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Of Laws Tattooed in Flesh: Street Poetry, Hip-hop, and Graffiti and the Contest for Public Space  
in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia

A thesis submitted in satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts  
in Anthropology

by

Agatha Evangeline Palma

2014



## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Of Laws Tattooed in Flesh:

Street Poetry, Hip-hop, and Graffiti in the Contest for Public Space in Post-Revolutionary  
Tunisia

by

Agatha Evangeline Palma

Master of Arts in Anthropology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2014

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The 2010-2011 Jasmine Revolution brought many Tunisians who had lived their entire lives under authoritarian regime out onto the streets for the first time in protest. Tunisians of all ages and social backgrounds participated, demanding the ousting of then-dictator Zine el Abidine Ben Ali. Since his ousting, Tunisian public life has witnessed a radical transformation: with individuals having earned new forms of expression once denied to them, public space is undergoing a process of renegotiation. At the same time, public art created by young, politically-minded Tunisians is surging in popularity: street poetry meetings, graffiti, and YouTube-produced hip hop recordings have exploded onto a brand-new scene of highly accessible public art. In this thesis, I examine several of the various art forms that have become the means for young Tunisians to reclaim public space. However, I argue that the Tunisian public sphere is divided into various counterpublics, wherein various factions of Tunisian society oppose one another's claim to public space. As art has historically been an important political tool for counterculture movements, I examine the production and spread of street poetry, hip-hop, and

graffiti, and consider the ways in which Tunisia's various political factions contest and intersect in public space. I argue that post-revolutionary Tunisian public space is not simply in the process of being reclaimed by the so-called public from the state – rather, I argue that Tunisia's public sphere is divided into counterpublics, wherein public space has become an ongoing political contest.

The thesis of Agatha Evangeline Palma is approved.

Marjorie M. Goodwin

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2014

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“What we have witnessed above all in the region... is a systematic and expansive reclaiming, by one massive demonstration after another, of the public space that the postcolonial era had left vacant... No matter what the states do, the ever-expanding public space is restricting the scope of the ruling regimes’ operations.”

– Hamid Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism*

## **I. Introduction**

Writing in 2012 as the Arab Spring was still unfolding, Hamid Dabashi’s optimism for its future is especially glaring in retrospect, as sectarian divisions and internal disputes have replaced former struggles against authoritarian regimes. Yet Dabashi’s claim here is not an uncommon one: writings on the reclamations and renegotiations of public space during and after the Arab Spring have continued to proliferate. However, this concept is in need of further exploration. In this thesis I examine the use of Tunisian public space by the state and by various political groups, pre- and post-revolution, and the ways in which Tunisian youth respond to such claims over public space via forms of public (and highly political) art. Yet rather than simply affirming that public space has been “reclaimed,” I complicate the concept of public space further, exploring it as a site of ongoing political contest.

The 2010-2011 revolution brought many Tunisians who had lived their entire lives under authoritarian regime out onto the streets for the first time in protest. Tunisians of all ages and social backgrounds participated, demanding the ousting of then-dictator Zine el Abidine Ben Ali. Since his ousting, Tunisian public life has witnessed a radical transformation: with individuals having earned new forms of expression once denied to them, public space is undergoing a process of renegotiation.<sup>1</sup> New topics previously unheard of in public life have suddenly become unavoidable conversations: homosexuality, marijuana, atheism, and women’s sexuality name only a few of the previously unheard of topics that now occupy Tunisian radio and television talk shows. At the same time, public art created by young, politically-minded Tunisians is surging in

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<sup>1</sup> Yasmine Ryan, “Tunisia’s Consensus, or when a Kiss is just a Kiss” *Jadaliyya*, March 8, 2014



popularity: street poetry meetings, graffiti, and YouTube-produced hip hop recordings have exploded onto a brand-new scene of highly accessible public art. In this thesis, I examine several of the various art forms that have become the means for young Tunisians to reclaim public space. If Tunisians, and particularly, Tunisian youth, were indeed stripped of their rights to public space, then the revolution was a fleeting realization of their potential to own and shape it. I thus examine the production and spread of street poetry, hip-hop, and graffiti, and further consider the gendered dynamics of Tunisia's new public space and the ways in which Tunisia's various political factions contest and intersect in public space. As Nouri Gana explains, "Islamists, secularists, leftists, Arab nationalists, and salafis, among others, have variably contributed as sociopolitical actors to the toppling of Ben Ali, [yet] their combined histories of victimhood, resistance, and struggle has hardly resulted in a common agenda in post authoritarian Tunisia."<sup>2</sup> I thus argue that post-revolutionary Tunisian public space is not simply in the process of being reclaimed by the so-called public from the state – rather, I argue that amidst Tunisia's divided public sphere, conflicts have arisen over who can officially reclaim it. This has manifested in rival publics, or *counterpublics*<sup>3</sup>, wherein various factions of Tunisian society oppose the other's claims to public space.

## **II. Background: The Revolution**

Citing Tunisia's recently completed constitution, Valentine Moghadam argued that it is the only country of the Arab Spring to be on a smooth path towards democracy post-revolution.<sup>4</sup>

Tunisia is often used as a template for countries of the Arab World to follow in the wake of the

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<sup>2</sup> Nouri Gana, "Visions of Dissent, Voices of Discontent: Postcolonial Tunisian Film and Song" in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, ed. Nouri Gana (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013) 182.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005) 14.

<sup>4</sup> Valentine Moghadam, "Tunisia's Road to Democracy," *AMEWS E-Bulletin*, no. 4 (2014) <http://iwsaw.lau.edu.lb/publications/amews/amews-ebulletin-2014April.pdf>

Arab Spring; its revolution is frequently placed in juxtaposition to Egypt's, for example, to demonstrate the latter's failure.

But the image of Tunisia as a Western-friendly role model for the Arab world is not a new one; since its independence from the French in 1956, president Habib Bourguiba embarked upon a campaign of Tunisian Europeanization and modernization. Bourguiba became the hero of many Tunisian women, encouraging them to go to school, enter the workforce, and to stop wearing the hijab (which he famously referred to on multiple occasions as an "odious rag"). More importantly, Bourguiba instituted the Personal Status Code, which earned Tunisia its place among the most progressive Arab countries in regards to women's rights; the code banned polygamy, raised the age of marriage to 17, and eased women's access to divorce proceedings.

Yet democratization did not quite follow Bourguiba's modernization project – in fact, he was declared president for life in 1975, and managed to maintain a single-party system for three decades. He had developed for himself a strong personality cult that has lasted even until today, nearly thirty years after he was forcibly removed from office by his successor, Ben Ali, due to old age and senility. But Bourguiba's strong following was not accidental; through his use of imagery and discourse in the public sphere, he carefully crafted an image of himself as *al-mujahid al-akbar* (the supreme combatant), *bani Tunis al-jadida* (the architect of new Tunisia), and *muharrir al-mara'a* (the liberator of women).<sup>5</sup>

His successor, Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, took the cult of personality to even greater lengths: declaring himself the *munqudh*, or savior, he drew upon Islam as a means of legitimacy, while simultaneously cracking down on the presence of Islam in the public sphere. He opened all his public speeches with *bismallah* (in the name of God)<sup>6</sup>, and made a public show of his

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<sup>5</sup> Monica Marks, "Women's Rights Before and After the Revolution" in *Making of the Tunisian Revolution*, in Gana, 230-233.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Friday prayer attendance and trip to Mecca,<sup>7</sup> yet continued Bourguiba's systematic dismantling of Islamic institutions, and continuously denied formal recognition of the moderate Islamist Ennahda party, which had been seeking recognition since Bourguiba's presidency.

In fact, this routine suppression of Islamists as well as their leftist adversaries (both of whom disapproved of Ben Ali and wished to see him out of office), would later prove to be one of the greatest underpinnings of the 2011 revolution, aside from the obvious economic ones; both leftists and Islamists rightfully felt marginalized, silenced and criminalized under Ben Ali's regime. Throughout his 30-year term, Islamists were routinely harassed, jailed, or thrown into exile, and Islamic dress (such as the hijab) was outlawed and made punishable. Rachid Ghannouchi, the co-founder of the Ennahda movement (who had been jailed and released numerous times by both Bourguiba and Ben Ali), lived for decades in political exile. Tunisian leftists faced a similar fate and retreated to the underground.

The disappearance of Tunisia's dissident Islamists and secularists from public space allowed for Ben Ali to overtake it completely. Streets, mosques, and other public institutions were renamed after him. Ben Ali became omnipresent, but not only visually – to live under the regime was to live under its watchful eye. Most feared expressing any form of dissent and remained silent, feeling the regime's presence everywhere, as though even the walls were listening.<sup>8</sup>

Yet decades into Ben Ali's leadership, he rightfully sensed a climate of growing dissatisfaction among Tunisians. It has been argued that one of his efforts to mitigate Tunisian

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<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Perkins, "Playing the Islamic Card: The Use and Abuse of Religion in Tunisian Politics" in Gana 2013.

<sup>8</sup> I heard this expression repeated numerous times in casual conversation. One young woman, a doctor, told me one evening in her kitchen, "it was as though the walls were always listening." Another, a young activist, remarked as we drove past Ben Ali's former palace in Carthage, "If Ben Ali were still there and we were looking at the palace the way we are now, we would have been followed by the police. I never dared to even look at it until now. Everyone was watching and listening. Even the walls." (April 2013)

discontent was through his authorization of private radio stations, which, while still under his control, became entirely broadcasted in Tunisian dialect. This was perhaps a critical move in that Tunisians were now able to call in and air out their frustrations that may have otherwise been directed at the regime.<sup>9</sup> Ben Ali similarly allowed for mizwid, traditional Tunisian music associated with the lower class, to be publicly broadcasted for the first time on national television.<sup>10</sup> Like the use of dialect, broadcasting mizwid was another means to pacify the public and suppress any resistance. It should be noted here that the only public speech the regime ever delivered in dialect came from Ben Ali, the day before his ousting, wherein he infamously stated, “*ana fhemtkoum,*” or, “I got it.”

While the reasons behind Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation that would eventually spark the revolution were largely economic,<sup>11</sup> Tunisia’s Islamists and leftists quickly joined in on the protests that followed; in fact it appeared that everyone, now emboldened by their own anger, had reason to want Ben Ali to *dégager*. It was only a very small class of Tunisians who had actually wanted him to remain in power – mainly the elites who benefited from his corrupt leadership.

Shortly after Ben Ali’s ousting on January 14, 2011, Ghannouchi made his return to Tunisia. He had been in exile for nearly three decades. His homecoming, which attracted

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<sup>9</sup> Rikke Hostrup Haugbolle, “Rethinking the Role of the Media in the Tunisian Uprising” in Gana, 162.

<sup>10</sup> Gana, “Visions of Dissent” in Gana, 195.

<sup>11</sup> Emma C. Murphy, “Under the Emperor’s Neoliberal Clothes! Why the International Financial Institutions Got it Wrong in Tunisia” in Gana, 2013, explains how Tunisia was afflicted by widespread unemployment, rising food and fuel prices, increasing poverty, and rampant corruption; meanwhile, the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) continually portrayed its economy as a “regional development success story” (36). According to Emma C. Murphy, “Tunisian compliance with [the West’s] neoliberal economic agenda was applauded, while rising unemployment and poverty were barely noted,” and regimes were able to divert resources into their own pockets. (35-36). Murphy acknowledges that there were other reasons behind the revolution, but says, “whatever the motivations of protesters, it is clear that the IFIs had failed to fully comprehend what was going on within the Tunisian economy and had instead endorsed a regime which was failing its people’s economic needs” (35).

hundreds of greeters at the airport and ample media attention, was a momentous one: it symbolized a return of Islamism to Tunisian public space. Ennahda swept the first post-revolutionary elections, winning 89 of 217 assembly seats, and rapidly became the largest, most well organized political party in all of Tunisia.

With such a victory in place for Islamists, Tunisian leftists (fractured into nearly a dozen different parties) began organizing against them. It is within this highly contested public space that the various art forms I am examining – hip-hop, graffiti, and street poetry – are still taking shape. Feminist street poetry, Islamic hip-hop, or anti-Islamist graffiti, (as well as various combinations of all of the above) have left their visible or audible mark in post-revolutionary Tunisian public space. If under Bourguiba and Ben Ali’s harsh regimes, the walls were always listening, it is as though they are finally talking back.

\* \* \*

In the spring of 2013, I attended the World Social Forum, held in Tunis in honor of its recent revolution and role in spreading the Arab Spring. At the time, I had noticed the overwhelming eagerness and optimism from the young activists I spoke with (no doubt at least partially influenced by the presence of the forum in Tunisia and the influx of international activists). The forum itself being a decidedly leftist one, I had the opportunity to meet an array of rather important Tunisian activists: leaders of Tunisia’s most prominent feminist organization (L’Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates, or the ATFD), student members and leaders of various youth coalitions (such as the Young Arab Voices of Tunisia), and Basma Khalfaoui, the widow of recently-murdered Chokri Belaid, who had led the Democratic Patriots’ Movement and was secretary-general of the Popular Front, the leftist coalition that formed out of opposition to Ennahda.

In spite of Belaid’s recent murder and Ennahda’s victory, the Tunisian activists I interviewed and spoke with were generally optimistic. Amira, a member of Young Arab Voices

of Tunisia, told me over coffee on downtown Habib Bourguiba Street one night, “I believe that revolution is a process. We aren’t going to be happy yet, and we certainly won’t ever be perfectly happy with whatever we end up with.”<sup>12</sup>

But already upon my return later that summer, I noticed a different outlook among those I had interviewed earlier. By then, constitutional negotiations were underway with no signs of agreement foreseeable between Ennahda and the Tunisian left. When I met again with Amira and a group of her male friends, the men admitted their doubts in the revolution. Amira sat back with her arms crossed, saying nothing, until finally bursting out that there were those in parliament who wanted to “make a model out of Saudi Arabia for Tunisia.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, I began to notice a rather troubling theme – taxi drivers, shop owners, my Arabic teachers – everyone seemed to be saying that they were better off *before* the revolution. The one Ennahda supporter whom I chanced meeting on a flight from Tunis to Paris – a well-educated young man who by the end of our conversation would show me pictures of his home in Paris and invite me to his upcoming wedding – was the only person I had spoken with who was looking forward to Tunisia’s future post-revolution.

### **III. Theories of Public Space and Tunisian Public Space**

Writing on theories of public space is a complicated project. As Michael Warner notes in *Publics and Counterpublics*, “attempts to frame public and private as a sharp distinction or antinomy have invariably come to grief, while attempts to collapse or do without them have proven equally unsatisfying.”<sup>14</sup> To demonstrate the very complicated nature of such a binary, Warner provides the example of Catharine Beecher’s harsh criticism of women’s rights activist Frances Wright: Beecher condemns not so much Wright’s opinions but her very presence in

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<sup>12</sup> Fieldnotes, 28 March 2013

<sup>13</sup> Fieldnotes, 23 June 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Warner, “Public and Private” in *Publics and Counterpublics*, 29.

public, which Beecher describes as “masculine.”<sup>15</sup> Beecher went on to publish several books that articulated the public/private distinction, arguing that women belonged in the latter; yet in so doing, Beecher did not only address the public, much as Wright had done – she herself became a public figure.

Yet as the above example demonstrates, the public/private binary is not only an oversimplification of a very complicated issue, but a gendered one at that: the distinction between the feminine private realm and masculine public sphere has made itself perhaps deceptively apparent to many scholars. This issue has been especially troubling for feminists, who must contend with what often appear to be noticeable divisions in gendered space, but with rather puzzling complications, such as the one demonstrated above. Such concepts become even more complex when religion is thrown into the question: even where religion is supposed to be relegated to the private sphere, it often exists rather publicly, and can serve to add complicated justifications for the gendered divisions between public and private.

Understanding public space in Tunisia is no less complicated, as pre- and post-revolutionary changes must also be sorted out. As noted earlier, Bourguiba’s 1957 Personal Status Code granted rights for women considered progressive for their time. Yet the code by no means assured that women would have equal access to private space, and in fact, the complete ban on the hijab only complicated the matter further: a religious garment intended for public use became illegal in public. Bourguiba’s and Ben Ali’s simultaneous suppression and invocation of religion in public were also fraught with confusion: certain public expressions of Islam (such as dress) were outlawed, but Islam was used frequently for purposes of establishing and maintaining religious legitimacy.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>16</sup> See Kenneth Perkins’ “Playing the Islamic Card: The Use and Abuse of Religion in Tunisian Politics” in Gana, 58-80.

The opening up of public space post-revolution has seemingly exacerbated tensions between Tunisia's various political factions. This has become especially apparent due to the visibility of Islam in public space, via bearded men in *thobes* and women in the hijab (or more importantly it seems, the niqab<sup>17</sup>), which has struck a rather visceral chord for many Tunisian leftists and some of its moderates.<sup>18</sup> The same certainly applies to Tunisian leftists who have made use of newly accessible public space for various reasons: to protest changes in the constitution that were interpreted as detrimental to women's rights<sup>19</sup>, or to mobilize in support of Azyz Amami, a Tunisian leftist beaten and jailed for alleged marijuana consumption,<sup>20</sup> or to protest the murder of Tunisian leftist leader Chokri Belaid. Tunisian FEMEN member Amina Tyler's demonstration of public nudity (via Facebook) and the national scandal that followed is another example of the use of public space, but requires separate attention (as I elaborate this point later).

It may be useful to draw upon Warner's distinction between publics and counterpublics in order to better understand the positionality of Tunisian leftist and Islamist groups, as both were clandestine movements in opposition to Bourguiba's and Ben Ali's regimes, but were also oppositional to one another. A counterpublic, according to Warner, maintains consciousness of its subordinate status, and, "against the background of the public sphere, enables a horizon of

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<sup>17</sup> During my interviews, many Tunisians (with the exception of a few leftists) had told me they felt it was better that women could now wear the hijab if they wanted to. However, all my interviewees were vehemently opposed to the niqab, which they viewed as a particularly un-Tunisian, *khaliji* (meaning from the Persian Gulf) export.

<sup>18</sup> See footnote 18.

<sup>19</sup> The 2012 draft of the Tunisian constitution sparked national controversy when its 28<sup>th</sup> article supposedly replaced women's equal status to men with "complementarity" status. As Monica Marks explains in her article "Women's Rights Before and After the Tunisian Revolution" in *Gaza* (236-237), the use of the word "complimentary" was a grave mistranslation from the actual Arabic *yetekaamul*, which Marks translates as a mutual fulfillment rather than an unequal complementarity of men by women.

<sup>20</sup> Amami has been a target of Tunisian police since his involvement in the 2011 revolution, and more specifically his cyber-hacktivism of official Tunisian websites under Ben Ali's regime. His 2014 arrest led to public outcry, and he was eventually released from prison.



opinion and exchange; its exchanges remain distinct from authority and can have a critical relation to power.”<sup>21</sup> The various leftist and conservative factions I examine here are apparent *counterpublics* in that they often maintain a rather critical relationship to the state’s authority and to normative public space. It appears to be this continuous struggle between Tunisia’s multitudinous counterpublics that makes up Tunisian public space post-revolution. My decision to examine art stems from this, as art has historically been a powerful countercultural tool.

Little has been written about Tunisian public space<sup>22</sup> except for writings more generally on Islam and public space and, more specifically, women in Muslim societies and veiling practices.<sup>23</sup> Much remains to be said about the encroachment of the Tunisian state on public space or even its role in the establishment of a Tunisian “public” (the quotation marks were intentional here, as Warner notes that a public must be self-organized, without the input of an external framework<sup>24</sup>) and the changes Tunisia’s revolution have brought about to this space. Tunisia’s police continue to limit public freedoms as it did under Ben Ali, where the police were the main agents in patrolling public space and suppressing any form of dissent. It is telling that Bouazizi’s self-immolation came after continuous police harassment and allegations that he could not afford to pay the police enough in bribes.<sup>25</sup> Even if such allegations are untrue, they give insight into common perceptions of police corruption and the state’s control over public space. After the revolution, Tunisia remains a heavily policed state (though not to the degree it

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<sup>21</sup> Warner, “Public and Private” in *Publics and Counterpublics*, 56.

<sup>22</sup> Paula Holmes-Eber’s *Daughters of Tunis: Women, Family, and Networks in a Muslim City* (Westview Press, 2002) provides a rather simplified case study of Tunisian public space that lacks historical and political context.

<sup>23</sup> See for example, Nilüfer Göle, “The Gendered Nature of the Public Sphere,” *Public Culture* (1997): 61-81.

<sup>24</sup> Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics” in *Publics and Counterpublics*, 70. According to Warner, “this is why any distortion or blockage in access to a public can be so grave, leading people to feel powerless and frustrated. Externally organized frameworks of activity, such as voting, are and are perceived to be poor substitutes” (70). Such logic could easily lead to a further understanding of the role public space (or a lack thereof) had in sparking the revolution.

<sup>25</sup> Nouri Gana, “Introduction: Collaborative Revolutionism” in Gana, 10.

was under Ben Ali), as frequent occurrences of police brutality in suppressing activism and dissent have continued to show.<sup>26</sup>

As most studies of public space will demonstrate, examinations of public space must be gendered, as women's rights comes up frequently as a main question in debates over the public sphere. A casual observation of the Tunisian public sphere, however, would lead one to conclude that, like most public space anywhere, it is usually male-dominated: men fill the sidewalks at night as patrons of male-only cafes, smoking cigarettes and *shisha*, observing with passive curiosity the women that occasionally cross into their domains.<sup>27</sup> Yet, while all of that appears to remain unchanged, the 2011 revolution and its aftermath have shaken up Tunisian public space, if it ever was as clearly male-dominated as others have claimed.

#### **IV. Women in Public Space: Street Poetry**

Gendered disputes over public space became especially noticeable to me when I first encountered Tunis' new street poetry scene. Language is a critical factor in the gendered interplay between public and private spheres. According to Warner, "Public and private are bound up with elementary relations to language as well as to the body. The acquisition of language is an education into public and private speech genres and their different social contexts, which are commonly contexts of gender."<sup>28</sup> Upon my first encounter with Tunis' street poetry scene, I noticed its inherently subversive nature: young Tunisians were utilizing public spaces to read dissident poetry that criticized the state and the Islamist Ennahda government. Yet within this space, women were not only reclaiming space from the state and from Islamists, but from men as well.

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<sup>26</sup> See page 9 on Azyz Amami, or page 13 on Wled al-15 (to name only a few)

<sup>27</sup> Field notes, August 2013. It is especially common to see male-only cafes in smaller cities.

<sup>28</sup> Warner, "Public and Private" in *Publics and Counterpublics*, 25.

In the summer of 2013, I joined a group of young Tunisians in a public park for poetry. We were given yellow flyers to attach to our arms that read “*Sayeb al-15*.” The crowd was demanding freedom for Wled al-15, a Tunisian rapper who had recently been jailed after months of hiding for his song *Bolicia Kleb*, or “The Police are Dogs.” The gathering was among the first for *Klem shāri*, a street poetry movement initiated by young Tunisian poets, which stresses the importance of poetry in Tunisian dialect, known locally as Tounsi. One young woman got up to read an original poem, but I had seen her somewhere before – she was Shams Radhouani Abdi, a popular socialist and feminist. Her voice low but powerful, she read to us her poem, “Prepare the Shroud,” in dialect:

Prepare the shroud  
And if you still have more cloth, don't forget  
To sew her a dream  
And to sew her a light in a dark night  
And to write her a poem and a love song enveloped by a sigh  
And to wipe the tears of her idea  
And to tell her, I'm still with you until the revolution comes  
You shut your eyes and open them  
And you find her resisting by your side  
Laughing and measuring and cutting, she tells you,  
Prepare the shroud<sup>29</sup>

In the poem, Abdi speaks of preparing a burial shroud for her country. Yet she intentionally refers to Tunisia with the feminine pronoun *hiya*, to speak not only to the grim future she predicts for the country, but for its women as well.

It is significant that *Klem shāri* is by its very nature *street* poetry, in that it is explicitly intended for a public audience. That the poetry emphasizes the use of Tunisian dialect is also noteworthy, especially when it is being used by women; Tounsi is often associated with vulgarity and crudeness, and while it is always used in public (in day to day conversation), it popularly holds lower-class and uneducated connotations, and may be cited as inappropriate in the

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<sup>29</sup> From “Prepare the Shroud” by Shams Abdi; translations by Ghassen Hedfi and Agatha Palma. Delivered 29 June 2013. Written copy obtained with permission from Shams Radhouani Abdi.

supposedly refined world of poetry, where standard or classical Arabic have long dominated. If Modern Standard Arabic and French are the languages of education and sophistication, then the Derja (or dialect) is the unwritten language, the language of the streets. “The Derja is a battered language. And yet it is the mother tongue, that of affect, emotions, human relationships”<sup>30</sup> – it is thus the language of expressivity, and is therefore an important place to examine resistance.

The use of the Derja in poetry is rather unusual, and its use in public space appears to serve several means: for one, it resists the supposed sophistication of standard Arabic, used historically by Arabic-speaking poets, and the supposed pureness of classical Arabic, associated with the Quran; second, it asserts a *Tunisian* identity above all others; third, it pushes up against the politics of language education, wherein French becomes the dominant means of pedagogy in Tunisian schools; fourth, it confronts questions of language use and masculinity versus femininity, and finally, in combining all of the above, street poetry becomes a means for young Tunisians, and especially young Tunisian women, to reclaim public space. Warner offers an important perspective on the use of language in public space: “in one sense... all language and all thought are public... Yet there are degrees of formality in speech and writing that create a continuum of publicness. In many languages, these are sharply divided and lexically distinct... in many societies... these differences are frankly avowed as differences of status and gender: men can speak in public concourse, women cannot.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the Tunisian public that women poets speak to gives the impression of a gendered binary between (masculine) public space and the (feminine) private realm.

I first met Shams earlier that spring at the World Social Forum. She had led a large seminar on transnational feminism, and later brought several hundred to their feet, chanting “So-so-so! Solidarite! Avec les femmes!” Shams had garnered the attention of many, and was

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<sup>30</sup> Hager Ben Ammar, quoted in “Le tunisien, l’écrit de la rue” by Elodie Auffray.

<sup>31</sup> Warner, “Public and Private” in *Publics and Counterpublics*, 25.

waving off an Al Jazeera journalist when I finally had the opportunity to approach her. Before I knew it, I was crammed into the backseat of her two-door car, amongst four other female poets, laughing each time we hit a bump in the road – Shams was yelling out dirty curse words from her open window, defining them for me in explicit detail, and asking if there were any equivalents in English. A young man crossed on foot in front of us, and Shams honked and yelled out her window, “Zabbour!” which made the entire car erupt in laughter. Finally, it was explained to me: *Zabbour* is the Tunisian word for vagina, used frequently by men to describe sexy women. Shams, then, was appropriating the term and using it to tease a younger man, who looked back at us, bewildered and amused.

Of course, all-too-common incidences of men catcalling women might be traced back to a broader patriarchal structure of male-dominated and owned public space, where women are intruders whose bodies become the subject matter for men to judge and comment on. Shams’ playful catcalling might then be viewed as an attempt at disrupting the dominant structure of male-dominated public space, where Shams’ catcalling briefly flipped (or at least disarranged) patriarchal social norms. The six of us women crammed into her car seemed to embolden Shams; undoubtedly, the *Klem shāri*’ collective likewise encourages many young Tunisians to assert their claim to public space.

As I have argued, poetry in dialect is especially important for women. Throughout my fieldwork in Tunis, I often noted that the Tunisian dialect appears to hold particularly masculine connotations. While it is equally spoken by Tunisian men and women alike, the language is considered rough, especially in its most modern form – young Tunisians, for example, have taken to replacing certain verbs with the word *ennik*, or fuck. They will often be heard saying, *ennik sandwich*, which means “eat a sandwich” but which translates literally to “fuck a sandwich,” or *ennik taxi*, for “take [or fuck] a taxi.” Common insults in the dialect, such as *barra nik ommik*, or “go fuck your mother,” have clear implications of what gender they speak

to, and have become such a fixture of the dialect that they have almost lost their original meaning.

Women typically refrain from using such phrases in public. In fact, numerous studies have shown that when it comes to code-switching between dialect and more prestigious language, women actually tend to choose the prestigious forms more often than men.<sup>32</sup> In Tunisia, this could mean choosing French in certain formal settings. Linguist Elizabeth Gordon explains that this is not for purposes of self-promotion, but rather to avoid the associations that often accompany dialect use when intersecting with gender: female users of dialect, for example, tend to be associated more with sexual impropriety.<sup>33</sup> We should then ask what meanings we might draw from women who intentionally use dialect in public spaces. Perhaps it is more than simply to reaffirm their Tunisian identity, but to also directly challenge the stereotypes that further exclude them from public space.

While the two founders of *Klem shāri'* are men, it has become a popular space for many politicized Tunisian women. Poetry has historically been an acceptable place for women perhaps because it is associated with “softness,” but scholars have long shown how poetry has been a central means of women’s resistance. In fact, feminist poet Audre Lorde has said, “poetry is a vital necessity of [women’s] existence. It forms the quality of the light within which [they] predicate [their] hopes and dreams towards survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action” (1977). But still, we must question, how might reading poetry in public translate into tangible action for Tunisian women?

Another of Abdi’s poems, written after the assassination of leftist leader Chokri Belaid, is an obvious confrontation to Ennahda, the Islamist party that some hold responsible for Belaid’s

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<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth Gordon, “Sex, speech, and stereotypes: Why women use prestige speech forms more than men” *Language and Society* 26 (1997): 47-63.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

death. In this poem, Shams speaks of *al-fikra*, or an idea, being stomped out by Islamists: she says,

The idea is a time bomb, a missile  
The idea is dynamite  
It heals the ill  
Awakens the dead  
A song, a poem, a book  
...  
The idea is a rap artist  
And in his blood he injected the hate  
of Ennahda and Al Beji  
His words came out of the ghettos  
Written in blood  
Coming from flesh  
...  
The idea makes you live, despite the killing  
The idea calls for life, despite the fighting  
The idea lets you make bullets from words  
Of laws tattooed in flesh<sup>34</sup>

Contestations between feminists and Islamists in Tunisian public space came very publicly to a head when, in March 2013, Tunisian FEMEN member Amina Tyler controversially posted a half-nude photo of herself on Facebook, with “my body is mine” painted on her bare chest. Shortly afterwards, Tunisian Imam Adel Almi issued a *da’wa* against her, advising that she be lashed and stoned to death. It is important to note that many Tunisian feminists do not endorse FEMEN, citing its promotion of Islamophobic messages. However, the Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates (ATFD) announced that it would defend Amina should her rights be violated. This is somewhat reminiscent of the Catharine Beecher example provided by Warner, demonstrating a very complicated layering of public and private: Tyler ironically chose to bare her body publicly in order to declare it her very own private belonging, opening up criticism not only of whether she had the right to do so, but of her very body, where both men and women commented on it in various public formats (online, on television, etc.). Amina later

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<sup>34</sup> From “Chokri Belaid” by Shams Abdi; translations by Ghassen Hedfi and Agatha Palma. Delivered 29 June 2013. Written copy obtained with permission from Shams Radhouani Abdi.

disassociated herself from FEMEN due to its Islamophobia, but continued to post nude photographs of herself to Facebook.

As the above example demonstrates, artistic debates between feminism and Islamism in Tunisia are not limited to poetry; Amina's public photos, metaphoric on several levels, are also works of art, even if problematic ones at that. The question of women has had a history of resurfacing in nearly every political contest, and is thus one that comes up continually in artistic claims to public space as well. Yet whereas some young Tunisian women have flocked to the streets for poetry, very few have entered the male-dominated scene of Tunisian hip-hop.

## **V. Islam in Public Space: Islamic and Anti-Islamist Rap**

On November 7, 2010, Tunisian rapper Hamada Ben Amor, better known by his stage name El Général, uploaded a song to Facebook that would quickly become the theme of the revolution. The song, "Rayyes Lebled," or "Head of State," opens with an old video of Ben Ali speaking to a young schoolboy. Ben Ali asks him, "What worries you?... Would you tell me something?... Don't be afraid." The child is clearly afraid. El Général frames his song as an angry response, years later, from the child in the video. In Tunisian Arabic, El Général tells Ben Ali (as translated by Nouri Gana):

Mr. President,  
I speak to you today in my name  
And in the name of all the people who live in oppression and pain  
It's 2011 and there are still people who die of hunger  
They want to work to make a living but their voices are not heard  
Go down into the streets and see people turn into beasts  
See the cops clobbering people, tak-a-tak, not caring in the least  
As long as no one can make them stop their assault,  
Constitutional laws remain ink on paper, not worth a thought  
Every day I hear of someone prosecuted for a fake offense  
Even while officials actually know his innocence  
I see police goons beat up hijab-wearing women,  
Would you accept if your daughter were in their place?  
I know these words make one cry, I know



As a father, you won't let your children in harm's way  
So, consider this message to be from one of your children talking  
We are suffering through our lives like dogs  
Half the people live in humiliation and drink of misery's cup

(Chorus):

Mr. President, your people are dead  
Many, today, on garbage fed  
As you can obviously see what's going on nationwide,  
Miseries everywhere and people find nowhere to sleep  
I speak on behalf of those who were wronged and ground under feet

Mr. President, you told me to speak without fear,  
I did, but I expect slaps in the face, let's be clear  
I see so many injustices, which is why I chose to address you  
Even while many people warned me I'd face the death penalty  
But, for how long must Tunisians live in illusions?  
Where is freedom of expression? I saw nothing but repression  
You called "Tunisia, the Green," Mr. President, but as you can see  
Today, it's become just a desert terrain split in twain  
They steal in broad daylight, confiscate property, and own the land  
No need for me to name them, you know who they can be  
A lot of money was pledged for projects and constructions  
Schools, hospitals, buildings, and modifications  
But, the sons of bitches stuffed it into their potbellies  
They pillaged and plundered and clung to their positions of power  
I know people have in their hearts much to say but no way to convey  
If there were no injustices today, I would have had nothing to say

(Chorus)

Okay...People's voice...Général...2011  
Same sate...same problems and suffering  
Rayyes Lebled...Rayyes Lebled...Rayyes Lebled...

(Chorus)<sup>35</sup>

The song was re-uploaded dozens of times on YouTube with translations in various languages and featuring different video compilations. It was not until months later, after the start of the revolution, that 30 plainclothes police officers awakened Ben Amor at five in the morning and arrested him from his home. He spent three days under interrogation, believed by many to

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<sup>35</sup> Translation by Nouri Gana, in "Rap Rage Revolt," *Jadaliyya*  
<http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/2320/rap-rage-revolt>, August 5 2011.

be already dead. By the time El Général was released from prison, he had become a national star – protesters had been demanding his release in the streets since his imprisonment, thanks in large part to social networking sites. El Général became the “voice of Tunisia,”<sup>36</sup> and “Rayyes Lebled” has since been lauded as the anthem of the Arab Spring.

In fact, El Général was not the first to use hip-hop to criticize Ben Ali’s regime; Tunisian rapper Ferid El Extranjero did so in 2006, albeit from Spain, where he needed not fear imprisonment. In his song “La3bed Fi Terkina” (People in Prison), Ferid says,

“Liberta! Speak out loud, discuss!  
We are living in a strange society.  
Where is our justice? We were born free, you won’t  
stop us if you arrest us!  
The press is the source of freedom,  
It’s the light in the darkness,  
Democracy is saying the truth.  
A paper and pen against the wind,  
Everything will be told.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> For example, YouTube users who uploaded his music to the web called him such:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IeGIJ7OouR0>

<sup>37</sup> Lyrics from Hip Hop Democracy: <http://hiphopdiplomacy.org/2014/01/14/rapping-the-arab-spring/#more-1120>

Fig 1



Stills from El Général’s “Rayyes Lebled” music video show old footage of Ben Ali asking a schoolboy, “Why are you worried? Would you tell me something? Don’t be afraid!”<sup>38</sup>

But in 2006, Internet access was not yet widespread in Tunisia, and Ferid’s song would never make an impact such as El Général’s. Many scholars, like Manuel Castells, have noted the importance of social media in spreading the revolution: he points to outlets like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, that allowed Tunisians from even remote areas to rapidly learn of protests across the country and to organize their own. Castells explains how these websites, along with the physical occupation of urban space, created a “hybrid public space of freedom” that was

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<sup>38</sup> Video source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IeGIJ7OouR0>.

critical to the Tunisian revolution.<sup>39</sup> El Général, perhaps referencing the articles that have since been written about him (Time Magazine named him one of the most influential people of 2011, above President Obama)<sup>40</sup> has claimed that his song inspired the Tunisia’s revolution.<sup>41</sup> More generally, hip-hop is frequently cited as being one of the catalysts of the Arab Spring.<sup>42</sup>

Yet this “hybrid public space of freedom” that Castells refers to has been at the heart of a tug-of-war since the end of Ben Ali’s regime and the ousting of his party from positions of power. Disputes about the place of Islam in public life have not only been the frequent topic of debate on television, but have taken over the politicized art world. Some of Tunisia’s most prominent hip-hop artists have disparaged Tunisia’s secularism in their music. In fact, El Général has stated that he raps to “defend Islam.”<sup>43</sup> This is more evident in his song “Allahu Akbar,” (God is the Greatest) in which the chorus exclaims,

Allahu akbar!  
In all sincerity I shout  
Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar!  
Allahu akbar!  
The banner of Islam always comes first  
Allahu akbar  
I want to be a martyr  
Nothing but death can stop me<sup>44</sup>

Among the most famous of these Islamic hip-hop artists has been Psycho M. Several of his songs, such as “Manipulation” and “Psychological War,” express disdain for what he views as a global campaign against Islam.<sup>45</sup> Both songs include violent wishes against Tunisian

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<sup>39</sup> Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 23.

<sup>40</sup> Time Magazine “The 2011 Time 100”:

[http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2066367\\_2066369\\_2066242,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2066367_2066369_2066242,00.html).

<sup>41</sup> From an interview for Spin Magazine: <http://www.spin.com/articles/inside-tunisia-hip-hop-revolution/>.

<sup>42</sup> Such as on hip-hop diplomacy: <http://hiphopdiplomacy.org/2014/01/14/rapping-the-arab-spring/#more-1120>.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Video source and translation from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1QhfyKQsj0>.

<sup>45</sup> Gana, “Postcolonial Film and Song” in Gana, 199.

secularists, such as filmmaker Nouri Bouzid, who has spoken out against Tunisia's Islamist turn post-revolution. In "Manipulation," Psycho M also harshly criticizes Tunisian actress Sawsen Maalej, who referenced the male organ on a talk show.<sup>46</sup> In the 15-minute song, he calls her a "sick actress who needs to be treated," and then sarcastically remarks,

Thank God we have such an actress  
Leading women and the nation  
With champagne and pastis.

The growing popularity of Islamic hip-hop in Tunisia may give us pause; after all, hip-hop as we know it has deep roots in anti-establishment movements, and rarely embraces religious values. Islamism, however, as we have seen, has been anything *but* the establishment in Tunisia for many decades. Islamic rap has thus emerged as a particularly important form of resistance pre- and post-revolution, with women's issues and the role of Islam in public Tunisian life as some of its focal points.

But anti-Salafist hip-hop artists have been fighting back with music as well. Artist Klay BBJ has released a number of songs harshly criticizing Tunisia's Ennahda-led government. Among his most popular is "Hchinahoulna," which translates to "We fucked ourselves." The chorus says,

"We kicked out a dictator  
We elected a faggot  
No one fucked us, brother –  
We fucked ourselves."<sup>47</sup>

Klay is well-known for rapping about poverty, coming from the poor neighborhood of Bab Jdid himself. In "Hchinahoulna," he goes as far as to question the sexual orientation of then-Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali, a member of the Ennahdha party.

Significantly, all of these songs utilize the Derja for their lyrics. Similar to Black English

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Translation from [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/12/16/the\\_police\\_are\\_dogs](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/12/16/the_police_are_dogs).

in American rap, Tounsi has a sense of limitlessness, as there are no written rules; of course, both Black English and the Derja are rule-governed systems,<sup>48</sup> yet they are more flexible and free-flowing, and become a way to “contest the dominant script.”<sup>49</sup> Rap has also opened up the space for the creation of new words and new styles of speaking, as evidenced by one of Tunisia’s greatest hip-hop hits, “Houmani,” which speaks about widespread poverty but combines Tunisian dialect with entirely made up words over hypnotically simple beats and synthesizers.

Much like hip-hop in the United States, Tunisian hip-hop has increasingly become the music of Tunisian youth: hip-hop festivals have become popular events not just for politicized Tunisians. Last summer I attended a hip-hop concert in Carthage, where young Tunisian men and women stood up front by the stage and tried to touch hands with the singers. The artists’ calls to free Wled al-15 were met by enthusiastic cheers from the crowd, but overall, the event had little to do with Tunisian politics. Some Tunisians had snuck beers into their backpacks and would climb out onto ancient ruins, hidden away from any possible police (who were suspected to be hiding in the audience in plainclothes), to drink and smoke with friends. After the concert, a group of college students I had met was headed out to Le Plug, a popular bar in the upper-middle-class town of La Marsa, for more drinks.

Such an event is in contrast to the hip-hop festival held last year in the impoverished city of Kasserine, Tunisia. Here, the entire purpose behind the event, Streets Festival Kasserine 2013, was to give poor Tunisians a chance to use hip-hop as a form of self-expression. Attended by international hip-hop artists such as the Iraqi-Canadian rapper The Narcicyst and the French rapper Medine, the five-day event featured workshops on free-styling and breakdancing competitions. Some had believed it to be an effective way to keep the young, unemployed, and

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<sup>48</sup> H. Samy Alim et. al, *Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2009).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

hopeless Tunisians away from the influence of Salafis, who tend to dominate public space in more impoverished cities like Kasserine.<sup>50</sup>

Just as white and bourgeois consumers in the United States have commodified hip-hop culture and rap music (whereas it was originally intended to be explicitly *not* for their consumption), hip-hop has taken similar root in Tunisian popular culture; Tunisian rapper Balti is a prime example of this, as he gained a reputation of being a favorite of the Ben Ali regime (contributing to his sharp decline in popularity and eventual irrelevance post-revolution). Yet the use of hip-hop both by disenfranchised Tunisian youth and even Islamist artists proves that hip-hop's original intention as a counterculture movement remains in place, even as two rival publics use it against each other.

## **VI. Graffiti Art and Anti-Salafist Movements**

Of all art forms, graffiti is easily the most public, as its very nature is a message intended for all (though sometimes only comprehended by few). According to Portuguese sociologist Ricardo Campos, “graffiti that is marked onto public spaces is particularly powerful because its audiences can be immense. The fact that its intended audience is unidentified makes this form of communication even more curious, as it resembles communicative strategies used in the dissemination of propaganda and advertising.”<sup>51</sup> But according to Warner, graffiti's resemblance to advertising is not a mistake. Writing on 1980s urban graffiti as an emerging practice of black male subculture, Warner explains how graffiti became a form of counterpublicity that “cuts

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<sup>50</sup> Sam Kimbali, “Tunisia's post-revolution hip-hop remedy.” *Aljazeera*. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/01/tunisia-post-revolution-hip-hop-remedy-201411135952171568.html>. (Accessed November 13 2014).

<sup>51</sup> Ricardo Campos, “Struggles on the Walls: Political Graffiti in Portugal.” Erin Taylor, translator. *Análise Social*: Originally accessed at <https://xa.yimg.com/kq/groups/.../name/Ricardo+Campos+-+english.pdf> on October 17, but Campos' article was later pulled from the journal.

against the self-contradictions of the bourgeois public sphere.”<sup>52</sup> According to Warner, “the graffiti of this subculture, in effect, parody the mass media; by appearing everywhere, they aspire to the placeless publicity of mass print or televisualization. They thus abstract away from the given body, which in the logic of graffiti is difficult to criminalize or minoritize because it is impossible to locate.”<sup>53</sup>

Because mass print, televisualization, the radio, and other forms of publicity all belonged to the state under Ben Ali (or were even its very tools to disseminate propaganda), it is not surprising that Tunisian graffiti, during and post revolution, would serve a similar function as black subculture graffiti in the United States. According to Warner, the latter implied the message that “although emancipation is not around the corner, its possibility is visible everywhere.”<sup>54</sup> Tunisian graffiti during the months of the revolution indeed promoted a similar message, although emancipation, of a certain kind, was in Tunisia’s very near future.

Lina Khatib, drawing upon Guy Debord, notes in *Image Politics in the Middle East: The Role of the Visual in Political Struggle* the importance of the image to the Arab Spring as a result of “today’s televisual public sphere.”<sup>55</sup> Televisualization, to Debord, is where “states stage spectacles... certifying their status before the people/public.” And, “subaltern counterpublics participate through the performance of image events, employing the consequent publicity as a social medium through which to hold... states accountable, help form public opinion, and constitute their own identities as subaltern counterpublics.”<sup>56</sup>

The various counterpublics I have identified in this paper all had one common goal during the Tunisian revolution: the overthrow of Ben Ali’s despotic regime. Revolutionary

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<sup>52</sup> Warner, “The Mass Public and the Mass Subject” in *Publics and Counterpublics*, 183.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 184.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Lina Khatib, *Image Politics in the Middle East: The Role of the Visual in Political Struggle*. (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 117.

<sup>56</sup> Guy Debord, quoted in Khatib, *Image Politics*, 117.



graffiti thus centered largely upon this general theme. The anonymity of graffiti art in this case appears to serve more than one purpose; not only did it guarantee that the artists would not be punished for their work, but it also gave the viewer the impression that the visual messages expressed were not just one artist's opinion, but rather *public* opinion. And overall, they did speak for public opinion: Tunisians who made up nearly all facets of society wanted Ben Ali out. Shortly before and immediately following Ben Ali's ousting, street art collectives like Ahl El Kahf and anonymous individuals began taking over Tunisian space. Images of revolutionary figures like Che Guevara appeared on walls all over the country, as did revolutionary quotes, and excerpts from popular poetry.<sup>57</sup>

Street Art, at that time, demonstrated the contested public space between the Tunisian public and the Tunisian state: as soon as artists would paint, their work would be swiftly covered up. This back-and-forth between art and censorship remained an almost cat and mouse game between graffiti artists and the police. Image reversal was also a popular form of street and performance art during the Tunisian revolution. Khatib describes this process in Libya, Syria, and Egypt during the Arab Spring, where images and effigies of Muammar Qaddafi, Bashar al-Asad, and Hosni Mubarak, respectively, were defaced or entirely burnt down in the streets.<sup>58</sup> This was also common during Tunisia's revolution, but not only was Ben Ali's image defaced; it was sometimes reproduced on public walls, but with a menacing frown in place of his usual (and rather artificial) smile.<sup>59</sup>

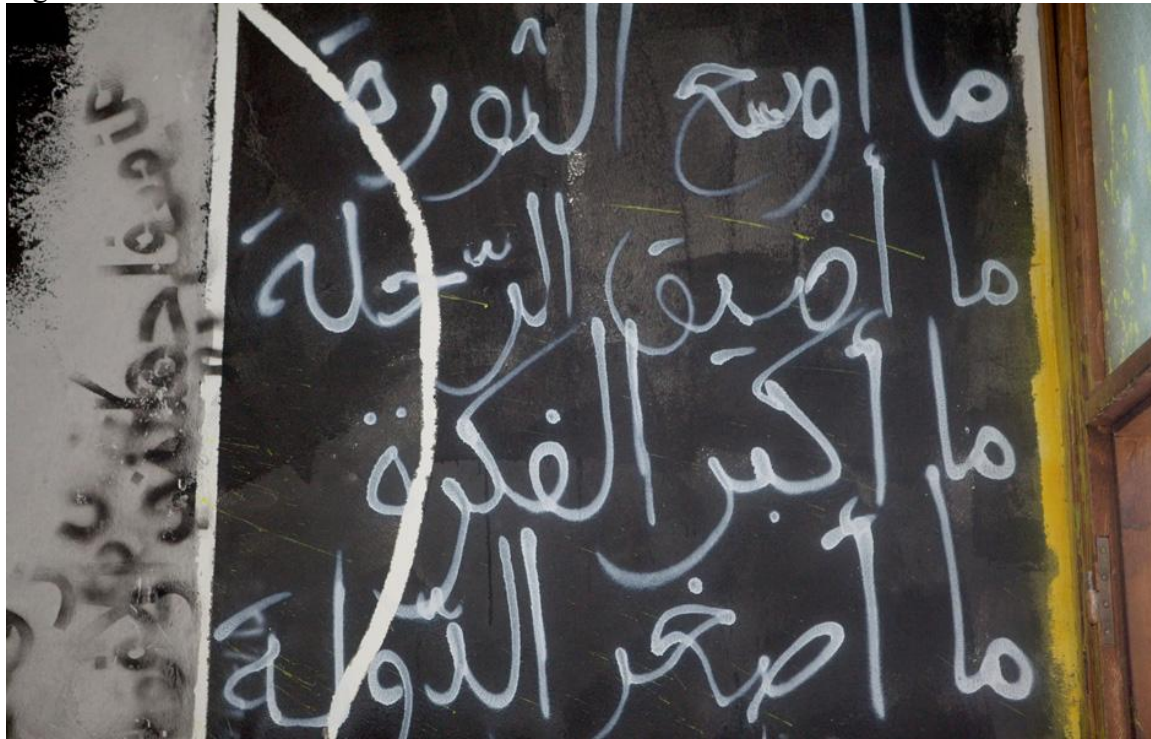
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<sup>57</sup> See fig 2.

<sup>58</sup> Khatib, *Image Politics*, 182

<sup>59</sup> See figures 3a and 3b.

Fig 2.



Graffiti by Ahl al-Kahf artistic collective in Tunis. “How limitless is the revolution, how narrow the road, how vast the idea, and how minute the state” – a quote from Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish’s poem “In Praise of the High Shadow.” (Photo credit: Al-Akhbar).<sup>60</sup>

Images of Ben Ali that once lined the streets and hung inside shops are now nowhere to be found. In fact, it seems a project of national forgetting has been taking place since the revolution: what was once the Ben Ali airport has become the Enfidha-Hammamet International Airport, and streets like November 7<sup>th</sup> Street (in tribute to the anniversary of his presidency) have become January 14<sup>th</sup> Street (in honor of the revolution). And, as if to explicitly broadcast the need to reclaim public space from the state, some street artists even took to plastering over Ben Ali’s image with that of ordinary Tunisian civilians.

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<sup>60</sup> Image source: <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/2948>

Fig 3a.

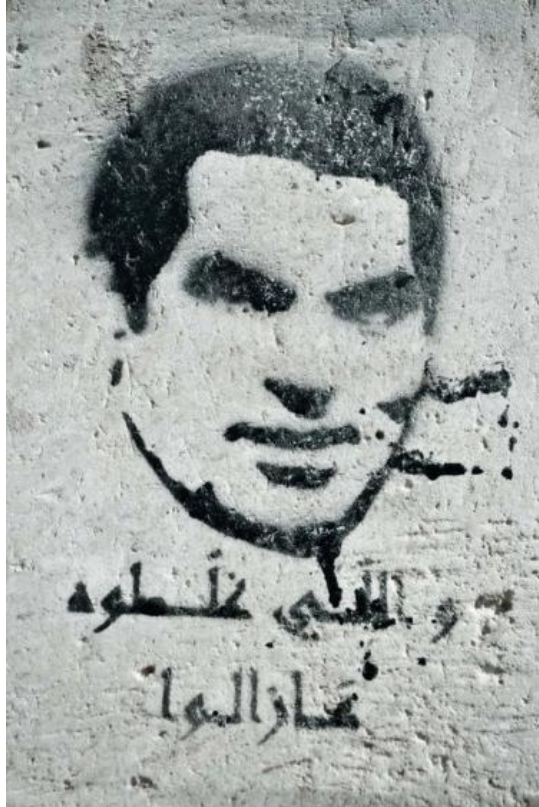


Fig 3b.



Artists unknown. (3a): A rather menacing image of Ben Ali; the text reads, “And those who made him do wrong remained.” The quote is usually preceded by the phrase, “The criminal fled.” (Photo credit: Al-Akhbar).<sup>61</sup> (3b): The French reads “The Republic Pukes!” (Photo credit: Thierry Ehrmann).<sup>62</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Image source: <http://blog.ehrmann.org/?cat=15>

<sup>62</sup> Image source: <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/2948>

Fig 4a.



A typical image of Ben Ali prior to his ousting, displayed next to a Real Estate office in Tunis in May 2010. The text reads, “Together we can overcome all challenges.” (Photo credit: Mike Thorpe).<sup>63</sup>

Fig 4b.



Prior to Ben Ali’s ousting, images such as the above were hung every November 7 to celebrate the anniversary of his presidency. The text below reads, “Ben Ali our only choice.” (Photo credit Hamideddine Bouali).<sup>64</sup>

Yet more than three years after Ben Ali’s ousting, Tunisian police continue to target young street artists, and perhaps most notably those whose art challenges the state (or those

<sup>63</sup> Image source: <http://www.home.earthlink.net/~sv-adagio/TunisiaToFrance.html>

<sup>64</sup> Image source: <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2011/11/09/tunisia-the-day-ben-ali-became-president/>

whose art could incite further public unrest). The *Zwawla* graffiti art movement, named in honor of Tunisia's poor, aims to bring awareness to poverty, which remains rampant yet largely unaddressed in Tunisia. In November of 2013, two *Zwawla* artists were caught tagging in the city of Gabes and arrested for "spreading false information" and disrupting public order.<sup>65</sup> The artists behind the *Zwawla* movement assert that their only intention is to convey one simple message: "The poor are the living-dead in Tunisia."<sup>66</sup> Yet such a message is perhaps less simple than it seems, as poverty was likely one of the largest factors that sparked the 2010 revolution. Reminders of its continued existence, if not always visible to the eye in its real form but splayed vividly across the walls, can undoubtedly plant more seeds for further discontent.

Yet unlike the *Zwawla* movement, much of street art in post-revolutionary Tunisia has taken on a much different meaning from its revolutionary past. No longer is its purpose only to reclaim public space from the state (although as the above example shows, the cat and mouse game with Tunisian police continues); public space is now contested between those opposing groups who previously had no claim to it under Ben Ali's regime. Clashes between Tunisian artists and conservative Salafis have made international headlines, such as the controversy regarding an exhibit at Palais Abdellia in Tunis last year. Salafi riots broke out over some of the exhibits, which were deemed heretical due to nudity and other imagery. During the three days of riots, the outside walls of the gallery became the billboards for Salafi Tunisians to declare Tunisia a Muslim state where non-believers had no rightful place.

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<sup>65</sup> Melek Lakdar. "Les «Zwawla» désormais LIBRES de crier leur misère? Après le verdict de leur procès." *Turess*, December 4 2012 (accessed December 7 2014).

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

Fig 5.



Islamist graffiti on the Palais Abdellia walls, where a controversial art exhibit was held. The red text on the right reads, “Tunisia is a Muslim Country,” and below it, “Non-believers have no place in Tunisia.” (Photo credit: CNN)<sup>67</sup>

Some graffiti artists, however, have tried to bridge this divide by promoting dialogue between Islamists and artists through graffiti. The well-known, (and not anonymous) artist eL Seed has begun painting images of Arabic calligraphy, which is typically reserved for religious artwork, on Tunisian walls. His most famous work was his calligraphy on the Jara Mosque minaret in Gabes, Tunisia (in which he was given permission by the imam and local governor), which features a quote from the Quran promoting tolerance: “Oh humankind, we have created you from a male and a female and made people and tribes so you may know each other.”<sup>68</sup>

## VII. Conclusions

While eL Seed’s work is laudable both for its beauty and positivity, fruitful dialogue between Tunisia’s sectarian factions remains to be seen: governmental politics are split between secular and Islamist parties, and Tunisian public space remains reflective of this divide. Just

<sup>67</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2013/01/11/world/meast/tunisia-salafists-artists-battle/>

<sup>68</sup> Translation from <http://www.culture.com/arts/art-el-seed>

recently, in October of 2014, Tunisia's leading secular party, Nidaa Tounes, took control of parliament with 83 seats over Ennahda's 63. Such news is perhaps optimistic on the one hand as Tunisian politics begin to resemble that of any other democracy, yet daunting on the other as the state policing system remains in place, and attempts at structural changes have not allowed for a true opening up of Tunisian public space.

As the above examples attempt to tease out, the reclamation of public space post-revolution has not been a simple victory of the Tunisian public vis-à-vis the state: Tunisian public space, a space that was by and large produced and shaped by the government and that remains heavily policed, is a place of contestation between the various political factions that have polarized Tunisia since its revolution. In line with Christopher Kelty's analysis of the Internet as a form of public space, Tunisian public space "is neither stable nor single but is constantly being rewritten and recompiled according to diverse, partially shared, shifting, and incomplete objectives."<sup>69</sup> Tunisian public space is a contest, and perhaps the kind that no side ever wins, as long as it remains policed.

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<sup>69</sup> Christopher Kelty, "Geeks, Social Imaginaries, and Recursive Publics" *Cultural Anthropology* 20 (2005): 185.

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