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Drawing the Revolution: The Practice and Politics of Collaboration in the Graphic Novel *Lissa*

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Motivated by the potentials of comics to convey complex, yet accessible anthropological insights on global health and political transformation, the authors crafted the collaborative work of graphic “ethnofiction” *Lissa: A Story about Medical Promise, Friendship, and Revolution*. *Lissa* chronicles the unlikely friendship of two young women living in Cairo—one Egyptian, one American—who are navigating difficult health circumstances at home and revolutionary unrest in the streets. In this excerpt and discussion of the collaborative process of crafting *Lissa*, we illustrate how we attended to the broader epistemological, aesthetic, and ethical fields within which the project took shape by working collaboratively with Egyptian revolutionaries on the story and by employing different visual and narrative techniques throughout the book to cite their artistic, academic, and activist work.

Lissa: A Story About Medical Promise, Friendship, and Revolution (University of Toronto Press, 2017) is a collaborative graphic adaptation of original anthropological research in two vastly different contexts: the contemporary Arab world and the United States. Motivated by the potentials of comics to convey complex, yet accessible medical anthropological insights on global health and political transformation, we crafted a work of graphic “ethnofiction” (Stoller 1992) that bridged Sherine Hamdy’s ethnographic work on organ transplantation in Egypt, and Coleman Nye’s research on breast cancer genetics in the US. Written by Hamdy and Nye, and illustrated by Sarula Bao and Caroline Brewer, *Lissa* chronicles the unlikely friendship of two young women living in Cairo—one Egyptian, one American—who are navigating difficult health circumstances at home and revolutionary unrest in the streets. Anna, the daughter of an American oil executive living in Cairo, has learned that a genetic predisposition for cancer runs in her family. Meanwhile, her best friend Layla, the daughter of the *bawab*

(doorman/servant) of Anna's apartment building, is making decisions about how to manage her father's kidney failure. As the young women struggle to understand each other's medical choices, they become swept up in the Egyptian revolution. As a medical student, Layla tends to injured protestors in makeshift field hospitals in Tahrir Square, while Anna helps to identify the bodies of the dead. As the revolution unfolds, the two women begin to see how their own experiences with health and mortality are intimately connected to the larger political, economic, and environmental contexts in which they live.

While the story in *Lissa* explores how individual experiences are inextricable from a wider set of social and systemic relations, the act of creating the book itself was an exercise in ongoing "response-ability" (Haraway 2007) to the broader epistemological, aesthetic, and ethical fields within which the project took shape. Donna Haraway describes response-ability as an active practice of attention, care, and openness to the complex and unresolved relations within which we live and work (75). For the team of artists and academics creating *Lissa*, it was particularly critical that we attend to our own complicated relation to representing the Egyptian revolution as Americans who did not contribute to or participate in the revolutionary thought, art, and action unfolding across Egypt. We did not want to overshadow or wrongly claim the intellectual production emerging from the revolutionaries themselves and those most immediately affected by the political uprisings. We hoped to make it clear that the critical intellectual work on the revolution belongs to Egyptians, not to us, as outsiders. In the following excerpt and commentary, we illustrate how we sought to attend to these concerns by working collaboratively with Egyptian revolutionaries on the story and by employing different visual and narrative techniques throughout the book to cite their artistic, academic, and activist work. At the same time, we acknowledge that the *Lissa* team still benefits disproportionately from this scholarship on the revolution and on revolutionary thought that is not our own.



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Page-1.png>)

Page 1



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Page-2.png>)

Page 2



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Page-3.png>)

Page 3.



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Page-4.png>)

Page 4.



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Page-5.png>)

Page 5

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Page 6.



**The people demand the downfall of the regime. **Hamas and Palestine with Hamasites, write not leaving until he [Barack] leaves.
 **Gaffiti (panel 3) by Ana Hussein. The mural depicts Ahmed Haneen, a dentist who was blinded in one eye by a gunshot in January 2011, and in the other by a rubber bullet in November of that year. The graffiti reads: "Your silence is murder."



* Graffiti (panel 3) by unknown artist. The graffiti reads, "You will not kill our revolution."

(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Page-7.png>)

Page 7



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Page-8.png>)

Page 8



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Page-9.png>)

Page 9



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Page-10.png>)

Page 10



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Page-11.png>)

Page 11



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Page-12.png>)

Page 12

Drawing the Egyptian Revolution

In a 2011 article about academic tourism and the “Arab Spring,” Egyptian sociologist Mona Abaza describes the enduring inequalities that inhere in international

scholarship on revolutionary action. Western researchers often rely on “local” academics and revolutionaries in the Middle East as “service providers” and then benefit disproportionately from these exchanges through access to funding, visibility, and publications. For Abaza, this troubling international trend reinforces an Orientalist worldview, in which “European thinkers remain pervasively as the ‘knowing subjects’ whereas non-Europeans continue to be the ‘objects of observations and analyses.’” In the Egyptian context, these uneven global dynamics are also cut through with local power imbalances. For example, modes of intellectual production such as academic and journalistic accounts published on major national and international platforms are granted authority and gain visibility within and beyond Egypt, often to the exclusion of other forms of revolutionary work upon which they rely. Not only does this reproduce a damaging and ill-founded division of labor and authority in knowledge production at multiple scales, but it works to obscure, expropriate, and devalue (intellectually and financially) the vital revolutionary work that many Egyptians have been doing in the very acts of grassroots organizing, fighting off riot police, improvisationally healing the wounded, navigating censorship, and presenting competing counter-narratives to state propaganda through social media, paper flyers, and graffiti art.

In the process of devising *Lissa*, we developed two key strategies to address these research disparities and to foreground the contributions of Egyptian revolutionaries from across the spectrum. First, our creative process relied on ongoing modes of collaboration. During and after a trip to Egypt, the *Lissa* team consulted with and incorporated feedback from Egyptian academics, doctors, protestors, and artists on the story, on character design, and on the artwork. Ethnographic filmmaker Francesco Dragone documented this process in the film “**The Making of *Lissa***” (<https://vimeo.com/ondemand/themakingoflissa>),” which follows our team as we visit the various sites where the novel takes place, discuss our script with Egyptian interlocutors, and reflect on how the characters and story changed through these encounters. Second, the formal dimensions of the work as graphic ethnofiction opened up exciting possibilities for challenging and reimagining conventional models of authorship, authority, and citation. Writing *Lissa* as a work of fiction enabled us to more seamlessly adapt the story in relation to the ongoing conversations we were having with revolutionaries, while the ethnographic dimension made it possible to base the story on real people and events. Further, the unique combination of text and image in the comic form allowed us to layer and juxtapose multiple perspectives on the uprisings, and to visually cite real revolutionaries’ experiences, insights, and artworks in the story.

The first stop on our research trip to Egypt was the Cairo University Faculty of Medicine, where our character Layla went to medical school. There, we met with Dr. Dina Shokry, a faculty member who had played an important role in the revolution by training students to keep detailed records of the protestors' injuries as a way to document the political violence. We also met with her medical students – who were, notably, all women – and told them Anna and Layla's story. The medical students were the first Egyptian audience with whom we shared a draft of the story, and we were struck that, unlike the American audiences whose reactions to our project had been great interest, curiosity, or fascination, the Egyptian students' reactions were mostly grief. The events that we depict in the story hit very close to home. They all had friends or family members who had experienced what we describe: whether late stage cancer or kidney failure or injury during the protests. The discordance in their reaction was an important reminder for us as to how stories of suffering can be consumed by distant others while remaining painful retellings for the subjects themselves. Yet, alongside their sadness, the medical students were also committed to a project that would historically record and widely share what they had experienced. As they showed us around the lecture halls and pathology lab, they provided insights into what Layla's daily life would have been like. They also reflected on medical issues that we would later depict in the story, such as the use of the painkiller Tramadol by young, often poor protestors like Layla's brother who would take it to help withstand the physical and psychological effects of political violence.

Our toughest critic in Egypt was Dr. Amr Shebaita, a co-founder of the nonprofit organization *Tahrir Doctors*, which carried out monumental work saving lives of injured protestors during the eruptions of state violence. He scrapped scenes he found too melodramatic or improbable and gave us helpful feedback on character design and key plot points. For example, he insisted that Anna have dark hair and a strong command of spoken Arabic, as a foreigner who could navigate Cairo's streets without drawing too much attention. Dr. Shebaita provided first-hand knowledge of what Layla and Anna might have done in the hectic space of the field hospitals and took us on a tour, at night, of the makeshift field hospital sites around Tahrir Square. At the time of our trip, the area was heavily policed and militarized, with tanks blocking off the square to prevent any more street protests. Watchful police officers or soldiers would quickly reprimand anyone for taking out a smartphone to snap a picture. This atmosphere heightened the intensity of listening to Dr. Amr's stories of providing first-aid in the very space that five years earlier was a deadly conflict zone.

We wanted to acknowledge the tremendous work of Egyptian revolutionary actors like Drs. Shokry and Shebaita, and we began considering how to cite them in our book. Depicting the revolutionaries brought up a host of questions for us about the ethics of representation: we were wary of falling into the trap of the Western academic tourist who drops in and extracts the knowledge being generated without having to face all the risks and demands of political participation. There are, however, dangers in sharing revolutionaries' names and stories. Counter-revolutionary forces continue to violently punish and repress political actors of all stripes, and we worried about the repercussions of potentially calling state attention to our interlocutors by publishing their names.

After much discussion and thought, we agreed that naming these key revolutionaries and generous collaborators was the best way to honor them. Revolutionaries wanted to disrupt the brutal oppression of dissent under Mubarak. As part of this effort, they were announcing themselves publicly. The story we tell of the revolution comes in large part from the accounts of those who took part and who made it a point to name themselves and discuss their experiences openly in memoirs, writings, blogs, Facebook posts, artwork, books, articles, and organizations. In line with this practice and in consultation with the revolutionaries we wanted to cite, we decided that saying their names and sharing their stories is crucial to remembering, valuing, and foregrounding their incredible work. Nonetheless, we maintain that there is no right answer to this dilemma of citation, particularly given the fact that the circumstances upon which our decision hinges are themselves quickly changing under Sisi's rule.

In the book, we portrayed our revolutionary collaborators as themselves. Dr. Shokry is Layla's professor in medical school (figures 1 and 2) and Dr. Shebaita (figure 3) is Layla's field hospital supervisor in Tahrir. In the excerpt, readers will find Dr. Shebaita directing Layla to record the injured protestor's name and injuries (figure 4), a practice that Shebaita, Shokry, and others put into place in response to government pressure on morgues to misattribute protestors' deaths to "spontaneous bleeding" instead of state violence. Through this record-keeping system, doctors sought to register these injuries and deaths with international human rights agencies. By including the doctors as themselves in the book, and by showing this practice of documentation, we hoped to center their critical and continuing role in seeking health and justice for Egyptian peoples.



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*Figure 1. Dr. Dina Shokry, Cairo University Faculty of Medicine.
Image source: Francesco Dragone.*



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/fig.2-shokryillustration.jpg>)

Figure 2. Dr. Dina Shokry, as herself, in Lissa



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/fig.-3-shebaita.jpg>)

Figure 3. Dr. Amr Shebaita, co-founder of Tahrir Doctors. Image source: Francesco Dragone.

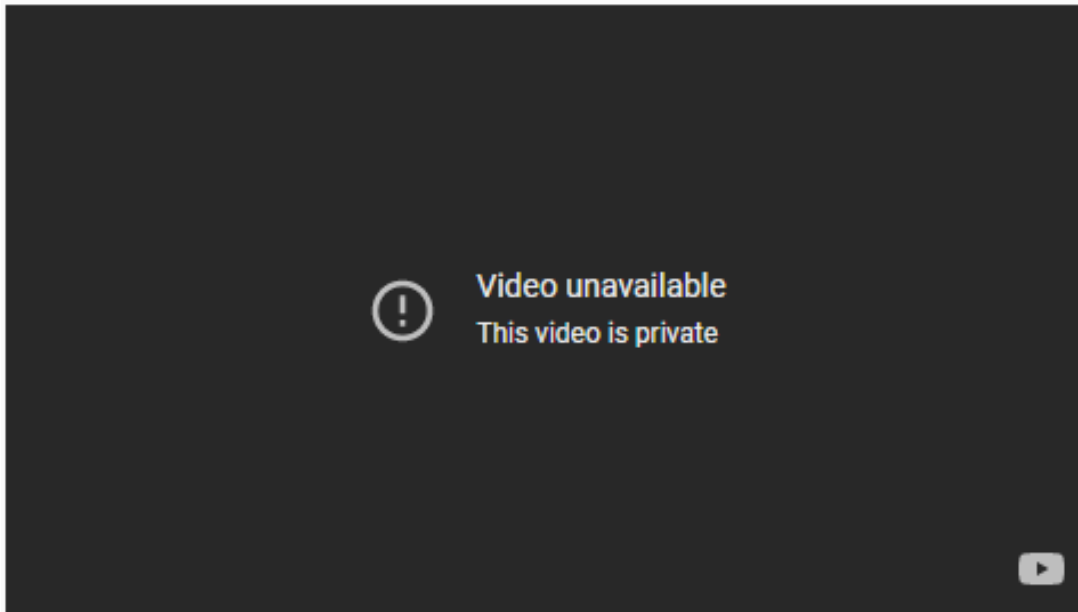


(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/fig.4-illustrated-shebaita-1.png>)

*Figure 4. Dr. Amr Shebaita, as himself, in *Lissa**

In conversation with the artists on the project and with Egyptian feminist researchers, we took care to visually subvert many of the problematic optics of gender, race, and class that often appear in comics and other popular media. We also sought to center women's voices in the creation of the story, in the story itself, and in our rendering of the Egyptian revolution. Through our visit to the Women and Memory Forum (WMF) in Cairo, we were introduced to a number of women's oral histories of the revolution that were recorded and archived by researchers precisely "because they are not famous," board member Amina Elbendary explained to us. Two other characters that Layla encounters during the Egyptian revolution – Reem and Alia – are based on the revolutionaries Reem Bashery (figures 5 and 6) and Alia Mossallam (figures 7 and 8) who were interviewed as part of the WMF's project. Many lines of dialogue are taken

directly from their testimonies, and the work that Anna engages in around identifying the dead is based directly on Mossallam's powerful account of her experience in a 2011 article for the Egypt Independent. This article formed the basis for the excerpted scene in the morgue where Layla first meets Alia and encounters a bereaved mother lovingly coaxing her dead son to speak.



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Figure 5. Reem Bashery



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/fig.-6-reemillustrated.png>)

Figure 6. Reem Bashery, as herself, in Lissa



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/fig.-7-aliamossallam.jpg>)

Figure 7. Alia Mossallam



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Figure 8. Alia Mossallam, as herself, in Lissa.

Meeting with Egyptian comic artists and studying the work of Egyptian graffiti artists of the revolution was another way we sought inter-textual citation and reference to what Egyptians intellectually produced during and after the revolution. During our trip, we were simply floored by Egyptian comic and graffiti artists' creativity, adaptability, and agility in producing stunning and poignant art that challenged social and political taboos and forged alternate paths of representation. If we were, in the making of *Lissa*, also making the argument that visual artistic creation is a form of knowledge-making, we wanted this to be woven into the visual and intellectual landscape of *Lissa*. Based on conversations and observations from our trip, we made the decision to incorporate the work of Egyptian graffiti artists who were leveling trenchant political critiques and messages of hope on walls and flyers throughout the country.

The combination of political resistance and artistic craft at play in the graffiti art on the streets of Tahrir was truly remarkable. In the excerpt, Layla passes military authorities painting over a mural of a face that is half-Mubarak-half-Mohamed Hussein Tantawi by graffiti artist Omar Fathy. When she returns to the same street corner the next day, she finds the officers angrily puzzling over a new revolutionary message that appeared on the freshly painted wall overnight. In an article about this particular corner of Mohamed Mahmoud Street, Mona Abaza explains how successive attempts by Egyptian authorities to erase the paintings were only met by the artists with "elaborated and sometimes improved versions of the previous paintings, until they excelled at the art of resisting, challenging, and insulting the counterrevolutionaries along with the wielders of power and their allies" (2013). On this particular page in *Lissa*, the newly painted mural depicts a protestor, arm raised, eye bandaged, demanding "Freedom!"

The wounded eye is a recurring theme in the revolutionary graffiti in the streets of Tahrir and in the pages of *Lissa*. This is in reference to the police snipers' practice of deliberately targeting protestors' eyes during the popular uprisings (Hamdy 2016). The graffiti art by Amr Nazeer depicted in the excerpt references one of the most publicized examples of these horrific attempts to blind protestors (figures 9 and 10). Dr. Ahmed Harara is a young dentist who sustained a serious injury to his right eye on January 28, 2011 when riot police violently attacked protestors in and around Tahrir Square. After Mubarak resigned following the demonstrators' 18-day occupation of public spaces, Dr. Harara was celebrated in state media and through official award ceremonies; he often deflected attention aimed at him, instead recalling the slain protestors and voicing the revolutionary cry that the lives lost would not be in vain. He even vowed that he would sacrifice his second eye if it meant securing justice and freedom for Egypt. During the

interim military rule in November 2011, a fresh wave of protests broke out, and Dr. Harara took again to the streets. In a perverse act of spite, a police sniper shot a rubber bullet as his remaining eye leaving Dr. Harara completely blind. By visually citing stunning and searing artistic depictions of blinded protestors by Amr Nazeer, Abo Bakr, and others in *Lissa*, we hoped to show the range of critical responses and resistant acts engaged in by Egyptian revolutionaries in the face of profound state violence.



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/6-NyeHamdyfig-9-hararagraffiti.png>)

Figure 9. Original graffiti of Ahmed Harara by Amr Nazeer.

You can watch the artist render the graffiti in real-time **here** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=toCyT9zIoNg>).



*The people demand the downfall of the regime. **Huwwa yimsh ee mish hanimshee: We're not leaving until he [Mubarak] leaves.
***Graffiti (panel 9) by Amr Nazeer, The mural depicts Ahmed Harara, a dentist who was blinded in one eye by birdshot in January 2011, and in the other by a rubber bullet in November of that year. The graffiti reads: "Your silence is murder."

(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/NyeHamdyfig.10-hararalissa.png>)

Figure 10. Graffiti mural of Ahmed Harara in Lissa.

One particularly exciting collaboration emerged from our focus on the artistic and intellectual work of Egyptian graffiti artists: Ganzeer, one of the foremost revolutionary graffiti artists in Cairo (figure 11), designed an original composition for the final page of the book. In this impressive work, Ganzeer draws on themes from the novel around friendship, hope, and revolution, while also engaging in critical forms of citation by

including the works of many other artists and activists in his full-page mural. At the end of the book, readers can learn about the multiple works of art and modes of revolutionary thought that he incorporated into the piece (figure 12).



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/NyeHamdyfig.11-ganzeer.png>)

Figure 11. Ganzeer, Egyptian revolutionary artist. Image source: Ganzeer.



(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Nye12.png>)

Figure 12. Mural in Lissa composed by Ganzeer

The original title for this project was *The Spaces Between*. This title, we thought, drew attention to the points of connection, overlap, and tension between our field sites, rather than reinforcing tired dichotomies between the West and the Rest, the self and other, the personal and political, individual and social. In retrospect, this old title aptly captures the collaborative dynamics at play in the gutters of our graphic work of ethnofiction. As Scott McCloud points out, in comics, the liminal space of the gutter asks the reader to be “a willing and conscious *collaborator*.” it is “in the limbo of the gutter [where] human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea” (65-66). We have worked in these gutters for much of the project, inhabiting the spaces between field sites (US and Egypt), disciplines (anthropology and art), and genres (ethnography, fiction, comics), in our attempts to transform anthropological insights and revolutionary imaginaries into a coherent, yet complex visual narrative. What this mode of response-ability looks like in practice is at times messy and necessarily inextricable from a wider field of unequal relations of knowledge and power. At the same time, it has been a deeply pleasurable and informative experience, as we have worked to remain at the edges of what we know and how we know, and have found different ways of ethically and artfully engaging with revolutionary thought in the process.

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