنجي
قاعد في الصفّ الاكلنجي
شكلاطة و كاراميلا

run by former and current movement poets and writers, including Sayed Hegab, Abdel Rahman el-Abnoudi, and Yahya Taher Abdullah (Yaḥyā al-Ṭāhir ʿAbd Allāh). See Elisabeth Kendall, *Literature, Journalism and the Avant-Garde: Intersection in Egypt* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Yasmine Ramadan, "The Emergence of the Sixties Generation in Egypt and the Anxiety over Categorization," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 43 (2012), 409-430. On *al-Muwājahah*, see Barbara Harlow, "Mismar Goha: The Arab Challenge to Cultural Dependency," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 87:1 (1988), pp. 109-129.

34 Ḥasan is a colloquial poet and long-standing activist within the Trotskyist Left of Cairo. Interview (December 18, 2017).

35 Ahmed Fouad Negm (Aḥmad Fu'ād Nijm), *Baladī wa-ḥabībatī* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Khaldūn, 1973), 71-3; *al-Fāgūmī: al-sīrah al-dhātiyyah al-kāmilah* (Cairo: Dār al-Aḥmadī li-l-Nashr, N.d.), 571. According to the first source, Negm composed the poem while in Qanāṭir Prison in 1971; according to the second, it was in 1970.

يتركس بعض الأيام
يتسلم بعض الأيّام
ويصاحب كل الحكّام
وبسطعشر ملّة

Troublemaker, con-man, big-talking word-man
Religion-milker, sponging grifter
Sitting in the classroom, stuffing his face
With bon-bons
Some days, he puts his Marx on
Others, he's wearing Islam
He's goes with every strongman,
And sixteen different kinds …

Nijm had penned this poem, "*Ḥalāwīlā*," a few years before while in the Qanāṭir Prison in order to excoriate political opportunists within the regime.

On that day, however, the invective was directed at el-Abnoudi. The challenge couldn't have been clearer: activists were accusing the old poet, once a supporter of Nasser, of selling out to the Sadatist reaction. El-Abnoudi's betrayal could not have been clearer: his praise for the free-for-all marketplace was as good as propaganda for the Infitah itself. Though incensed, el-Abnoudi kept his cool. When the heckling subsided, he raised his voice:[36]

خلّي الكلام ياخد براحه يا خال
ما تقولش حرّيه
وأنا صوتي مش صوتي
وأبقى جاوبني لما يفلت سؤال
بدال ما تكرهني وتناور على موتي
خلّي الكلام ياخد نفس مرتاح
ويمدّ دراعاته

Let our words take their time, Uncle!
Don't call it freedom

36 Abdel Rahman el-Abnoudi (ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Abnūdī), *al-Mashrūʿ wa-l-mamnūʿ* (Cairo: Madbūlī, 1985), 8-9. For a rich discussion of this poem, see Radwan, 190.

If my voice is not my own.
Go ahead and respond when a question comes out.
Better that than your hating me and moving in for the kill.
Let our words take a breath
Let them stretch out their arms …

According to Ḥasan, the mood turned in an instant. Here, el-Abnoudi was showing his audience another possible way to think of their moment. As those lines sank in, and with them his simple call for good-faith open debate instead of *ad hominem* denunciations, el-Abnoudi raised his voice and began to recite the entire poem, this time from the beginning:

الوحي ده
ما جانيش من موسكو
ما جانيش من أمريكا
ما جانيش غير من هنا من القلب
فأنا باعتقد إني باحبّ الوطن
وأموت فداء للشعب
أنا صوتي مني و أنا ابن ناس فقرا
شائت ظروفي إني أكتب وأقرا
فباشوف وباغني …
خلّي الكلام ياخد براحه يا خال

The inspiration for these lines didn't come from Moscow
Didn't come to me from America
It came to me from here, from the heart
For I believe that I love my country
And would give my life for the people
My voice comes from me, and I come from poor folk
As circumstances would have it, I can write and read
And see things and sing …

For activists, Negm's lines provided the language to denounce an "ambiguous" stance vis-à-vis Sadat's Infitah. In repeating Negm's words, these cadres come to own them—speaking as if they had composed them. At the same time, by

speaking Negm's words they come to speak with one voice. As Lisa Wedeen has argued, public performances inherently contain spaces, uncertainties, and openings.[37] As events where norms and stances are constituted publicly, they are also moments in which values and positions are also up for grabs. In performance, there is no guarantee that the event will go as scripted. These ambiguities of performance are what allowed activists to interrupt el-Abnoudi's poetry recital. By the same token, they are what allowed el-Abnoudi to absorb the assault and turn it back upon his attackers.

While this particular event from 1977 may not be widely recalled, these poems are. This brings us to the last dimension of movement poetry: its circulation within repertoires of song. The activists who interrupted el-Abnoudi may have encountered Negm's poem during a live reading or more likely by way of the song "*Ḥalāwīlā*," a standard of Sheikh Imam's concerts from that period. Renditions of the song were not only played by amateur groups, but also circulated by way of audiocassettes widely shared among activists.[38] The same active dynamics of live performance obtain also for these recordings: audiences do not always sit passively, listening to lyrics, but often sing along, especially in groups. In this way, it is not uncommon for movement cadres to memorize vast numbers of poetic lines, any of which might be effectively used at different occasions: to crystalize sentiment, to reaffirm core values, to frame otherwise inchoate and shifting situations, and to disrupt the framing activities of opponents.[39]

Poetry in such scenes is not ornament to the business of contentious politics; it also becomes the language of contention itself. Moreover, this scene shows how the meaning of poetry goes beyond the words of the poem. The poems are there as linguistic texts, but they are also pretexts for performances that are as physical as they are linguistic and ideological. In these performances, cadres raise their bodies, their voices and their stakes. They shout out and shout down. With poetry, they take stances and begin and end debates. In sum, this scene illustrates how poetry is a context for politics: a commonly

37 See Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

38 On the history and dynamics of audiocassette culture in Egypt, see Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

39 Far from being a relic of the past, the lyrics of "*Ḥalāwīlā*" are still part of a living cultural tradition that goes beyond the repertoires of movement poetry. In late 2016, an electro-pop version was recorded by the Egyptian singer, Maryam Saleh. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUZ6-hVsPQo>.

scheduled agenda item in political meetings; a language for dissent and debate about the nature of politics itself; and a public arena in which that takes place.

This last observation recalls Doug McAdam's seminal essay on micromobilization in which he outlines how such situations orient activists toward "cognitive liberation" by providing them with a discursive context, organizational roles and practices, and events that invite active participation rather than passive membership. Even in the above scene, we can see how the situation not only implies a shared knowledge of poetic canons, but that poet and audience alike understand that the dynamic, shifting character of performance. They know how the roles of speaker and addressee might turn back and forth, and they also know how to make those turns happen. Moreover, the collective nature of this performance—the experience of sharing a language and stage—is one that erodes "the tendency of people to explain their situation as a function of individual rather than situational factors" and thus facilitates the formation of a "collective consciousness."[40]

Bricolage: Collecting and the Collective Voice

The collective quality of movement poetry permeates its performances, circulation and even the process of composition. If this is true within formal staged poetry readings, it is even truer in the case of slogan-poems. Participants in the 2011 Egyptian uprising regularly describe how the act of joining the demonstrations fundamentally altered their feelings and understandings of self, community, and the possible. Some descriptions of this feeling echo Victor Turner's concept of "communitas" and Emile Durkheim's notion of "collective effervescence."[41] In their accounts, activists suggest the act of singing and moving with large groups of other individuals created a certain, sudden, and palpable sense of community that had not existed before.[42] Because slogan-poems involve embodied actions taking place in particular situations, their significance is only partly semantic, and only partly linguistic. As E.P. Thompson and David Graeber have written with regard to other contexts, such poetry is

40 McAdam, "Micromobilization Contexts and Recruitment to Activism," 137.

41 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction, 2008).

42 In this regard, see the discussion of Mona Prince's account of transforming from the first person singular to the first person plural in: Elliott Colla, "Revolution Bookshelf: Revolution is My Name," *Jadaliyya* (July 3, 2013) <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/12588/revolution-bookshelf_revolution-is-my-name>.

usually accompanied by dancing and props, "giant puppets" and "rough music," that transform the streets into stages, and activists into actors.[43]

To see this, we might turn to the concrete example of a small protest that took place in Cairo in December 2010, only weeks before the uprising of 25 January 2011.[44] To set the scene, we should remember how dire this moment was to those living in it. For months, there had been shortages of bread and diesel fuel in the county. An epidemic of avian flu was also wreaking havoc on local food supplies. Unemployment was rampant. Months earlier, there was the especially egregious torture and murder of a young man named Khālid Saʿīd at the hands of Alexandrian police that gave rise to an ingenious innovation of "standing protests" along the Corniche in that city as well as in Cairo.[45] And then, in late November and early December, the Mubarak regime celebrated another victory in what were, by all accounts, the most fraudulent elections ever held in the country.

It was in this context that a handful of demonstrators mounted a tiny protest in Downtown Cairo. Shaymāʾ Aḥmad and other members of the April 6 Youth Movement gathered in front of the downtown High Court, located on 26th of July Street. In a long series of rhyming couplets, Aḥmad and the others began to denounce the corruption and brutality of the Mubarak regime, focusing their complaints on the police, Mubarak and his family.

ستة وعشرين شاب ضحية
من حكومة البلطجية
لفّق لفّق فى القواضى
أمن الدولة واطى واطى
هو مبارك عايز أيه؟
كل الشعب يبوس رجليه؟!
لا يا مبارك مش هنبوس
بكرة عليك بالجزمة ندوس

43 On puppets, props, and street theater, see David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (Oakland: AK Press, 2009) and E.P. Thompson, "Rough Music Reconsidered," *Folklore* 103:1 (1992), 3-26.

44 For video footage of the demonstration, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yMVR7w9i2NA> (posted December 28, 2010).

45 See Amro Ali, "Saeeds of Revolution: De-Mythologizing Khaled Saeed," *Jadaliyya* (June 4, 2012) <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/26148/Saeeds-of-Revolution-De-Mythologizing-Khaled-Saeed>.

...
مجلس الشعب صباح الخير
وأنت رئيسك مليادير
مجلس شعب مساء الطين
وأنت رئيسك قط سمين

Twenty-six youth dead
At the hands of thug government
Cooking up evidence, framing lies
State security is really dirty!
What is it that Mubarak wants?
For the entire people to kiss his feet?
No, Mubarak, we won't kiss!
Tomorrow, we'll be walking over you
...
Wake up, good morning, Parliament—
Your president is a billionaire!
Wake up, crappy evening, Parliament—
Your president is a fat cat!

Given the violence that had attended similar protests, and especially the history of sexual assault against women activists in that very location, the small demonstration was quite dangerous. Under emergency laws that had been in effect since the early 1980s, public protests were illegal in Egypt. Moreover, it was also illegal to insult the President, his family and high-ranking officials. Protesters were routinely assaulted, detained and, in detention, tortured by police and intelligence forces. Battalions of riot police, composed largely of illiterate conscripts, would be deployed in long cordons around the demonstration. Police officers (sometimes, but not always, in uniform) would direct traffic and pedestrians away from the event. At the same time, plainclothes officers would enter the demonstrations to record activities, work as provocateurs, or make targeted arrests. This tiny demonstration was not only surrounded by riot police, but it was also infiltrated by state intelligence officers.

This particular action was itself part of a protest cycle that had been going on since 2000. These activists were part of a broad network of actors and organizations, most illegal, that had mounted large-scale protests against military occupations in Palestine and Iraq, and smaller scale protests in the guise of

Kefaya and April 6 Movements.[46] These same activists would soon lead the 25 January uprising. Within this decade of uninterrupted mobilization, a coherent cultural tradition emerged, and this resonated with cycles of protest from earlier decades.

Part of this is evidenced in the physical gestures of the activists: they know all too well how to participate in the "call-and-response" ritual of chanting. Similarly, the song leader, Shaymāʾ Aḥmad, knows how to use her body as well as her voice to hold the focus of the performance and she knows when to change the tempo, speed things up, and slow them down.

The craft of slogan composition is never detached from the craft of slogan performance: many of the best song-leaders in movements are also the best-known slogan composers. Thus, improvisation is built into the process of composition itself. Resonance with the familiar counts for as much as originality. Innovation matters, since successful slogan-poems are fresh ones. The unit of composition is not the line or the word, but rather the formula, as James Monroe has argued with respect to oral poetry.[47] By this, I refer to how slogan-poems are built in part of received sound patterns and set phrases that can be repurposed to suit a variety of discursive situations.

The slogans from the 2010 protest are mostly simple couplets and contain familiar conventions of literary invective. They also contain many formulae drawn from earlier protests. For instance, some of the above lines replicate an earlier version recorded from the January 1977 uprising:[48]

46 The most detailed history of 2000-13 protest cycle can be found in: Anne Alexander and Mostafa Bassiouny, *Bread, Freedom and Social Justice: Workers and the Egyptian Revolution* (London: Zed Books, 2014).

47 "[The] oral poet composes during the very act of performance, that is to say, he improvises, and he must do so very swiftly indeed if he is to retain the audience that is immediately in front of him. In order to achieve this remarkable feat of producing regular verses extempore and without the use of memory, the oral poet is not entirely lacking in technical resources, for he draws upon a vast repertory of traditional formulas which he has previously mastered and which he strings together at lightning speed to produce regular lines of poetry; he sings in a specialized language of which the smallest separable unit is not the individual word, but the formula …" James T. Monroe, "Oral Composition in Pre-Islamic Poetry," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 3 (1972), 1-53.

48 From Aḥmad Bahāʾ al-Dīn Shaʿbān, *48 Sāʿah hazzat Miṣr: ruʾyat shāhid ʿayyān li-waqāʾiʿ wa-aḥdāth 18 wa-19 yanāyir 1977* (Cairo: Haven li-l-Tarjamah wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Barmajiyyat, 2009), 41.

يا مجلس الشعب صباح الخير / يا اللي رئيسك مليونير

Wake up, good morning, Parliament / Your president is a millionaire!

Comparing them, we can see how one script might remain available for different situations separated by many decades. One only need change "millionaire" to "billionaire" to bring it up to date. Similarly, there are phonetic traces of slogans chanted long before. For instance, in 1977, protesters sang the line "*Yā Amrīkā limmī filūsak / bukrah sh-shaʿb il-ʿarabī yidūsak*" (America: take back your money / Tomorrow the Arab people will trample you down"),[49] which was itself adapted from a line, "*Yā Amrīkā limmī filūsak / ʿAbd al-Nāṣir bukrah yidūsak*" (America: take back your money / Gamal Abdel Nasser will tomorrow trample you down") that had already been chanted by protesters in November 1967.[50] Parts of this line's consonance—*bukrah*, and *-dūs*—were reused in the 2010 protest described above.

Such resonances are common. More importantly, they are known, as are their authors. In this case, these lines were originally composed by Kamāl Khalīl who was active during the earlier protest cycle and has remained so until the present.[51] Long-time activists are keenly aware of the provenance of contemporary slogan-poems, and how they build upon earlier instantiations of composition. As more than one activist has told me, far from being a problem, the recycled, inherited quality of slogan-poetry is a virtue that allows movements to forge connections between different periods, situations and demands.

At the core of slogan-poetry is a practice of collecting bits and pieces of discourse and redeploying them in new assemblages. New compositions are made from formulae gleaned from movement traditions, to which are added more occasional references from news headlines, pressing social issues, official state discourse, nursery rhymes, pop culture, consumer advertising, and folkloric motifs. This is the aesthetics of bricolage and in this way, the slogan-composer is a bricoleur par excellence, redeploying received signs to create new meanings. Following the critic John Clark: "[When] the bricoleur re-locates the significant object in a different position within that discourse, using the same overall repertoire of signs, or when that object is placed within a different total ensemble, a new discourse is constituted, a different message

49 This appears in ʿAbd al-Rāziq, 81-2; and Ghāli Shukrī, *al-Thawrah al-muḍādda fi-Miṣr* (Beirut: Dar al-Ṭalīʿah li-l-Ṭibāʿah wa-l-Nashr, 1978), 337.

50 From Hishām al-Salāmūnī, *al-Jīl allādhī wājaha ʿAbd al-Nāṣir wa-l-Sādāt: dirāsah wathāʾiqiyyah li-l-ḥarakah al-ṭullābiyyah 1968-1977* (Cairo: Maktabat Jazīrat al-Ward, 2010), 88.

51 Kamāl Khalīl gives an account of this slogan formula dating to 1973 in *Hikāyāt min zaman fāt*, 153.

conveyed."[52] In a poetics of bricolage, the terms "old" and "new" describe neighbors, not opposites.

In the more formal genre of movement poetry, this same process sometimes obtains, with received and ready-made utterances revised and combined in original ways. Consider in this regard, Ahmed Fouad Negm's 1977 poem, "*Humma mīn*" ("Who Are They?) also well known through Sheikh Imam's song of the same title. Some of the most cherished lines of this poem/song were borrowed and revised from slogans first sung during the January 1977 "Bread Uprising." Ḥusayn ʿAbd al-Rāziq records these lines:[53]

يشربوا ويسكي ويا كلوا فراخ والشعب من الجوع أهو داخ

They drink whiskey and eat chicken / while the People are sick and tired of being hungry

and

إحنا بنسكن سبعة في اوضة وهو بيلبس اخر موضة

We live seven to a room / While he wears the latest fashion

Aḥmad Bahāʾ al-Dīn records similar lines from January 1977:[54]

هو بيلبس اخر موضة وإحنا تاكلنا السوق السوده
هو بيلبس اخر موضة وإحنا بنسكن عشرة في أوضة
هو يبنى في استراحات وإحنا نعاني آهات وآهات
هما بياكلوا حمام وفراخ وإحنا الجوع دوخنا وداخ

He wears the latest fashion / while we're getting eaten alive by the black market
He wears the latest fashion / while we live ten to a room
He builds rest houses / while we moan and groan in pain
They eat pigeon and chicken / while we get sick of hunger, and hunger gets sick of us!

52 John Clarke, as quoted in Dick Hebdidge, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979), 104.
53 ʿAbd al-Rāziq, 81-2; 101.
54 Shaʿbān, *48 Sāʿah*, 59-60.

In Negm's poem, which appeared some months later, these lines are distilled into a smoother prosody:[55]

هما بيلبسوا أخر موضة وإحنا بنسكن سبعة ف أوضة
هما بياكلوا حمام وفراخ وإحنا الفول دوّخنا وداخ
هما بيمشوا بطيارات وإحنا نموت بالاوتوبيسات

They wear the latest fashion / while we're living seven to a room
They eat pigeon and chicken / while we get sick of eating fava, and fava gets sick of us
They go around in airplanes / while we die in busses

The changes Negm makes to the lines are subtle and create a prosodic bounce that was not there in the original slogan variations. Negm's other revision is to recast the personal pronouns into the more consistent "us" and "them," in order to accentuate their differences from one another. The result of this is that Negm's poem (and Sheikh Imam's song) effectively expand the particular complaints and invective of the January 1977 moment into a war between two opposing classes of Egyptians. This is the epitome of social movement framing—the translation of daily life issues into a coherent, totalizing interpretation.

There are many examples of such bricolage technique during the period of the Eighteen Days (January 25-February 11, 2011). For insight, we can trace those that involved the musician, Ramy Essam (Rāmī ʿIṣām). Ted Swedenburg reports that when Essam first arrived in Tahrir Square in late January 2011, he was an unknown musician from Mansoura.[56] Inspired by the images of thousands of demonstrators, Essam had gone to Cairo with relatives and friends to join in the protests. Initially, he hadn't thought to bring his guitar—someone else suggested it to him. Nonetheless, with his guitar in hand Essam quickly emerged as a commanding musician on the stage of the Midan. The song for which he is best known is the simple "*Irḥal*," composed almost entirely of protest chants. While Essam's song is simple, the process behind it is complex: with multiple authors composing slogan-songs that are revised by song-leaders during protest performances; and poets and song-writers taking up the same

55 Ahmed Fouad Negm (Aḥmad Fu'ād Nijm), *Diwan Aḥmad Fu'ād Nijm: al-aʿmal al-kāmilah* (Damascus: Dār Ṭalās, 1986), 2:753. Date of composition given as December 1977.

56 Ted Swedenburg, interview with Rami Essam, January 22, 2018.

slogan-songs in more formal compositions that circulate beyond and long after the initial protest itself.

A second example of bricolage composition illuminates other dimensions of composition and circulation within the Egyptian uprising. While in Tahrir during this same period, Essam performed a song "*il-Gaḥsh wa-l-ḥumār*" ("The Little Donkey and the Big Ass") apparently penned by Negm.[57]

الجحش قال للحمار
يابا أديني الحنطور
يابا إنت سنّك كبر
ووَجَب عليّا الدور
كَحّ الحمار كَحّة
فزعِتْ لها الركاب
مش يابني بالصحة ده كل شئ بحساب
وسواقة الحنطور محتاجة حد حكيم
وإنت عينيك فارغة همّك على البرسيم
قوللي تسوق إزاي والتبن مالي عينيك
ده حتى حبل اللجام واسع يا إبني عليك
إعقل وبطّل طمع لا تسخّن الركاب
ما تجيش يا واد جنبهم لا تبقى ليلة هباب
دول صنف ناس جبّار قادر مالوهش أمان
يبان عليهم وَهَن لكنهم فرسان
يابا دا نومهم ثِقِل وبقالُه يابا سنين
كل البشر صحصحوا ولسه دول نايمين
يا جحش بطّل هبل وبلاش تعيش مغرور
رُكابنا مش أغبيا ولا عضمهم مكسور
بُكرة حيصحولك ويزلزلوا الحنطور
وتلاقي في قفاك تمانين خازوق محشور

57 The poem was published on-line in late 2010. Source: https://3skrwy.yoo7.com/t464-topic.

The little donkey said to the big donkey:
"Dad, give me the cart
Dad, you're old
And now I'm obligated to take my turn."
The big donkey coughed loudly
Which terrified the passengers in the cart.
"It's not done, Son.
Everything has its reason
And it takes a wise person
To drive a cart.
You're greedy and all you care about is clover.
And tell me: how would you steer
When your eyes are filled with hay?
And that's saying nothing about the harness
Which is still too big for you.
Smarten up. Stop being so ambitious.
Don't get the passengers riled up, Boy!
Don't come near them, okay?
Lest a storm come along one night.
Those people are powerful
Capable of anything.
They look weak
But in reality they're giants."
"Dad, they're fast asleep.
They've been snoozing for years.
Everyone else is woke
But they're still napping."
"Listen, little Donkey, stop being stupid.
Stop deluding yourself—don't think your so smart.
Our passengers aren't stupid.
Nor are they broken-boned.
Tomorrow, they'll wake up to you
And turn the cart over
And you'll find eighty stakes
In the back of your head."

Perhaps because of the revolutionary context, or the fact that his performances were entirely non-commercial, Essam hadn't asked for Negm's permission to use the poem. It soon became a regular feature of Essam's protest

repertoire.[58] Crowds were enthusiastic, clapping, dancing and singing along. When Essam met Negm in the Midan, he was anxious, and hoped the poet would like what he'd done with the poem.[59] To his surprise, Negm laughed and said that the poem was not one of his, and that it was fine in any case. Only after Essam went into exile in Sweden, did he correct the attribution.[60]

Essam was not wholly wrong. The poem, as posted on the Internet in November 2010, clearly attributed Negm as the author. Perhaps those who composed it were fans of Negm. Perhaps they thought that by attributing it to Negm they would avoid trouble with the law. Perhaps they correctly guessed that their poem would get a wider reading if audiences believed it was by Negm. And this is not the only such poem incorrectly attributed to Negm. Indeed, many of Sheikh Imam's best-known songs are similarly attributed to Negm, even when they have been penned by other poets.[61] Whatever the case, here we can see another configuration of the key dynamics of movement poetry that combine anonymous poetry with authored verse, composition with improvisation, and writing with song: attribution matters, but only insofar as it encourages circulation and adaptation.

One Movement Poet: Samīr ʿAbd al-Bāqī

The place of Samīr ʿAbd al-Bāqī in official letters is quite marginal despite his huge output as movement poet and playwright, including dozens of books and multiple theater productions, and the relative popularity of some songs based

58 Till this day, multiple versions of these performances are readily available on YouTube. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKufrOmv2Kk (dated: February 11, 2011); https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M-j07X0Q-Fc (dated: February 22, 2011); and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Hf8LtmWKVE (dated: July 11, 2011).

59 On the incident, see: http://swedenburg.blogspot.com/search/label/Ramy%20Essam *The Los Angeles Times* reported, "According to newspaper accounts at the time, "Essam had written the music and played it for himself alone at home before the revolution. And now everyone shouted for the scathing lyrics of the aging poet, who had been jailed under Mubarak's predecessor. He felt honored when the poet stood with him and recited the words." See: http://articles.latimes.com/2011/feb/18/world/la-fg-egypt-singer-20110219/2.

60 The YouTube videoclip identifies them as Amgad El Qahwagy, Mohamed Ibrahim, Galal El Beharry and Lynn Fattouh. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f3Ou_mE8ba4.

61 Because of their long collaboration, audiences often attribute some of Sheikh Imam's songs to Negm. Two such poems are Maḥmūd Ṭawīl's "*al-Intikhibātī*" <https://ayman1970.wordpress.com/2014/09/11/أغنية-الأديب-الأدباتي-الانتخاباتي-أح/>; and Najīb Shihāb al-Dīn's "*Yā Maṣr ʾūmī*."

on his lyrics.[62] However, thinking of him as a movement poet, allows us to recognize both the centrality and humble nature of his role in Egyptian social movements.

Born in Mīt Salsīl (Daqahliyyah) in 1939, ʿAbd al-Bāqī and was jailed from 1959-1964 for his activities in the communist party, *Ḥaditū* (*al-Ḥarakah al-Dīmūqrāṭiyyah li-l-Taḥarrur al-Waṭanī*). The first thirty months of ʿAbd al-Bāqī's time in prison were especially abject as he spent them in solitary confinement in Mansoura, rather than with comrades in the notorious Wāḥāt Prison. He describes the theatre productions they staged in their compound. After his release from prison, ʿAbd al-Bāqī returned to his village. He published his first poems on broadsides. In 1968, he joined the post-war protests and was again jailed. Subsequently, he began to write for children's magazines such as *Samīr* and *ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn*. Throughout this period, ʿAbd al-Bāqī remained active as a movement poet, giving readings, writing librettos and publishing chapbooks. The poem, "*al-Sirr fī al-ʿummāl*" ("The Secret Lies in the Workers"), which appears as a song in ʿAbd al-Bāqī's 1974 play, "*Fī ḥubb Maṣr*" ("In Love with Egypt"), gives a sense of the directness of his poetry:[63]

الكلمة اللي ما تبقى رصاصة ملعونة وخاينة
والقلم الكداب شوكة في طريق الحق
إخرس لو كان اللي حتقوله عوالة
واكسر قلمك لو مقدرش يقول للغاصب لأ
وإلا فاسقط قتيل
ودقة فوق الوتد والتانية ع السندان

62 Notable titles would include: *Anāshīd al-ḥuzn al-Lubnāniyyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Fārābī, 1978); *Aṣwāt fī al-layl: qiṣaṣ qaṣīrah* (Cairo: N.P., 1978); *Dafātir al-ʿāmmiyyah al-Miṣriyyah* (Cairo: N.P., N.D. [1993?]). [At least 5 parts]; *Farḥah laysat li-l-ḥibr al-sirrī* Cairo: Dār al-Thaqāfah al-Jadīdah, 1983); *Fī ḥubb Miṣr* (Beirut: Dār al-Fārābī, 1975); *Ghinwah li-l-ḥarb, ghinwah li-l-salām*. (Cairo: al-Majlis al-Miṣrī li-l-Salām, 1977); *Hākadhā takallamat al-aḥjār* (Cairo: al-Markaz al-Miṣrī al-Samʿbaṣarī, 1979); *Kānat wa-ʿāshat Miṣr: qaṣīdah drāmiyyah bi-l-ʿāmmiyyah al-Miṣriyyah* (Cairo: Dār Maʾmūn li-l-Ṭibāʿah, 1978); *Karākīb al-ṣandarah: ʿalā hāmish al-sīrah al-dhātiyyah* (Cairo: Dār al-Thaqāfah al-Jadīdah, 2008); *Nashīd al-anāshīd al-Miṣrī: qaṣīdah drāmiyyah* (Cairo: Dar al-Thaqāfah al-Jadīdah, 1977); *Nashīd al-faqīr: ʿan Bāblū Narūda* (Cairo: Dār al-Thaqāfah al-Jadīdah, 1976); *Shamrūkh al-arāgōz: shakshakah shiʿriyyah*. Occasional Periodical: 1-80 (February 2002-November 2011); *Wardah ʿalā khadd Mūskū: qaṣāʾid Miṣriyyah li-l-ʿīd al-sabʿīn* (Cairo: Sharikat al-Amal li-l-Ṭibāʿah wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzīʿ, 1987).

63 *Fī ḥubb Maṣr* (Cairo: Dar al-Thaqāfah al-Jadīdah, 1974). A recording of part of the performance can be heard at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oxohewBBRL8>.

والتالتة مع بعض يبقى المستحيل ممكن
القوة نار وحديد.. والسر في العمال
يا مصر.. يا مصر
مصر غيطان الرياح
مصر أصوات التلامذة في الصباح
مصر عابدين في المظاهرات القديمة
مصر ملاوي، زفتى، برديس، جهينة
مصر ميت سلسيل وشبرا
مصر شهدا الجامعة والأزهر
مصر حلوان، دنشواي، كمشيش، وسينا
مصر غنوة الألم لحن الجراح
اللي عايشة العمر تتحدّى الزمن
والأسى وسود الليالي والقدر
عمرها تزقفني ألحان الحماسة
أعشق الأحلام ولا أخشى الخطر
مصر تعرف في السياسة
عارفة إن الشمس فوق سينا يطلعها البشر

A word is a horrible and untrustworthy bullet
The pen that lies … is a thorn in the road of truth
Shut your mouth if you're going to speak sycophancy
Break your pen in two if it cannot say "No!" to someone who is furious …
Or drop dead.
Pound once on the peg, and again on the anvil
And once again, altogether—see the inconceivable become achievable!
Strength is fire, is steel … the secret lies with the workers
Egypt, O Egypt
Egypt is fields of wind
Egypt is the sound of schoolchildren in the morning
Egypt is Abdeen, during the old-time demonstrations!
Egypt is the one from Malawi, from Zifta, Bardīs and Juhayna
Egypt is Mit Salsīl and Shubrā

Egypt is the martyrs of the university and al-Azhar
Egypt is Helwan, Dinshaway, Kamshīsh, and Sinai
Egypt is a song of pain, a tune of the wound
Living forever, defying time itself
And tragedy, the blackness of night and fate.
Its tunes forever spurring me on
To yearn for dreams, to not fear danger
Egypt understands politics
And knows that people will reach the sun on Sinai's soil.

Like much of his poetry, these lines were set to music by ʿAdlī Fakhrī and performed in a staged musical.[64] Along with many other of the poets mentioned in this essay, ʿAbd al-Bāqī was jailed after the mass uprising of January 1977. In 1980, he moved to Lebanon as guest of the Lebanese Communist Party. While there, he continued writing children's stories as well as plays for the Syrian stage. He returned to Egypt only in 1984, by which time he had broken formally with the various communist parties of Egypt. Though ʿAbd al-Bāqī continued to publish poetry during this time, he struggled with the fact that, as he put it: "People might enjoy poems, but they do not read books of poetry."[65]

When large-scale protests broke out in the early 2000s, ʿAbd al-Bāqī decided to try another format. Beginning in February 2002, he began to issue a small zine called *Shamrūkh al-Arāgōz* (Punch's Stick) which refers to the thick club wielded by the *ʿaskarī* (soldier) character in the *Arāgōz* "punch-and-judy" puppet tradition of Egyptian street theatre. Roughly each month, ʿAbd al-Bāqī would "publish" hundreds of copies of his zine, distributing them by mail (to subscribers) and by hand around the cafes of downtown Cairo. True to their name, the issues of *Shamrūkh al-Arāgōz* are not subtle. The poems contained in each issue are meant to knock the reader in the head. When the Kefaya movement began in 2004, ʿAbd al-Bāqī (along with other movement poets mentioned above) quickly became active in it. Thus he continued as a movement poet, composing and distributing poems with cadres as his primary audience. Only after the 25 January Uprising began did ʿAbd al-Bāqī finally retire the project. Samīr ʿAbd al-Bāqī's long career is a direct link between the Communist organizations of the 1950s, the protest cycles of the 1970s, and the social movements—and protest cycles—that erupted between

64 *Fī ḥubb Maṣr* was first produced by Gamāʿat al-Drāmah bi-l-Qāhirah in 1974. Sāmī Ṣalāḥ directed the production.

65 Interview with author, December 18, 2017.

2000-2013. The biographies of other movement poets—such as Ahmed Fouad Negm, Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn Fuʾād and Kamāl Khalīl—show similar lines that tie together various organizations and generations of activists.

Conclusion: The Autopoetics of Social Movements

The category of movement poetry allows us to see the central role of literary practices within Egyptian social movements of the modern period. What defines the phenomenon is not necessarily a set of themes or structures that are primarily literary in nature, or a set of topoi that are "political." Rather, this poetry is defined by how activists employ language arts to "do" activism; and how poets use movement structures and events to develop their audience, craft and impact. The context of movement poetry remains the performance—at times, informal and relatively unscripted; at others, highly ritualized. Some performances are purely occasional—they mobilize or sustain an event such as a meeting or sit-in. Others are meant to matter beyond the moment—to sustain movements even after they have peaked or been defeated. Richard Schechner has describes this as the "aftermath" stage of performance—that organizations employ techniques of recording, reproduction, and dissemination to mark events long after they have passed.[66] This, it seems, is another major aspect of movement poetry that deserves even more exploration. In other words, in addition to mobilizing for actions, and propelling action during events, movement poetry also serves as a living record of past actions that remains available, through the practice of bricolage, for use during future actions, and also available as an archive during trough periods when action becomes unthinkable.

Besides its performance aspect, movement poetry differs from other (but not all other) forms of literary production in its collective nature. Movement poetry exists because of a network of actors—poets and audiences, songleaders and activists—all of whom are joined by a common sense of struggle. Thus, this poetry is characterized to a large degree by its inward dimension, which is meant to galvanize activists, reconfirm commitment, focus activity, and demonstrate meaningful stances. There may also be an outward dimension to movement poetry, although it is difficult to determine how such poetry can move other audiences or lead to the recruitment of new cadres. All possible, though outside the scope of what I have sketched here.

66 Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 246.

What needs to be added, of course, is that movement poetry is not just an effect of activist networks, but also a contributing factor to their existence and health. In other words, occasions of movement poetry—whether concerts, readings, salons, or theatrical productions—are part of the event structures of the movements themselves. As McAdam might point out, these events provide structures—and organizational roles and practices—that develop the capacity of movements. Poetry lies at the core, in other words, of the auto-poetic quality of social movements in Egypt.