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The American University in Cairo
School of Global Affairs and Public Policy

**Our Stories, Our Lives:
Performed Storytelling in Cairo**

A thesis submitted to
The Cynthia Nelson Institute for Gender and Women's Studies

In partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts (M.A.) in Gender and Women's Studies
In the Middle East / North Africa

By Dana Alawneh

Under the supervision of Dr. Martina Rieker

August 2015

The American University in Cairo

School of Global Affairs and Public Policy

“Our Stories, Our Lives: Performed Storytelling in Cairo”

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Abstract

Our Stories, Our Lives: Performed Storytelling in Cairo

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American University in Cairo
Under the supervision of Dr. Martina Rieker

This thesis explores the work of two storytelling groups in Cairo through different conceptual frameworks. Affect, class politics, marginalization, art and the political are the main lenses through which I delve into the work of the groups in an attempt to understand a condition in which such groups exist and what it means to be part of a storytelling community in Cairo. Moreover, through my analysis I try to question the approaches of each group towards the issues they address, why and how they choose to tell certain stories. Moreover I question the method how the stories are told and whether they contribute into creating, emphasizing or reproducing certain discourses within the society while trying to change another.

In order to understand how the stories come to life and eventually become a performance, I go behind the curtains to understand the processes of the making of those stories, and the capacity of those stories to affect others and potentially enable something, even if it was only on the level of change among the group members themselves, therefore I explore the transformations the storytellers went through, the revisiting and deconstruction of situations in their lives, in the process of writing/performing, as well as in the construction of those groups. I argue that by revisiting affects possibilities and potentialities are created.

Chapter One

An Attempt to Surf the Wave: Thinking of Affect through Performed Storytelling

The skin is faster than the word
Brian Massumi (2005: 4)

My first encounter with performed storytelling was in March 2013 as a member of the audience. My first impressions watching those performances was how courageous the performers were, telling their stories on stage. Stories and moments that I could imagine being drawn from their own lives that radiated so many feelings and energy on stage. I left one of those performances feeling overwhelmed and excited by the honesty and courage of the storytelling, I found myself in so many of their stories. I had the feeling of being included and a part of something that others as well belonged to. That performance took place in Rawabet Theater, located in a small alley in downtown Cairo. Rawabet Theater defines itself to be “serving as a platform for the independent performing art scene in Cairo and the country as a whole...it offers transparency and a lack of censorship...a rare and heavily relied upon facility in a country where arts and culture are hardly at the top of the agenda.”¹

The show I attended was called *Bi Basata Keda* (Simply like that!) performed by a group called *Ana Elhakaya* (I am the story). After the performance, I talked to two of my friends who attended the performance with me. When I told them how I felt about what I just saw and experienced, they did not share the same feelings as mine, one of them commented that it was depressing. Having seen such a show for the first

¹ Information taken from the website of the Townhouse Gallery
<http://www.thetownhousegallery.com/rawabet/aboutrawabet>

time I felt excited, and kept carrying the same feeling I had after that encounter with storytelling in my visits to subsequent performances by other groups. Hence, I decided to focus my thesis on storytelling.

The year 2014 was a transitional time in Egypt after the events of June 30th 2013 and the presidential elections in 2014. There was a feeling of uncertainty mixed with helplessness and despair after the events of *Raba'a Aladweyya*² and the subsequent violence, mixed with residues of the intensity of emotions that the January 25, 2011 revolution left in each of us. Seeing this performance for the first time invoked the intensity of feelings from 2011, especially the 18 days, and the moments when "it was all possible." The irrational happiness and the whole romance of it, the admiration and the utopia that the uprising in Tahrir square represented for me. And I thought at that moment that those storytellers, with their courageous and relentless performance, were revolutionary. In an attempt to understand how such feelings emerged in the context of storytelling and the performance I decided to look more closely at how such feelings are produced. In spite that the performance was about stories of the revolution, those stories were not about heroic actions and gestures, they were rather about the daily experience and changes that the storytellers went through and how the revolution affected their daily life experiences on a personal level.

This thesis critically engages two storytelling groups in Cairo. In order to understand how the stories come to life and eventually become a performance, I go behind the curtains to understand the processes of the making of those stories, and the capacity of those stories to affect others and potentially enable something, even if was

² The name of the square in Nasr City, Cairo, where mostly members of the Muslim Brotherhood had a sit-in after President Morsi was ousted by the military with the support of a large number of Egyptians on 30th June 2013. The sit-in lasted till 14th of August 2013, before the army cracked down on the people in the sit-in early morning on that day and killed almost 1000 people (Solbert:2013:847).

only on the level of change among the group members themselves, therefore I explore the transformations the storytellers went through, the revisiting and deconstruction of situations in their lives, in the process of writing/ performing, as well as in the construction of those groups. I argue that by revisiting affects possibilities and potentialities are created for the future through moving forward by realizing the freedom of the self from the (non)actions that did *not* take place in the past which are told in the stories in the moment of the present, the present “passing too quickly to be perceived, too quickly, actually, to have happened” (Massumi, 1995: 30). The freedom through movement, as Massumi (2001: 218) puts it “the ability to move forward and to transit through life” even with the heaviness of the actuality of the past. He continues, “freedom is not about breaking or escaping constraints, its about flipping them over into degrees of freedom” (ibid). The freedom cannot happen in actuality, because of its existence. It happens through the realization of the non-action or what Agamben (2000: 179) calls “the existence of non-Being, a presence of an absence” or the “ability to see in the shadows.” For Agamben freedom lies in the domain of potentiality. This non-action or non-Being, which did not take place and is non-existent but still present is an empty space, a space that can be filled, or not, with alternative imaginations for the future, an imagination that is made through revisiting affects and deconstructing one’s own relationship to certain incidents that already happened and that are part of the past within the present.

Therefore, I attempt to explore whether storytelling creates a space for transformations by revisiting the sensible that is the outcome of encounters. Affects are constantly made and unmade, we have the capacity to constantly affect and be affected. Those affects that are in their raw condition, and that have happened in a certain moment of the past in the life of the storytellers, and if revisited and reworked

in the present moment, lead to new realizations and alternative possibilities in the future.

My research examines the concept of affect in relation to the process of storytelling and how affect works in and through it, moreover, it extends to engage further concepts such as class politics, marginalization, feminism, and the political in an attempt to situate and to analyze the two groups of this thesis. My approach to each group differs according to the nature of my relationship to each group and the access I was granted by them as a researcher. I was able to work close to Al Batt Il Iswed, for example I attended their closed meetings and workshops besides interviewing some of its members and attending their performances. As for Bussy, as I mention later on my approach to them is different, due to that fact that I was not able to get into their workshops and they did not want to tell me who the storytellers were, so I had limited interaction with whom the stories belonged, but through my fieldwork and observation I was able to get a clear picture on how each group functions and about the dynamics within the group and their relationship and what ideas they hold in relation to the environment they live in. Based on all that my approach to the concept of affect differs in both groups.

Although I began this thesis interested in exploring my own reactions to storytelling as a spectator, this thesis is not about the audience. The research focuses on the groups and its members and what happens to them throughout the storytelling writing/ performance process and on their performances on stage. I draw on Ranciere's (2007: 259) observation that "in the heart of what I call aesthetic regime of art is the loss of any determinate relationship between a work and its audience." Hence my exploration of the audience is only through myself as a member of the audience as well as a researcher and critic of the work I see. Moreover, I touch upon how my

interlocutors observe and think of their audiences, the direct feedback they get from them, and ways in which this feedback travels back into their practices of story-telling performance be it on the stage or the street. Even though I do not study the audience this does not mean that I think of the spectator as invisible or “held in a state of ignorance about the process of production” (Ranciere 2009: 2). Moreover, I do not perceive the spectators as passive, but rather as re-active, and reaction includes an action, the action of selecting, seeing, hearing, feeling, thinking, analyzing, comparing, relating and “refashioning in their own way” (ibid: 13) or merely choosing to go and see a performance makes the audience active.

The storyteller, through different forms of artistic expressions, tries to raise a form of consciousness or trigger a feeling and energy within the audience that pushes them to react. Artistic interventions, so Rancier, are political, through the “modification of the visible, the ways of perceiving it and expressing it,” (ibid) processes that are experienced by the spectator. What is meant by “visible” here is related to the situations of which certain artistic expressions are produced, in this thesis it would be the incident that produces a story, and its modification would be *how* the story is thought of and re-worked by the storyteller, and how it is consequently told in the performance. And this how is not the first thing that happens to us, it is rather something that comes after something else, and this something else according to Deleuze can only be “sensed” (1994:136,139).

From all the art that has been produced in ‘revolutionary’ Egypt, the different forms artists use to express themselves, I selected storytelling because this form of artistic practice is not determined to focus on conveying certain images but rather it sets “the capacities” in motion (ibid), and I am interested in exploring the worlds that this mode of expression is constructing on a multiplicity of layers.

Literature Review

Demos (2010:83) observes that “storytelling has been gaining a growing momentum in contemporary art” and one of its mediums is performance and theater. “Whereas storytelling might at first call up fairytales and the communal transmission of collective memory...Contemporary art confers on its practice an experimental, innovative case, producing social relevant and politically engaged work” (ibid.). Generally speaking, storytelling has been used by people as a way of narrating alternative histories, a way to build collectives around stories based on common experiences, and it is a means of entertainment for people and a place to vent and talk about their lives. According to Maguire (2015:7) much of the literature of storytelling is concerned with speaking about the audience and how storytelling performance unfolds in the imagination.

Whereas theater is a performed act with a plot, a beginning and an end, a storytelling performance, is a performance that does not depend on a plot or actors but invites ordinary people to tell their stories. Markovska (2008:1) argues that the difference between theater and performance is that in a performance it is the self that performs, and in theater the self can only do, or play, or create theater. She observes that “creating” or “playing” theater, is something that is marked as outside the self, while performing is an action of the self (ibid.). In this lies the importance of calling storytelling a performance rather than a play, because in storytelling one is mostly performing ones own self through telling ones own story, or even someone else’s, the significance is that it is someone’s actual story. The Arabic language distinguishes between storytelling performance (*ard haky*) and theatre performance (*ard masrah*).

In the Egyptian context most literature produced on storytelling, and specifically on women storytelling, engages its arguments around terms such as “empowerment” “agency” and “women’s rights.” Ali (2014: 98) in reference to the storytelling project *Ana El Hekaya* (a group I will refer to later) argues that “The main objective of the project is to bring about change in the gender status quo in the Egyptian society, thus empowering both the participants in the project and women in the whole society at large.” Performed storytelling in Egypt has often been connected to the image of Shahrazad or to *Al Seera Al Hilaliyya*,³ that is, folk epics, or poetry told by the *hakawati*⁴ (the traditional storyteller). Storytelling groups that emerged in Cairo in the late 1980s and 1990s were inspired by this legacy and focused their endeavors on re-writing Shehrazad’s stories or re-working folkloric tales. In recent years, however, storytelling has taken a different path by including personal stories of the storytellers in the performance. Writing and telling feminist stories was not merely about changing folkloric narratives that contributed in shaping a gender discourse as much as it was about connecting it to one’s personal life events. Instead of only criticizing the social and engage topics visible in the larger social domain without directly connecting them to the storyteller, contemporary storytelling groups engage personal life experiences. By engaging the personal, the storyteller connects personal experiences and daily life incidents as part of the social, and vice versa.

³ The *Sirat Bani Hilal* is an Arab folk epic that has been told throughout the Middle East and North Africa for centuries. Based on the actual migration of the eponymous Hilal tribe from the Arabian peninsula to Tunis between the tenth and twelfth centuries, the epic narrative has been transmitted by oral poets since the 14th century. (Reynolds 1-2, 9; Slyomovics 1) and is quite popular in Egypt.

⁴ The *hakawātī* (storyteller) remained a major fixture of Arabic-speaking countries, choosing a select spot either in the open air of evening or in a café from which to recite episodes from some of the great sagas of Arab lore, retrieved from Encyclopedia Britannica <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1349825/hakawati>

Performing or writing stories is a process, and it is in the process where transformations occur. Joseph (2008:252) argues that “storytelling presents a particular way of knowing, as process-verb, not non-active not passive.” In the performance space, according to Boal (1998: 7) “allows them [the storytellers] to see themselves in action.” In other words, the process the storyteller undergoes to perform a story is an active process which entangles writing, thinking, discussing, feeling, affecting and getting affected. The embodiment of storytellers’ stories into a performance not only propels the sensitive self in action but also the physical one. In the context of the theater of the oppressed, which is a method specifically used by *Bussy*, the action of the storyteller lies in staging an experience and creating an imaginary reaction to it, but it does not stay there. The audience is usually invited to an interactive performance where they are invited to tell their own stories, first they utter their experience, and at that moment among so many people they see themselves in action within the context of the performance in the performance space. Every audience is active be it through participation in the storytelling performance, or in analyzing the performance, loving it, hating it, or even choosing to attend the performance in the first place. Moreover, the act of identifying with the stories the storytellers tell in the performance is also an action, an action of empathy, especially if the stories told engage painful experiences and forms of oppression.

In *Dispossessions: the Political in the Performative* (2013: 210) Butler and Athanasiou argue that there is a political significance in assembling bodies who “exercise a certain performative force.” The emphasis on the subjects’ existence, materiality, and the will to be recognized, heard and seen, unites the storyteller and members of the audience, hence I argue that this equal power relationship between both of them leads to creating a collective that consists of the storytellers and the

audience. For this “force,” so Butler and Athanasiou (177) contend is what moves people politically and in their daily lives. This force “travels”, among individuals and on different levels within the individual, “as a contingent field of flows and forces, extension and intention” and they produce a politics that “involves and mobilizes affective dispositions” by using speech and their bodies to enact them. (ibid, 177). The importance of the body is that the manifestation and embodiment of agency happens through the body and those become as Butler and Athanasiou argue “*ours*.” (ibid, 178) In the words of Boal (2006) hence “theater is a rehearsal for a revolution of everyday.”

Much of the debates on storytelling are connected to history, popular and oral. This thesis is not interested in making a comparison between formal forms of history and storytelling being an alternative source of history, though obviously each personal story carries a part of the historical within it. Since 2011 storytelling in Egypt has been affected by the January 25, 2011 revolution. Storytelling adapted, as most of other forms of art, to the revolution. While storytelling performances maintained their ties to the personal experience, following 2011 the personal, which was always already part of a larger collective, was affected by the revolution. Much literature has been produced on revolutionary art in Egypt due to its significance as a mode of expression during those turbulent times.

Conceptual Framework

The concept of affect is crucial to this thesis. Deleuze (1994:136,) argues that “something in the world forces us to think. This thing is not an object of recognition but of a fundamental encounter. It may be grasped in a range of affective tones... In whichever tone, its primary characteristic is that it can only be sensed.” The tones

Deleuze speaks of are the different affects and different degrees of intensities that result from an encounter. The force of that encounter that makes us think comes from that affect, through a process. Massumi (1995: 7) differentiates between affects and emotions, “affect is most often used loosely as a synonym for emotion” but “emotion and affect follow different logics and pertain to different orders.” He argues that affect is the pre-personal or raw, and therefore less individuated, as emotions are the personal or “the socio-linguistic fixing of the quality of an experience” (ibid), which Deleuze (1994: 139) terms “object of recognition.”

Deleuze argues that affects are not recognizable less individuated and usually shifting between pleasure and pain, happiness, joy. Although most scholars when speaking of affects relate them primarily to pleasure and pain, thinking in black and white, although many other “tones” fall under those or are somewhere in between. And because those are constantly changing and “shifting, always relative to a specific relation and situations” (Unemployednegativity, 2014),⁵ they are seen as a “flux” In order to make something out from this flux, a process of knowledge happens usually in a sequence. Deleuze (1997:123) describes this sequence from the moment of the encounter as “(a) the collision between bodies (b) the composition of relationships between bodies (c) the perception of the essence of the thing-the rational.” Lambert (2013:42-430) unpacks this sequence as (a) the perception of a situation (b) the modification of the body (c) the emotion of consciousness of the mind. He uses the images of a strong wave that hits a body and brings it out of its balance, this moment in Shouse’s words “the non-conscious experience of intensity; it is a moment of unformed and unstructured potential” (2005). Then the body learns to handle the wave,

⁵ Retrieved from <http://www.unemployednegativity.com/2014/03/affect-andor-emotions-differentiation.html>

this level is related to the technique and the skill of handling the encounter.

Eventually, “the perception of the essence” (Deleuze 1997:123) meaning the understanding of the wave and all its aspects and by that the ability to consciously, from the mind, handle it.

The first part of the thesis emphasizes the first perception of the encounter, on the body. The body, this mass moving within temporality, affecting and being affected. Massumi (2005: 9) argues that we need to “rework of how we think about the body... the present is...passing too quickly to be perceived, too quickly actually to have happened” (ibid.) therefore the body is in constant condition of “pastness opening onto a future”, in other words, the “presence”. This presence that happens too quickly and is “virtual,” hence the body is as much virtual as much as it is actual and this virtual is “a realm of potential”, this potential is where the future combines, unmediated, with pastness. The virtual is that thing “where cannot be experienced cannot but be felt” (ibid.) and from there emerges an “expression” that is “consciously” registered.

This thesis does not focus on elaborating the differences between affect and emotions; nonetheless, it is crucial to distinguish them from one another. I look at affects as what comes before the rational, I do not think that the rational, the mind, can be separated from the physical, the body (As a first perception) but the mind comes after the rawness of the affect that causes physical reactions, as the first encounters are always physical, which after the process become a conscious reaction. I examine how this process happens within storytelling in order to examine the transformation that happens in individuals within it, how it happens and what possibilities such a transformation gives the individual within her temporality.

A storytelling group is a collective, a collective is “defined by its affects ... a common affect, more than by thought” (Unemployednegativity, 2014). In storytelling, the collective is formed around the affect, which usually revolves around, from the interviews I conducted and fieldwork observation, pain, joy, happiness and gratitude. Deleuze (1978:13-14) argues that “we cannot come to know ourselves, and we cannot come to know external bodies except through the affections that external bodies produce on our own,” hence the “capacity of affect and to be affected.” In other words, as much as bodies are apt to be affected through encounters that produce intensities, they have the ability to affect as much, for affects tend to travel from a body to another through constant encounters between those bodies and the relationships that consist that body.

In *Autonomy of Affect* (2005:8) Massumi argues that “the body does not just absorb pulses or discreet stimulations, it infolds context, it infolds volitions and cognitions that are nothing if not situated.” I relate the “infolding” of context and volition to the concept of desire in the Deleuzian sense in *Anti-Oedipus*. Smith argues in the words of Deleuze through the Nietzschean schema that “desire is the state of impulses and drives” (2007, 71) and Deleuze argues that “drives are simply desiring-machines themselves” (1987:35) hence Smith argues in Deleuze’s words again that “our drives never exist in a free and unbound state, nor are they merely individual, they are always arranged and assembled by the social formation in which we find ourselves” (2007, 71). This desire for individuals who are part of the social formation, gets affected if the social is affected by sensations, expectations, encounters and habits of relating (Stewart 2007: 4-5). Desires are apt to change. What happens to desire when ruptures happen within a certain space and time, and what happens to it when the social is interrupted with those impulses and encounters...and when publics and

social worlds get caught in something that feels like “something” (ibid, 3). This something, which is not a matter of recognition, presses the question of what potentialities it carries? And whether storytelling manages not to interpret this something into a representation and instead leaving it open for each to make his/her own perception of it through performing the intensity, in this context, in an artistic expression of performed storytelling.

This thesis attempts to capture “limited moments in the fluxes that make up reality” (Law 2004: 9), the “reality” that is not always clear and is constantly being made and unmade, leaving behind it a “mess” (ibid:2). In an attempt to make sense of that messiness and the complexity of the world and in order to apprehend this mess I use what Law called emotionality or apprehension (ibid: 3). Through the encounters I had with storytelling performances, and through reflexive analysis, and what I have sensed when I was watching those performances or attending a workshop or while I was interviewing my interlocutors, I try to explore the world of sensibilities and feelings in order to understand how “a form of knowledge, a capacity, an energy in a body or a mind“ travel (Rancier 2009:14) without the purpose of instructing, for that is where the potential lies. How are feelings mediated within the context of storytelling and what they do, this “something that throws itself together in a moment as an event and a sensation.“ (Stewart:2007:4). How are individuals and collectives affected by such energies? In other words, how do affects work. I explore how such moments interfere, or possibly could interfere, in the world and consciously make a difference.

Fieldwork

This thesis is based on attendance at storytelling performances and in-depth interviews with storytellers in two groups between December 2013 and 2015. The first

group this thesis examines is *The BuSSy Monologues* (Bussy means Look! in the imperative female form of colloquial Egyptian Arabic), known generally by the shorter name of *Bussy*. The first performance I attended by the group was on December 4, 2013 titled “Stories about the woman’s body in Egypt” by *Bussy* in Rawabet theater in downtown Cairo and was performed by two women. The show, initially produced for a theatre festival in France, was scheduled within the 16 days of activism global campaign to combat violence against women from 25 November-10 December, 2013,⁶ a thematic that has gained much popularity in the past few years in Cairo among activists and NGO workers. The second performance I attended was on February 24, 2014 by *Al Batt Il Iswed* (The Odd Duck) called *Qaws Quzah* (Rainbow) at Jesuit Nahda Center in Faggala, Cairo. After the performance of *Bussy* and right before the performance of *Al Batt Il Iswed* I decided to do my thesis on storytelling.

I attended two workshops by *Al Batt Il Iswed* on March 28 and and May 23 2014, which took place in the University of Cairo Alumni Club. And I attended rehearsals by *Bussy* on August 5-6 2014, and a performance on August 7 2014 in theater of the AUC Greek Campus in downtown Cairo. I attended a performance on October 24, 2014 by *Bussy* in Rawabet theater. I had a ticket booked for a performance for *Bussy* in Hanager theater in Zamalek on March 15, 2015, the show was cancelled on the same day due to censorship but was rescheduled for April 16, 2015. Performances prior to my fieldwork I viewed online on the channels of each group. This included *Bi Basta Keda* by *Ana El Hekaya* originally performed February 17-18, 2012 and performances by *Hakawy El Tahrir* (Tahrir Monologues) originally performed between May 2011 and November 2012.

⁶ Information retrieved from *Bussy’s* Facebook page
https://www.facebook.com/TheBuSSyProject/info?tab=page_info

I conducted personal interviews with members from both groups I study during August 2014 and January 2015. The interviews took place in a cafe, my interlocutors' houses or in mine, or sometimes over the phone, if someone was unable to talk to me personally, which was usually the case with members from *Bussy*. When I started interviewing, I did not have fixed questions, but open ended conversations. Some of the members from *Al Batt Il Iswed* with whom I conducted the interviews with, were active in storytelling for many years, others had joined over the past three years. They all had different occupations in life, some of them were students, others were teachers, writers, doctors, or freelancers. The second group I worked with *Bussy* has a few professional permanent storytellers, such as the director Sondos Shabayek others have part-time jobs or work with other projects in addition to *Bussy*.

Finally, I read the press releases the groups give out. I followed the social media of both groups, I read articles written by members of both groups on different topics, active writers on topics that engage with storytelling, the society and social change and are published mostly on the web, I watched interviews conducted with the directors of each group and some group members.

My approach of analysis is different for each group. Instead of presenting a direct comparison between them I look at different aspects in each one of them. The reason why I do this is because of the accessibility I had to each group. As I said I was not able to attend *Bussy*'s workshops and training sessions therefore my analysis relies on my personal observation of their performances on stage as well as on the interviews I conducted with them individually. I was not provided a chance to observe the group interacting together directly; it was rather always on stage in a performance. Moreover, I found the topics the group addresses and the way they present those topics as well as the way they present themselves more pressing to discuss in this case.

As for *Al Batt Il Iswed*, my access to attend the group's very intimate workshops and the sessions they held together as well as their private meetings gave me a sense of the bond some members of the group had with one another and that their stories came from real places and real experiences, and how they worked with them together is what touched me mostly, much more than watching the performance that was the outcome of those sessions. What mattered to me with this group is how I was able to get close to how they felt towards those experiences and towards their lives and the way they were able to rework them in order to make sense of them. My interviews as well with the storytellers who wrote their stories and who retold those stories to me in details and explained to me as well why they chose those stories and what it meant to them and talking about them openly created an understanding between us that I was not able to sense while talking to *Bussy*. Their main concern did not seem to me at that moment to be as personal as it was with the members of *Al Batt Il Iswed*, therefore the angles from which I examine the work of both groups differs enormously especially in chapters two and three, in which I try to bring out the main concept of this thesis which was more realizable with the group *Al Batt Il Iswed*. For *Bussy*, I relied on my analysis of the group's performances directly on stage which only gave me a certain façade of the work of the group.

The Groups

Storytelling projects have emerged in Cairo since the 1980s. *Al Warsha* (the workshop) was formed in 1987 by Hasan Gritli, and defines itself as „the first independent troupe in the free theater movement in Egypt.” Initially adopting European plays, by 1992 they started performing popular stories and in 1994 they worked on *Al Sira Al Hilaliyya*. It was not before the end of 1997 when they turned to

storytelling, what they called “bringing living human beings from our lives and our imagination onto the stage,” which gave them freedom from the “preconceptions of realistic acting and our heritage of 19th century declamatory.”⁷ By the end of 2012 they were performing testimonies from the revolution.

Seshat (ancient Egyptian Goddess of wisdom, knowledge and writing) is part of a project called *Doum Haky*. Doum a non-profit Egyptian Cultural Association, seeks to "supporting a critical way of thinking in the Egyptian society"⁸ through organizing storytelling workshops, performances, lectures, music and book series. They started organizing storytelling workshops since 2012 and performing them during the month of Ramadan 2014. Their performances try to intertwine ‘the traditional’ with the contemporary, performing stories from daily life but in a traditional setting such as Bayt Il Sinnari⁹ in the popular downtown neighborhood of Sayyeda Zainab. These groups exist in addition to numerous individual storytellers/performers that have emerged in 2011 such as Dalia Bassiouny.

I selected to focus my thesis on *The Bussy Monologues* and *Al Batt Il Iswed* as both groups ground their personal stories in the larger social domain in which everyday life is lived, giving particular attention to gender issues and the ordinary. Moreover, they are relatively new projects, and hence open to experiment.

Al Batt Il Iswed (The Odd Duck) was formed in 2013 and defines itself as a feminist storytelling group. *Al Batt Il Iswed* separated from another storytelling project *Ana Elhekaya*. *Ana Elhakaya* itself had separated itself from *Qalat Al Rawiya* (The

⁷ Information and quotes from https://www.facebook.com/pages/WARSHA-Theater-Troupe/14623913510?sk=info&tab=page_info

⁸ Information taken from their Facebook page https://www.facebook.com/DoumCulturalFoundation/info?tab=page_info

⁹ Bayt Al-Sinnari, a centre for science, culture, and arts built in 1794 and aims at promoting Egypt’s cultural heritage. Information retrieved from <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/5/35/76595/Arts--Culture/Stage--Street/Bayt-ALSinnari-offers-free-art-workshops-for-women.aspx>

Storyteller Said) in 2009. *Qalat Al Rawiya* had been initiated in 1998 by the Woman and Memory Forum. Founded in 1995 by a number of university women professors, researchers and activists. The forum is concerned with the “alternative cultural information and knowledge about the role of women in history and in contemporary society.”¹⁰ The project *Qalat Al Rawiya* was, according to the page of the forum, founded as a project promoting “gender-sensitive fairytales and feminist stories.”¹¹

Al Batt Il Iswed consists of almost 25 members, men and women. The group organizes workshops around themes in which they depict gender inequalities and discuss the themes through reflecting on personal stories and experiences, followed by the writing of the stories and eventually performing them. Some of the topics they discuss concern the body, sexual harassment, Arabic classical literary works, and societal violence among others. So far the group had two performances in Cairo, in Hanager Theater and in Nahda Theatre, in addition to their participation in a storytelling festival in Qena, Upper Egypt.

The Bussy Monologues was formed in 2006 by a group of students from the American University in Cairo and was inspired by The Vagina Monologues. The Vagina Monologues is theatrical performance founded by Eve Ensler, a feminist playwright who, according to Reiser “traveled the world interviewing over 200 women, mostly in the United States, of all ages, races, creeds and backgrounds.” (2006:1), which she then made into a theatrical performance. The performance of the monologues became popular and was translated into 48 languages and performed in 140 countries. The Vagina Monologues format was adapted in many countries around the world, including in Palestine and Egypt. The Vagina Monologues discuss female

¹⁰ Information taken from the website of the NGO (<http://www.wmf.org/eg/about-us/?lang=en>)

¹¹ Information taken from the website of the NGO (<http://www.wmf.org/eg/project/qalat-al-rawiya-gender-sensitive-storytelling/?lang=en>)

sexuality and attempts to break taboos of speaking about it. The Vagina Monologue project has been subject to much criticism as well for being “exclusive and reductionist”¹².

Bussy was inspired by The Vagina Monologues and adapted their style. *Bussy* sees itself as a “project intended to empower women and raise awareness about women's issues through ‘creative’ means.”¹³ *Bussy* performed exclusively at the American University in Cairo in the years 2006-2010, until it left the walls of the university. According to their blog, with the move the stories were changed in order to fit Egyptian society. The stories they collect are mostly on the body and violence practice against it such as sexual harassment, FGM and rape. In 2012 *Bussy* began conducting performances in public space such as telling stories in the women’s wagon in the Cairo metro and staged different sexual harassment scenes on Talaat Harb Street in downtown Cairo. Currently the group performs in theaters. The group consists of a number of fixed members, which are trainers, directors and performers. For each show the group gives out a call for stories on a certain theme. After having accumulated a number of stories, they work with the writers of the stories within a workshop, this includes editing or, for example, encouraging writers to telling the story within an entrusted group to revisit and rework the feelings they carry towards the story as well as think about their reactions and thoughts in those stories. The stories, produced in those workshops are subsequently performed by the writer/creator of the story or by one of the other members of the group, if the storyteller prefers to preserve his/her anonymity.

¹² Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/16/vagina-monologues-mount-holyoke_n_6487302.html

¹³ Information taken from the website of the group’s blog <https://bussyblog.wordpress.com/about/>

Over the past few years, after *Bussy* left the walls of the American University of Cairo, it has had some of its plays censored by cultural outlets or even cancelled because the content of the performance was found inappropriate, and they were accused of ruining the reputation of the theater they were to perform. The last performance that was cancelled was on March 15, 2015 scheduled to take place in Hanager theater, a state owned theater in Cairo Opera House, as part of a storytelling festival. The performance was rescheduled to mid of April 2015 on the Greek Campus, located in downtown Cairo, a technology start-up leased from the American University in Cairo.

Chapter Outline

In chapter two *Revisiting Affect Rethinking Possibilities: a Storyteller Writing her Life*, I analyze, by building on Deleuze's argument on affect, the process of the making, writing, sharing and thinking of a story and how affects work within these processes by referring to three stories from two members from the group of *Al Batt Il Iswed*. Moreover, I analyze the affects within the stories themselves by looking into the situations that generated them and consequently produced those stories. I explore the concept of temporality and the body within those stories that create potentialities. Finally, I analyze how affect works in the collective of the group, throughout the workshops in sharing the stories and how it consequently works in the physical expression and embodiment within a performance..

Chapter three focuses on boundaries and limitations. In this chapter I engage concepts of class, othering, the marginal, the mainstram, emancipatory art and the emancipated spectator, producing the marginal and constructed imaginations in order to examine closely the work of *Bussy*. The chapter explores the affects produced by

critique of the social domain, and how, in the words of Stewart (2007:6) “the potential modes of knowing, relating and attending to things”, and the capacity to move things, impacts the audience and the writers themselves.

Chapter four *Storytelling and the Political* engages the question of “revolutionary art” in Egypt. The chapter attempts to understand more fully the shift that took place in the art scene in Egypt as a result of the January 25, 2011 revolution regarding activism, censorship and public space, and before that period in order to situate the groups and to examine the shift that took place with their dynamics and how and what they performed was affected by the uprising. Moreover, I examine effects of the formal political landscape over the past 4 years on storytelling performances both on the level of individual writers/ performers, the groups overall, and their engagement with larger publics.

Chapter five *Towards a Conclusion* as much as this chapter is meant to be a concluding chapter it is as well an attempt to be an opening to further questioning and contemplating in storytelling and in the work of both groups.

Chapter Two

Revisiting Affect, Creating Possibilities: A Storyteller Writing her Life

This chapter explores the processes of the production of a story to eventually be performed by Al Batt Al Aswad. The group permitted me to attend their workshops on writing and storytelling, and individual members welcomed the conversations with me. While Bussy holds similar workshops, I was not permitted to attend these due to the group's privacy policy. Unlike Al Batt Al Aswad, the stories told and performed at Bussy are not only those written by its members, but include stories collected through Bussy's open calls on social media. In this chapter I analyze the stories assembled and performed by two of my interlocutors Doaa and Zeinab. Additionally I explore the relationship that was created between these stories and myself. By exploring what I have sensed and how it invoked certain feelings that provoked me to think of why I have felt this way.

I have previously tried to define affect, a "thing" and a "non-conscious intensity" that can only be "sensed," in this chapter I examine how it works. This chapter does not engage with answering the question of "what is affect" but "what does affect do?" and "how does it work?" Affects happen through the body and this process happens prior to and independent of "intentions, meanings, reason and beliefs" (Leys: 2011:437). In the words of Massumi "the skin is faster than the word" (2005:4). Leys (2011: 437) argues that "they are autonomic processes that take place below the threshold of conscious awareness and meaning" (ibid), a moment of the *unformed* and *unstructured* in which potential lies, it arises "in the in-between-ness: in the capacity to act and be acted upon" (Gregg and Seigworth: 2010:1). My interlocutors revisit

those moments of intensity in their re-telling of their stories. The stories they told me, already written and performed on stage, were from their pasts with their bodies having already moved on. For Doaa and Zeinab thinking through the senses embeds remembering physical encounters and intensities that they individually experienced at a certain time in the past. What was quite remarkable that by re-telling these stories my interlocutors articulated corporeal expressions as much as linguistic ones. Having my interlocutors tell me the stories in person permitted me to observe those corporeal movements which contributed to my understanding of how affect works.

Remembering, speaking and writing constitutes the process that members of *Al Batt Il Iswed* go through in the production of their stories. This journey takes them back to the moment when they felt an intensity produced through an encounter, a moment full of potential. This process opens a space for them to think their stories through their bodies, to recount experiences on different levels, reflecting on those experience, thoughts and questions through their physical presence on stage. This encounter throughout the performance has the capacity to affect the audience by being active through sensing, hearing, seeing, and feeling the space around them and the energy radiating from the storytellers.

I have said that I will be the embodiment of the audience in this thesis and talk about my personal experiences with the performance, I do so by relying on my observations and the feelings that I have sensed while watching the performance. I also engage my interlocutors regarding how they think of how the audience is affected by their stories. I seek to understand if the storytellers felt that a relationship was being established. At the beginning of my research this seemed to me to be the most pressing and natural question to ask, for a performance is made for an audience.

In almost all the interviews I conducted my interlocutors had to take a moment before answering this question, or they gave answers that seemed to be assumptions. No one really knew how to answer that question in a straightforward manner, usually they began by telling me about what people told them after the shows. The most common answer I received was that people approached them after a performance to tell them how they related to their stories. Some audience members would even tell the storytellers their own stories that they found close to the stories they heard in the performance. In other words, the performance moved something in them, a relationship was established at that moment around an experience. I will at times be using the terms ‘feeling’ ‘feel’ and ‘felt’, Massumi (2002:213) observes that “every transition is accompanied by a feeling of the change in capacity... the affect and the feeling of the transition are not two different things.” Speaking about the stories of my interlocutors as experiences and transitions that are accompanied by feelings of change, the original experience of what happened in the past and the ongoing experience of the process of writing that gave them the space to revisit the first experiences on which their stories are based on.

Thinking through an Affected Body

My first interlocutor Doaa, a member of *Al Batt Il Iswed*, works in the corporate sector and is the mother of two. She is a writer not a performer. At the outset I asked her about the audience of the last performance the group had. Doaa took a moment to answer, and when she finally did she spoke to me mainly about her children. She said they felt proud and happy for her because she was finally doing something that she really loves to do, writing stories. And they felt even prouder that the story was told in front of so many people. She then proceeded to reflect that “when

we write our stories, we write the story for ourselves, we don't think about the audience or what they want to hear, it's about us, so we write for us, we write to get closer to ourselves." This answer posed more questions regarding how to understand the feelings produced on the part of the audience and myself. It also raises the question of how the audience affects the storyteller and writer.

What Doaa described as becoming "closer to ones self" did not happen with the members of the group overnight, or something that they brought with them into the group. It was a process, the process of understanding their feelings and affects connected to daily life events that according to Stewart (2007: 4) "give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies and emergences." Telling stories and writing them down is not about the outcome, but rather, how it happens and how to reach, as Doaa called it, "a certain insight" about one's own story that narrates parts of ones own life. It is also about what is embedded in this process, in the words of Stewart (ibid) those "things that happen... in impulses, sensations, expectations, daydreams, encounters and habits of relating." Doaa said that "While I was writing the story of the *Ten Stitches*, at the beginning I did not really know how it will unfold. I did not have a moment of enlightenment and epiphany, it happened through a process." From my personal observations while attending the workshop and consequently the performance, this process is not merely one of defining and giving a name to those things that happen, which emerge from bodily experiences and encounters. It is a process of trying to understand the intensity that took place in oneself and how to be able to deal with that intensity and eventually how to think about it. The process reflects the complexity of the stories.

On 23, May, 2014 I attended one of the monthly workshops held by the group to discuss their stories — to contemplate, think and write. The workshops are usually

held in a big room at the Cairo University Alumni Club on Sherif Street in downtown Cairo. Some members in the group fare from Cairo University and two or three of them teach there, but not everyone is part of the university. The workshop I attended was held by Zainab, an actress, writer and performer in *Al Batt Il Iswed*. The workshop she conducted was accompanied by physical activities like drawing, breathing, telling stories and eventually writing. Those physical activities aim to release the writers from their daily routines and stress and prepare them to think of incidents in their life stories and write them down. There is always a chosen theme that the writers rework through their stories.

In the workshop I attended the meeting began with members sitting on the ground in a circle, whoever had a story or an experience related to the topic to share, stood up and told her story. Stories varied from one person to another, narrating a moment of happiness, pain, gratitude or loneliness. This was followed by a breathing exercise and deep concentration. Thereafter participants spend fifteen minutes of intense writing, in which their whole energy is put into writing a story. Participants were free to write whatever they wanted.

The themes that the members talked about in this particular workshop I attended included their bodies, sexual harassment on the street and violence in its different forms, relationships with their families, and friends. In other words, their intimate lives and what emerged from those experiences, encounters and incidents and how they set such feelings and affects in motion and “the intensities they build and in what thoughts and feelings they make possible” (Stewart 2007:5). What Doaa called becoming “close to oneself” or opening up to oneself is a process that includes thinking through ones own body, sensing something being there but not yet defined. The process includes sharing and opening up to the other members of the group by

telling stories and experiences and writing them down, and seeing oneself in the story. The relationship among the members of the group is based on trust and understanding of one another. Opening up to the group forms a collective around certain affects produced by different encounters that are not always the same for all members. Their love for writing their stories, what their intimate lives are made of, and those produced feelings of certain events, are where they find themselves understanding each other, even if their lives are completely different or they have different views and opinions on life.

What happens to the storyteller/ writer is that she thinks of moments that have already taken place in the past, positioning the self in the story and describing details of things that happened in it. This process allows her to understand and question her own actions which were the results of those affects produced through encounters. The writer thinks of an experience that was troubling, heavy or even happy and tries to see herself and her reactions within that story. The reactions produced subsequently to the intensities and forces of the immediate encounters are themselves the actions and movements that drove them to action or non-action. The writer tries to think of those reactions and how they became what they are, such as feelings of pain, sadness, attachment, or regret. She tries to understand how feelings and their reactions shape the relationship with certain people and things and events, and pulls the self someplace it did not exactly intend to go (Stewart 2007, 81). Things that happened are left with them and with which they return to in their storytelling workshops. Doaa says

Sometimes I feel the workshops becomes a bit like psychotherapy.
It's actually how we feel about it many
times. Sometimes there are certain things or experiences
that we don't know how we feel about or to deal with...
When I sit with the group and we discuss a theme

that we choose, such as the body for example, through our discussion. I start to realize and understand things.

She continues then to tell the story of the *Ten Stitches*, a story she wrote in a workshop on the body, and that was subsequently performed in February 2014 on stage by Sahar, another member of *Al Batt Il Iswed*. In the story she goes back in time to her experience of the birth of her daughter Hana, a cesarian birth that left her with ten stitches marked on her body. “Those stitches hurt sometimes, and I feel them” she commented. She speaks of how her daughter is beginning to breaking away from her and how this affected her, wanting to control her daughter’s body and mind.

I felt I wanted to achieve through her my dreams and wishes and what

I could not achieve myself. I felt she was mine and I possessed her and owned her, that’s what the story of the *Ten Stitches* was about. About the relationship of a mother and a daughter, for example my daughter wanted to cut her hair and I did not allow it, she wanted to play football but she was injured once and I want her to take care of her body.... I was projecting on her what I felt as a shortcoming or unachieved in myself. I don’t really do this with my son, sure I care about him but I don’t approach my relationship with him in that way. And at a certain point I started to question why is it so? In writing the story I reworked such moments and feelings.

Doaa told me that she does not like to write about herself but prefers to write about her daughter, but while she was writing about her daughter she was actually thinking of her own self and how she felt and how her actions affect the relationship with her daughter. Through the process of writing she had to come to certain realizations about herself:

Sometimes it scares me that I am raising a human being. It’s this person that came out of me and I am responsible for her, and that she is someone that has her own personality and knows what she likes and does not like, which was clear from the first day. So this experience to me is overwhelming, I write about her a lot because I feel often that she is stronger than me.

Doaa realized through her relationship with her daughter Hana that the reason she was acting this way towards her is because she had certain feelings in herself that made her act in a certain way that she could not understand. The birth of her daughter was a very intense experience and she was strongly affected by it. Thinking of her daughter as part of her one body caused separation anxieties, as her daughter grew independent. She was afraid to be left alone, her daughter's personality developing stronger than her own.

Earlier in the interview, I asked Doaa to introduce herself to me. She said that she worked in marketing, she immediately followed this by saying "and everyday I want to quit." I asked her why and she said that she hated the routine of her work; she changed jobs many times in her life, from working in tourism to working in a petroleum company. Writing was the one thing she loved and was proud to do. It is what made her realize things about herself, struggle with certain feelings of "fear, anxiety and control." Writing allowed her to reconcile these feelings and opened herself to something new. Doaa spoke of her emotions as something personal. Emotions are personal and conscious, unlike affects. She was separating her body from this experience because she thinks she is talking about her daughter's body and wanting to control it. Yet due to the fact that she mentioned her own body and the stitches in her story, she knew there was "something" even if she was not conscious about it, for affect, so Massumi (2002:215) is "never entirely personal, it is never all contained in our emotions and conscious thoughts."

Doaa uses her own body while writing, for writing is not just a mental experience but a physical one as well. The physical exercises in the workshops such as meditating, drawing, breathing, are all activities that require bodies to carry them out. Deleuze (2010:118) notes that "writing is a corporeal activity. We work through our bodies; we write through our bodies, hoping to get the bodies of our readers."

Affects are ideas. But they are not solely of the mind. They arise out of a violent collision of mind and body. As such they are not, properly speaking, of either; they are a particular combination of thought and body in which a distinction between the two is no longer important. In regard to writing, this is of crucial importance: the affects are not only the eyes of the mind, but its powers and its words. (ibid)

Doaa's story comes from a bodily experience, the pain of her stitches, the disconnection of her daughter's body from hers and all the affects that this produced. These are pre-defined for us and one of the things she tries to understand is why are things like that, why is she acting towards her caught in this particular way.

Doaa's bodily encounters produced affects, influencing her actions. She transcends beyond her body to understand the body of her daughter in order for her to try to understand how her daughter feels after she was affected by her. Hence, she observed that she was not writing about herself but about her daughter. What Doaa missed, however, is that her own actions are produced from her feelings and are actually affecting her daughter. *Ten Stitches* is a story about herself as well. This personal story begins with her experience of giving birth, a process connected to her own body. The fact that she is writing about her daughter who came out as a part of her body is also a personal story. Personal here is not related to affect but related to her own body, for affects are not personal but the outcome of experiences is something that belongs to the affected.

What Doaa was dealing with was the separation of this body part that belonged to her and was part of her own self. Hence her desire to control this part of her body that is now separated from her, which she said knew what she wanted and she realized her daughter was different from her. Doaa needed to confront this process, the emerging of an independent person from herself. Thinking that she was protecting her daughter's body she was actually protecting her own body. Her comment that her

daughter is stronger than her, suggests that her daughter is more independent from her than she from her daughter. The daughter did share the experience of her birth or the experience of the affects of that experience. Doaa noted that she did not have these feelings in relationship to her son. Her daughter was her first encounter with such an intensity and her son was a repetition of the experience. An experience that was stored in her body and she became conscious of it. Her emotions of fear for her daughter's body is an emotion that is constructed, which was how she explained this to herself.

Al Batt Il Iswed defines itself as a feminist group that pays attention to gender inequalities and she referred to her action in that light. Giving birth to Hana marked Doaa's body. Her first perception of having her daughter was that there was this body that she was responsible for. Then she learnt the skill of raising her, a social construct that is heavily gendered. She was acting towards her daughter in "accordance" with gender norms that "are instituted and applied" (Butler 2014:7), always adjusting her position in this encounter, repeating her constructed perception. Yet she was not able to compose a harmonious relationship with her daughter. The storytelling group opened a space for her to think of her actions produced by her first encounter with giving birth, and the relationship with her daughter. Through writing she revisited the experience that left her with bodily scars and how she felt about them.

Doaa's speaking and thinking of her relationship with her daughter was an attempt to rationalize her actions towards her daughter and to the experience of understanding how to act upon her feelings of the separation that happened to her. The affects that occur parallel to the experience produce affective changes in a situation, this affective loading and its outcome manifested itself in action, according to Massumi (2002: 218) "an ethical act.. [that] affects where people might go or what they might do as a result... not based on a characterization or classification according

to a preset system of judgment.” The writing workshop allowed Doaa to speak of her feelings, deconstruct her actions and constructs, a process she terms “being enlightened.” This embodiment of her perception of the incidents is realized by performing the act of writing manifested in a story.

Releasing Action

Deleuze argues that the body and mind are not separate experiences. The physicality of being on stage, moving and telling the story with their bodies present on stage, enables members of *Al Batt Il Iswed* to transmit to the audience their experiences of the body and mind.

The body was the topic of the last performance *Al Batt Il Iswed* that I attended. According to Zainab because the performance was about the body and performed by women, ‘everyone’ expected the show to focus on issues of sexuality. *Bussy*, popular in the alternative performance scene in Cairo, started as a women’s storytelling group that focuses predominantly on the body in the context of sexuality. *Al Batt Il Iswed* calls itself a feminist group, hence this ‘everyone’ Zainab speaks of thought that such a performance by women has to be on sexuality. Moreover, this also has to do with how feminists who speak of their bodies are perceived in Cairo.

Zainab wrote two stories, one of them is called *Bruises*. I asked her about how the process of writing that story began:

The process began in my mind with deconstructing/thinking of the idea on writing on the body, which is: Writing on the body is writing on the sexuality of the female body. That is when I started realizing that my relationship with my body lies beyond the concept of sexuality, the issue of virginity or what the society thinks of it... and that is when I realized that the relationship with my body is quite significant.

Zainab, a storywriter and performer, shared certain preconceptions with ‘everybody.’

The first thing that came to her mind in writing about her body was through sexuality, as it appeared “the common thing to do among feminists.” However, the act of thinking and being “close to herself” made her see things differently and resulted in the story of *Bruises*.

Bruises is a story about how Zainab tends to bruise herself because she believes that she is clumsy.

I am very very clumsy, and this is what pushed me to write this story. That I bump into a lot of things and that it causes bruises and I have become accustomed to this...it's a physical experience but its not something normal, but I got accustomed to it as if it was normal, that my body would bruise and that I would bump into things and it was this realization that that was not the norm, so I started to think about my body in a different way. But it was not only me understanding my body in terms that were different than the sexual but also it was how much I started realizing that my body and my psyche are very connected, and this is what I really wanted to explore in the story.

I asked her about what she meant on how her psyche is connected to her body through this story

On that day I was not feeling well, I was upset and I was hurrying to get out of the house, and while I was doing that I bumped into a desk, and usually I would brush it away, comfort myself and go on... but it kept on hurting me for hours, and it felt it was connected to me not being able to pull the breaks and I say that I need to take a break of what is hurting me emotionally and physically, and this was one of the interesting moments in the workshop when you realize that your body and psychological state are really connected... I felt that the constant pain caused to me through that bruise which did not want to stop was somehow my body telling me not to ignore that pain and that not only my physical body but also that I was ignoring what was really hurting me and upsetting me and causing me to be unhappy... the realization happened to me that it was not about bumping into a desk and getting bruised is what really bothered me, when I started feeling that the pain has increased so much that it almost choke me that is when I knew it was me not feeling well.

The process of realization happened to Zainab through the workshop with the

other members of the group and through writing her story. Zeinab used to be a member of *Ana El Hekaya* before the split. There Zainab said she was not able to talk openly about her body, she said it was a real struggle for her to write something about her body then. But after the separation, in which most of the members of *Ana Elhekaya* left to form *Al Batt Il Iswed*, she started feeling more comfortable talking about her body. For Zeinab the harmony in the relationships with the people she encountered in *Al Batt Il Iswed* allowed her to begin the process of sharing her intimate life.

Bumping into things produced a physical pain, which along with it produced affects that irritated Zeinab that she ignored. This caused further pain and this is when she realized it was not only a matter of her body that she “felt,” but there was something else and this something else which she called her psyche and “me” led her to think about what it is she was trying to block from being released and come to the surface. In this realization lies the analysis of how she deals with the affects her body releases throughout an encounter that could lead to action or its suspension. And the reaction to that was to think about her bruises in the workshop, because in our hasty daily lives we do not always get the time and the chance to reflect on ourselves. Being part of the group gave her a space for doing just that.

I started thinking about my body and about its relation to me and to the people around me. And I felt more comfortable in the new group, so we transcended this taboo of talking about the body... and we wanted to talk about our own bodies and not other's. There are big questions of the body, like FGM, such topics are hovering over you, because you know it happens in a scary percentage in this country but then, we don't know anything about it. So we did not feel we had to talk about the body in such a vessel, meaning that it has to be sexual like on harassment, which seemed like the more pressing topic politically speaking, but it felt more natural to talk about how I felt about my own body.

Zainab actively follows what is happening around her, she reads, she writes and she has her opinion on things. When she was thinking about how to write about her own body, she realized she could not write about something that happened only to her. There were surely more important topics than ordinary things from her life. However, if she did choose to write on the stories of other women and how she imagines their lives, she would then be taking a representational role of something she did not personally experience or know how it felt. Therefore she chose to speak about her own body even if it seemed to her as “not pressing enough” and hence she wrote the story of her bruises. In this process she realized that her own experiences are accompanied by another experience of that experience, the affect. She was ignoring the affect until it became stronger than her, and she could no longer ignore that there was something.

On intensely being where we are: Affect, Possibilities and Understanding Connections

The Tahrir Girl, another story about the body, was written by Zainab. She introduced the story as being very personal, in other words, intimate. While Zainab was telling the story me, she was constantly jumping from a first to third person narrative.

It's a letter, this person (which is her) wrote it to a person she used to love, and with whom she spent the day of the biggest women march that happened in Cairo in 2011, it was December, right after the army have cracked down the citizens in the parliament, the crackdown was in mid December in the events of the ministry council (Maglis Al Wuzara), there was so much violence on that day and there is a very famous video of a girl who they called later *Sitt Il Banat* (The greatest girl) because no one knew who she was, it was the girl that was dragged on the street and was beaten up, who was wearing a blue bra...the video was horrible...there were other videos, one in which they were pulling a girl from her hair very hard... there was a big march after this incident...people made huge banners

in which they told the army ‘we will cut your hand’, there was so much anger, when I saw the pictures afterwards I was horrified... (going back to telling the story) as for the relationship with that person, it was complicated, they had problems. She did not go to the march on that day, because she was with that person in his house, they were spending intimate time together ... (going back to using ‘I’) I had time to go to the march, it was four o’clock but I did not go. I felt as if I was stuck there. I knew I wanted to go and I tried to act as if its fine, its not a big deal, but then when I saw the pictures afterwards I was very disappointed with myself because I did not go and did not take part of that and I was trying to brush away the memory of the days before the event, girls in the metro were even talking about it. I knew it was going to be big but I still decided to stay with him, as if staying with him those extra hours would have meant something... I knew why I stayed, I wanted to feel safe, you know, to feel more beautiful, more wanted, desired, its all related to physical insecurities... the letter is her writing to him after all that is passed... after a long time has passed and talking about how, you know, like how... why that happened... and was trying to open up in the letter on why I stayed there... and how it made me feel that she made the wrong choice as someone who believes she should have been there because she believed in that... so I had a conflict of what she believes and what she should have been doing and at the moment of making a choice I chose to stay, I was needy, I wanted to be desired and accepted.

She continued but this time referring to another incident with the girl who was beaten up. She talked about the woman, who tried to save her and was seen in the video, and was then interviewed on TV a few days after in the hospital after she suffered severe injuries.

I don’t know how many women would do what she did, I think that was the craziest thing I have seen in my life, its just one woman trying to stop five or six soldiers from beating the other girl. And how it was talked about that girl afterwards. And I started thinking about myself in her situation. If anything happens to me, would anyone come to help me? Because I dress different I feel sometimes other women in the metro look at me in a suspicious way. Would they in a situation like that, come and help me even if they think I look different?

I conducted this interview with Zainab in a quiet place sitting opposite from each

other. At moments while Zainab was telling me the story of *The Tahrir Girl* she would look up and drift away, her eyes sometimes widened and sometimes narrowed and sometimes they became transparent. I watched the movement of her body and I was able to sense her agitation and discomfort at certain moments of the story, sometimes she trembled, or looked down, her voice changed from talking slowly and quietly to loud and determined, she felt hesitant at times, at other times she became silent. There were moments in her story I felt so close to her and I felt I was with her in what was happening, I found myself telling her enthusiastically “Yes, I understand!” I uttered those words in a moment when I felt I was feeling what she was feeling, or understanding what she was feeling. She affected me but the way I felt as a result was something overwhelming that made me say something I was not sure if I consciously said it.

Did I really understand? Or did I feel I understood? Did I understand it because I thought I have had a similar experience that produced a similar feeling, although I know I never had a similar experience? Has her story really had such an impact on me or was it her physical expressions which she obviously was articulating unconsciously that radiated such energy? I felt as if I was “abducted,” Massumi (2002:217) defining this as “being drawn into a situation, being captured by it, by its eventfulness... [this] could be accompanied by a sense of vitality or vivacity, a sense of being more alive.” This “abduction” made me feel enthusiastic.

Zainab’s story is complex and multi-layered jumping from one encounter to the other, from one feeling to the other, engaging her body in each experience, her body being active in every thought she produced. In the moments when she spoke of her physical insecurities and the absence of her physical presence in the march, comparing herself to the woman who saved the girl, or the girl that was saved, she projected every

single aspect of the situation onto herself. Every time she is doing and un-doing, folding and unfolding the “intensities,” opening spaces for herself and in a constant becoming, which led her to thinking of herself within those encounters and how she acted in them and to realizations about those actions. What led Zainab to think of all that in the situation she was in, all that was around her and constantly affecting her, Deleuze (1978:13-14) argues that “the affections that external bodies produce on our own,” those encounters that Zainab that produced, the affects that led to different actions, which Ruddick (2010: 27) defines drawing on Spinoza as the experience of “affections of the body by which the body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, helped or hindered, and the same time the ideas of these affections.” Affects, so Gregg & Seigworth (2010:3) argue, are “ever gathering accretion of force relations” and within that “lie the real power of affect, affect as potential: a body’s capacity to affect and to be affected.” This explains how I was “captured” in Zainab’s story, living its details in myself, the affects I had are different than hers, as I am experiencing her telling me a story that release certain affects, and her affects are of her own experiences. Each of us was singular in her own experience and in our bodies; nonetheless, we were both captured together in the eventfulness and the vitality of feelings that, in that particular situation, established a connection between us.

Zainab belongs to a world of rapid encounters and is affected by all the intensities and by the external bodies and situations, which she told throughout her story. There is a constant accumulation of those encounters that affect her differently. I was affected by the events of her stories, by her reflections on it and by her mere existence in front of me. Through the affections she produced in me I thought I understood her, and when I thought I understood, I related it to my previous

knowledge of the incident of the blue bra girl for example. We both have seen it on TV, and we both in another space and time felt its violence. But Zainab's story was primarily about how she felt because if she did go to the march in which she would have felt she is doing something to express her protest. What brought us close was not that we both knew the story of the girl, but that Zainab realized within that situation she could have acted differently, by joining the march for example which was what she initially wanted to do. The feeling of "could have acted differently in a certain situation" is what we had in common, especially that she described the reason why she did not go as something coming out of her insecurities.

Eyes Wide Shut: Seeing the Possibilities

Zainab was caught in a complexity of affects and feelings that were reflected in my interview with her: jumping from one idea to the other, jumping back and forth between incidents and feelings, switching from the first person (active) to third (passive) person form and back again. This back and forth made her see this past, the story, from a different perspective. While she was telling me the story she revisited a past in her life, this past was full of different events each affecting her in a way, by different bodies around her. Her realization about how she felt about it is that she took a certain action, which she did not really want to base on her emotions at that moment which she called "insecurities." Her affection for the violence of the incidents that happened was interrupted by constructed emotions of insecurity that led her to think she needed reassurance.

Some scholars argue that affect is mainly driven by happiness or by violence, laughing and anger, the most intense and powerful affective expressions of all (Massumi 2002: 216). The act of violence Zainab saw on TV inflicted upon the girl

was an event that affected her like it affected thousands of other people who went on that march. And the people who went to the march became connected through their affective expressions which the incident released, be it rage, frustration, or anger.

Yet, what are the transformations that Zainab went through? While Zainab was in her workshops and while she was writing and telling the story and rehearsing bodily movements with the the group she realized that the moment she was retelling had passed. This moment was the future of that past and the past of the future, it was a moment in the present, and in this present she became free of something. While she was reworking her actions which were expressed in the past within a present moment she became, in that moment, conscious of what was *not* in her past, and this is what she was able to free herself from. It was not a question of what was there or how she acted, but of what was not there, and what she did not do. What was there and what actions she undertook will never change and will stay a part of her past, registered there, which she, can revisit. If there is something that was there it means there is something that was not there. And what was to there is an empty space where possibilities unfold for transformations and for different becomings. The non-action or what Agamben calls “the existence of non-Being, a presence of an absence” (2000:179) or the “ability to see in the shadows” is where the potential lies, where for Agamben as well as for Massumi freedom lies. When we open our eyes we see light and things are clear, but when we close them, it is dark, we think there is nothing there, but this dark place is a space in which we can look as well and find a “light.” Potentiality here lies in the darkness, where we can imagine a situation differently.

Chapter Three

Creating the Marginal: A Question of Limitations and Boundaries

In this chapter I explore the work of the *Bussy* Monologues. *Bussy* defines itself as “a performing arts project that aims to empower young Egyptian women and men and raise awareness about gender issues using storytelling ... the monologue performances allow women to write for themselves instead of being written about”¹⁴ Tracing categories such as class, marginality and the mainstream, I explore the processes whereby the attempts by the group to bring women’s issues into the mainstream is deeply implicated in class politics. In other words, this chapter explores how storytelling practices that seek to critically engage the dominant construction of women as ‘the other,’ rely on representational strategies that construct the poor, the marginal as ‘other’ within the Egyptian social domain. I argue that *Bussy* is premised on an imagination that reproduces and maintains dominant discourses of who are marginal in their attempts to use storytelling to fight social oppressions.

Mainstreaming the Marginalized

Shady, a storyteller, who began his storytelling path in 2011 with the Egyptian revolution by taking part in a project called *Hakawy El Tahrir* (The Tahrir Monologues) told me that bringing stories to the public empowers the teller of a story, whether he performs the story himself or not. Bayat (2012:20) argues that empowerment “brings the marginal to the mainstream.” He defines marginality as “a social position of inferiority ... caused by the dominant discourse, law and institutions.” (ibid.) Stigmatized as violent, dirty, dangerous, with no future as people

¹⁴ Information taken from the new website of the group
<http://thebussyproject.weebly.com/about-1593160616061575.html>

who do not fit in the prevailing social fabric, but remain on the periphery of what they [the state] consider ‘normal’ life“ (ibid:16). Bayat continues that “the ‘mainstream’ and the ‘normal’ the ‘integrated’ and the ‘modern’... includes being in the center, enjoying the position of power, comfort, respect, security, protection and recognition” (2012: 26). Marginality, Saad (2012, 97) contends “signals a deficiency to be remedied through intervention, and it is often no more than a shorthand covering a range of poverty-related situations as well as social groups.” Hence, an array of technologies are put in place to regulate marginality, produce docile subjects through processes of integration of ‘deviants’ into the mainstream. The political construction of marginal subjects is an ongoing process of identification of targets subject to intervention and transformation. In the particular context of neoliberal Egypt, such target populations in need of transformation appear under the rubric of *shaabi* (*popular*), the rural and urban poor.

Stewart (2007:54) reflecting on the experience of being mainstream, observes that it “is a concrete sensory experience of literally being in tune with a “something” that is happening. But nothing too heavy or sustained ... It is being in tune without getting involved. A light contact zone that rests on a thin layer of shared public experience ... it is like a floating device.” The first *Bussy* performance I attended left me uncomfortable. The storytelling performances, focusing on FGM, harassment, sexual violence, important problems in the contemporary social domain, were by and large left at the door of the marginal. The first *Bussy* performance conveyed a strong sense of belonging, but belonging to what, and at whose expense? Many months thereafter I received a promotional email in which *Bussy* called itself “The *Bussy* Family.” Who does this family include and most important who does it exclude? *Bussy* works within the mainstream, refusing to push questions further than their comfort

zone. This chapter traces how questions of FGM, harassment and sexual violence are addressed within *Bussy* storytelling, how they are made visible, and what audiences do they seek to engage.

Creating the Marginalized

I asked Shady about the audience in his storytelling performances. He responded that “reaching the audience is important especially an audience member that suffered...the bigger audience we reach the stronger it is that what we do, because then they will realize that what happened to them and how they feel about it happens to others as well.” This is the way *Bussy* works in general, drawing large audiences and selecting stories that are ‘hot’ and pressing at a certain moment, without thinking too deeply about the topics selected, or ways in which hot topics are made visible and represented in the Egyptian public sphere. Given the larger than life concern with numbers, as Stewart puts it concerning the comfort zone of the mainstream, *Bussy*’s storytelling performances offer “nothing too heavy or sustained.”

Bussy presents itself as “a place of untold gender stories... exposing reality that the society ignores” as noted in the language of their crowd funding campaign launched in May 2015. The group’s storytelling performances deliberately target hot topics in the Egyptian mainstream in order to raise feelings of shock and empathy in the audience, not allowing for much in between or anything to be thought of further. Straightforward empathy is generated through their liberal use of swear words and explicit sexual language, hence the problems *Bussy* faces with censorship.

In 2010 the group decided to take their shows outside the walls of the American University of Cairo where they originally started in 2006. This decision came after the university moved its head quarters to *Tagamou Al Khamis*, at the

northeastern fringes of Greater Cairo, hence impacting the potential audience of *Bussy* performances. Sodos said that the university told *Bussy* that if they wanted to continue performing on its premises they could only do so at the university's new premises. Leaving the safe gates of the university was difficult for the group. They toured almost all the theaters in Cairo, because of the content of their stories they were rejected by everyone except Rawabet Theater. Conflicts with scheduling with other Rawabet Theater events forced them to search for additional venues. They were offered two nights in a tent in front of the cafeteria in the Cairo Opera House Theater in *Markaz Al Ibdaa* (Center for Creativity). The day following their first performance, which took place in the year 2010 they received a visit from state security, the morality police and representatives of the Ministry of Tourism. According to Sodos, one of the performers was telling a story of removing her veil, as she did so on stage someone filed a complaint calling the performance pornographic. Other stories performed that night focused on sexuality and the sexual thoughts of the storytellers.

It was very dramatic... at that point of our work we even were censoring ourselves, there were no bad words said as well...there was really nothing there that was that bad, the stories were on circumcision, another one on pre-martial sex, on how some guy wants to have sex with a woman and that he wanted to wait for marriage and such stuff, they were very basic topics. Maybe there was only one story that was a bit daring or shocking.

The performance was halted for that night, the next day the group was asked to delete some sentences from their performance. But instead of deleting them they used the word "teeet" to cover what was thought to be inappropriate¹⁵. Before every show

¹⁵ Informatino taken from interviews with Shady on January 12th, 2015 and Sodos on January 14th, 2015, as well as from an article in Mada Masr <http://www.madamasr.com/news/culture/bussy-monologues-new-show-halted-cairo-opera-house>

they would apologize that the performance may contain some inappropriate language, they would follow the apology with the justification “but the fact is that we see and hear such stuff everyday in our society, so we decided to keep them in the performance.” *Bussy’s* defined goal is to “challenge Egypt’s social boundaries.”

According to the group’s social media site they were trying to bring stories “to a large body of people while providing the storyteller with a direct opportunity to publicly reclaim the truth as they experienced it.” Shady told me that they try to “to expose that which society ignores... and to raise the empathy of the audience.” Reflecting on their first experience in a public venue Sondos added

I was a bit naïve then and had no experience, and performing in the AUC one stays a bit limited, we were performing to an educated audience, and as soon as we took the show outside to the opera, which is a very mainstream government run place, I think its normal that for what happened to happen.

Sondos wants to “bring stories to a larger body of people” and “expose that which society ignores” but at the same time argues that *Bussy* “performed in the wrong place!” This begs the question of who is *Bussy’s* audience? And who is this “large body of people” that *Bussy* refers to? Does one need, from her point of view, define what society is or should be, and who should or should not see *Bussy*? This paradoxical statement reflects the particular social domain constructed by *Bussy*, a mainstream comfort zone of “the educated,” in which they seek to situate their work. Educated audiences was a term that emerged consistently in my interviews with *Bussy* members.

Khomsomeeyat (Fivehundred) was a performance that *Bussy* had planned at the Opera House as part of a storytelling festival called *Hakawy* International Arts Festival

for Children held March 9-17, 2015. The planned performance of stories from teenagers and school children was also cancelled. In the words of Shady,

One day before the show we were rehearsing in the morning on the stage in the opera house, and there were some workers in the room. One of them heard what we were saying in the rehearsal, for example we used swearing words, two girls were talking about kissing, masturbation and so on. This went to the director of the theater who then insisted to watch the rehearsal on the next day, which we refused. She wanted to watch it in order to tell us what to take out probably and this was out of the question, this is our show and this is how we want to perform it.

The Opera House workers that had reported problems with the Bussy performance were part of the audience. They did not need to be seated to watch the show, but this audience was not approving to what was being said which led yet to another cancellation of a *Bussy* performance. *Khomsomeeyat* then was performed on the Greek Campus, connected to the American University in Cairo's downtown campus. Bussy members described this performance as "super-cool!" Working class people were not the audience that Bussy was interested in "empowering." Shady described the audience of this performance as "teenagers from a public school in [upscale] Heliopolis, they were middle class people, you know, just normal people." For Shady "awareness raising about gender issues" can only take place with "normal people," a conversation within the mainstream, the respected, "the modern" (Bayat: 2012, 26).

The crowd funding promotional material, referred to above, notes: 500 stories, 5 governorates, 20 performances, 30 workshops. In the promotional email one sentence refers to the performance *Khomsomeeyat*: "For the past 2 months now, we have been touring the provinces of Egypt, spreading the truth about how teens in this country really experience schools and how they negotiate the often difficult terrain of being a teenager in Egypt." Previously the stories for this show were described to be

told to “normal” people and now they are taken to the provinces. I was very bewildered reading this sentence. The performance was primarily performed in English, because in hip and ‘modern’ schools pupils speak English, which reflects status and wealth. Speaking English in schools outside of Cairo is uncommon. Upon further investigation, the “provinces” referred to, among others, visiting one school in affluent Dokki, Giza in which upon graduation students attend expensive private universities such as the American University in Cairo. In one scene in *Khomsomeeyat* a girl tells her father that she does not want to go abroad for university, but that she would rather go to the American University in Cairo. What exactly is the mainstream in *Bussy’s* vision? Do they really believe that this story represents even the middle class teenager in Egypt?

To return to the role that numbers play for *Bussy*. In an interview with director Sondos she noted that:

We are currently working on stories from Port Said. There is so much domestic violence there, but no one talks about it. I did not find enough research done on that, I cannot find numbers or statistics of domestic violence cases. There is a lack of research there, I don’t know why that is so.

Sondos was interested in finding out figures and numbers, but did not think deeper into what was behind the absence of numbers. She said she wanted the numbers of domestic violence but was not interested in the social domain of Port Said in which the violence of the everyday is grounded. This, the approach of *Bussy*, announced that there is a problem but never talk about what is behind it, building a story based on a façade without trying to go deeper into what is actually going on. The group wants to tell “untold gender stories”. Most people are not familiar with the term gender and do not understand it immediately without explanation. I am not sure *Bussy* understands it either, or cares to engage in the broader debates on the term. The term never came up

in my interviews with any of the members, I could only locate it on their newly updated website or in their emails. The buzzword has become a staple in the development industry, it is chic and trendy, and can be useful to attract funders.

No one in the group has a background in the social sciences or humanities, let alone in gender studies, Sondos once said. “I don’t think I need to go to social studies or to do a masters [she has a B.A. in Media Studies], I think I know how to do what I am doing and I understand it and it teaches me a lot.” Certainly learning takes place in the act of writing and performing, but she is responsible for the ideas and the images she transmits. Going beyond a trendy buzzword, however, is not necessary for those embedded in the “powerful mainstream.” There is no need to understand the politics of representations in the social domain, or push uncomfortable questions that go beyond the fun of the shock effect.

The Deviant Other

Ash Ya Wahsh (Stories of Masculinity), a performance produced in collaboration with the feminist NGO Nasra, was performed in Cairo and select cities in Egypt in 2014. The story featured a sexual harassment incident staged in Faisal, a popular neighborhood in Cairo. A woman performer stood on stage walking with an invisible friend when she announces that she is walking on a street in Faisal. Then a woman acting a male role dressed with a cap and a cigarette hanging out of her mouth joins her on stage. The ‘male’ actor through his body movements represents an aggressive, macho, ready for a fight young thug, walks past the young woman and says “hey pretty, what up? Nice ass!” in a working class Cairene accent. At that point the young woman becomes nervous and shouts “oh my God I don’t know anyone in this area!!” Thereafter people storm the stage to resemble the busy streets of Faisal.

The street represented as chaotic produces anxiety among the woman story-teller and she screams to her imaginary friend “let’s get out of this place!!“ This play was performed in front of a “powerful mainstream” Cairo audience. The point here is not that sexual harassment is not an issue be it in Faisal, downtown Cairo or upscale Zamalek. but rather the politics of selecting Faisal “to empower young men and women.” *Bussy*’s selection of Faisal as the site in which the “powerful mainstream” reflects on social issues coheres with the current military regime’s production of the margins, the working poor, as *baltageya* (thugs.)

The lack of careful introspection regarding selections of sites, subjects, accents, language marks all of *Bussy*’s performances. They are determined to “publicly reclaim the truth,” but whose truth? The reiteration of hegemonic representations of the working class, the poor, the popular, the informal that are always already “deviant,” “thugs,” and “harassers.” What kind of a feminist project is it whose own “telling the truth” is only possible on the bodies of the marginal? There is nothing “untold” about these “gender stories” in Cairo and contemporary Egypt.

The last performance of the group I attended was the previously mentioned performance of *Khomsomeyyat* set in upscale Dokki and focused on teenagers and the problems they face in family and school, two “safe zones.” Two scenes in the play are significant for this analysis. The theme of sexual harassment staged tensions between teenage girls in an English speaking private school and boys in a public school on the other side of the street. The sexual harassers were identified with the public school, boys that were rude, had working class accents, and accused the mini skirt wearing private school girls of being ‘prostitutes.’ Another sexual harassment scene featured a *bawwab* or doorman with a belly, wearing a *gallabeya* and speaking with an Upper Egyptian accent, in other words, the familiar hegemonic repertoire of the rural, the

non-modern, the traditional. I focus on these two stories in particular as these two performances are the product of Bussy's leaving the university to "tell untold stories" to the larger Egyptian public.

Bussy's performances are designed to agitate their audiences, to trigger them to "do" something. Shady told me that by telling stories of oppression and suffering of the people they try to raise empathy of the audience with the storyteller, to share the experience so that the audience knows what is happening and that the storyteller or the person the story belongs does not feel alone. He calls people that share their traumatic stories "survivors" as opposed to "victims," given Bussy's mission of "empowering women and men."

I was curious to learn more about the experiences that Bussy had with their performances outside of Cairo and asked Shady about these.

When we go to perform in Egypt outside Cairo, with stories that we made in Cairo and showed them there, we do some changes, we take whole stories out, or take some words out... We are kind of new to this and we do not know how people would react to what we are doing... when we went to Suez or Assiut for example we took out words from our last performance *Ash ya Wahsh* such as *khawal* (homosexual) and stuff like that, anything with swearing words...we are entering slowly there, especially that the content of the stories for them is challenging. I mean, we talk about harassment, domestic violence which is challenging enough to them for such stuff to be talk of openly so using swearing words would be too much, so it is better for us to enter there slowly.

Shady pre-determines and pre-defines how people in 'those' rural places would feel and hence react towards the performance, because they see them as belonging to the illegible margins. While speaking to me about the performances outside of Cairo he appears uncomfortable and nervous. I got a sense that the 'other' is intimidating, hence the attempt to contain the other in the language of the powerful mainstream

categories of “the uneducated rural” and “the working class thug.” Bussy’s fear of the “untold stories” that might emerge in these other spaces thus requires “a slow entry” in case they disrupt and challenge the neat empowerment stories of the mainstream.

Performing in the rural, or in unfamiliar places, is the main aim of agitational theater, to take theater to people that do not have direct access to it (Pal: 2010:59). Yet, the expectation that “educated” people can engage with and react to what the storytellers have to say, while those “others” do not, or cannot, or will not raises the question of what exactly is agitational about Bussy storytelling? Pal (2010:49) observes that “what demarcates performance from other art forms is the potential for an interactive relationship between actors and audience...the engagement in a communal activity and the fact that both actors and audience can be creator or players in the game. *Bussy* tries to agitate its audiences by provoking them, talking about what they term taboo subjects, using swear words. Many of their stories are collected from anonymous people who found a venue through *Bussy* to vent their feelings, to let others know of their experiences in order for the audience to empathize with their stories. Stories usually take the form of confessions; they are very short with one or two ideas, never multifaceted. They affect their audiences in different ways by invoking feelings of excitement, anger, as well as happiness when one finds the self in the story. At the same time, they are adding to the dominant ideology of the mainstream by participating in the marginalization of the contemporary other.

However, they do not always get the reactions from the audience they expect. Shady told me that once when they were performing the show *Ash Ya Wahsh* outside Cairo as part of Bussy’s ‘expansion plan,’ a man in the audience laughed. He was upset as the story was about how he once was beaten up in Tahrir Square by thugs. “I do not know how they live, but maybe violence is perceived as normal there. I

understand this and hence understand his reaction.” Although for a moment he felt provoked, he tried justifying it and hiding behind the educated and non-educated binary of the powerful mainstream, seeing himself as the modern, rational subject confronted by the irrational, emotionally aggressive other. Hence, blocking all possibilities that could emerge from such a reaction, especially within himself.

In 2011 *Bussy* interrupted their performances to work on *Hakawaty El Tahrir*. Thereafter, they began on their expansion project to begin working outside of Cairo. To prepare for the expansion they started organizing workshops for a couple of months to work on stories for future performances. According to Sondos they do not always go with a theme, sometimes the theme just comes up while sitting with people who are there for the workshop. Sometimes funding determines the theme. The expansion project has primarily focused on Egypt’s secondary cities such as Alexandria and Port Said.

Going outside Cairo is really different, I mean in Cairo we are able to talk about sexual harassment openly and it’s alright but there, its like going ten years back in time, or even 50 somewhere else, it depends where. For example in Alexandria everyone knows each other, its so much pressure. We did an interactive performance there, we had one of us, the male performer, go to one of the female audience members, and he would tell her to sit in a proper way.

Bussy uses this method to test people’s reactions, make them feel uncomfortable, provoking them for an action/re-action, make them feel what others feel when they are being harassed. This method goes back to agitational theater, which according to Pal (2010: 49) is “a radical and progressive politics of theatre in/as action...not only reflects or mirrors contemporary social and political turbulences but also exemplifies the potential ability of the performing art to generate a process of change at the individual and /or societal level.” *Bussy* uses the same method in each and every

performance, it has become expected and loses its agitational possibilities. Similarly, what they call “taboos” (cf sexual harassment, FGM) are themes that have become the buzzwords within the well funded development industry, mainstream NGO activism, filmmaking and art.

Chapter Four:

Storytelling, Performance and the Political

The revolution changed everything in my life,
what I do, my friends, my dreams and my desires
(from an interview with Shady Abdallah in March 2015)

This chapter takes a closer look at the effects of the January 25, 2011 revolution on the two storytelling groups. O’Sullivan (2010:128) reminds us that “this world of affects, this universe of forces, is our own world seen without the spectacles of subjectivity.” Subjectivity is always about the individual and affects are not individuated, they are about the collective. During the revolution what connected people were many different affects but mainly, at the end of the day, what was hovering around them was happiness. The revolution affected people and changed their lives, their dreams and their desires; it gave them hope, living a very intense experience believing that everything is possible. Smith argues in the words of Deleuze through the Nietzschean schema that “desire is the state of impulses and drives” (2007, 71) and Deleuze argues that “drives are simply desiring-machines themselves” (1987:35) hence Smith argues in Deleuze’s word again that “our drives never exist in a free and unbound state, nor are they merely individual, they are always arranged and assembled by the social formation in which we find ourselves” (2007, 71). This

chapter asks what happens to desire during political ruptures? How does the “rearrangement of desires” affect the arts, storytelling and the relationships between individual writers and performers?

In order to get at some of these questions I begin with an overview of the art community in Cairo between 2011 and 2012. This thesis was not intended to be a thesis on the January 25, 2011 revolution. Yet, I find it inescapable to talk about the revolution in order to more fully understand its effects on the storytellers, the groups and their stories and performances. I position my groups and what it means to produce art over the past four years as a way of expressing affects, what O’Sullivan calls “the actualization of the virtual” (2010:129). Agamben argues that “actuality” takes out the aspect of potentiality of the virtual (Nadal 2010:3)¹⁶, O’Sullivan (2010, 129), having a slightly different take, argues that actuality is the moment of “being on the edge,” on the borderline between virtual and actual, this is where art is situated. In virtual lies the possible. Therefore, the significance of the art that was produced during the revolution is the potential that lies in this virtual, that travels further than the actual, and that affects us and includes our daily lives in it. I focus on the dynamics in the groups during the uprising and its unfolding process from 2011 until the ousting of President Morsi on June 30, 2013.

The Uprising and the Production of Art

Different forms of art emerged alongside the 2011 uprising and its aftermath. Songs were written based on the words chanted by the masses in Tahrir square, the walls of Cairo bore witness to an explosion of graffiti. Visual art, theatre, music all became entangled in the themes of the revolution, hence the art of that period was

¹⁶ Taken from <https://belate.wordpress.com/2010/04/04/agamben-on-potentiality/>

quickly named “Art of the Revolution” or “Revolutionary Art.” According to Von Maltzahn (2014:230) “ordinary people who had not considered themselves professional artists of the established intelligentsia” (2014: 230) were making art spontaneously. It was, according to Tripp (2013:2) “one of the ways in which the multiple voices of recently mobilized citizens can be heard.” The “voices” the writer speaks of are expressions of affects that produced voices that affected others, hence “the capacity to affect and be affected” (Gregg & Seigworth 2010: 3) marks experience of the people in that time and place. O’Sullivan argues (2010:129) that “art precisely actualizes invisible universes, or at least it opens up a portal onto these other virtual worlds,” the virtual here is the realm of affects that is packed with potentials.

According to Tripp art “helped in shaping the agenda” and contributed to “the formation of a new kind of political public” (2013, 2). This period was marked by an intensity of art that engaged the political drawing in many people that had previously never thought of this medium. This outpouring of expression soon took certain organizational forms, such as, for example in *Fann Al Midan* (Art in the Square), described as a “cultural outlet born from the womb of Tahrir square... and a creative artistic state spread all over Egypt since January 2011,¹⁷ based on volunteers and donations. A new public culture was born that, according to Abaza (2013:125) “re-appropriated public spaces through the Tahrir Square effect.”

Fairly soon art produced during these two years was categorized as “Revolutionary Art” or “Art of the Revolution.” The quick commodification of “Revolutionary Art” in local and international art circuits, increasingly was met with a distancing from the label on the part of politically engaged artists. Politically engaged

¹⁷ Information retrieved from <http://ar.qantara.de/content/lmshhd-lthqfy-lmsry-htfly-lfn-mydn-lfn-mydnmtnfs-thqfy-mwlwd-mn-rhm-mydn-lthryr>

art opposing the regime, as many artists came to argue, did not just emerge in 2011 but has always been there. Likewise, the sorting of themes that went into the “Revolutionary Art” category increasingly limited the potentially of art to engage the moment. Of all artistic expressions graffiti became what Abaza (2012)¹⁸ terms “the barometer of the revolution.” Public space, controlled and monitored by the state represented by the Ministry of Interior and the police, became an important site of political engagement for graffiti artists, photographers and street performances. While the state enforces its presence in the venues where art is expressed, such as exhibition halls, film and the theater through censorship and surveillance (cf Mehrez 2008), the breakdown of state control in 2011 made it possible to express criticism openly. Art in public spaces becoming an important site for openly questioning and challenging the state. Von Maltzahn (2014:229) observes that “the eighteen days of 2011 launched an existential debate about the overall role of the Ministry of Culture, some pleading for its outright abolition.”

Oppositional art has a vibrant and involved history in Egypt. Mehrez (2008:3) argues that “the cultural wars themselves are part and parcel of the political ones.” For instance, in 2005 ‘Writers and Artists for Change’ expressed its vision as one that spreads political awareness through art. The group declared its solidarity with the political activist group *Kefaya*¹⁹ (Enough), forming a direct relationship between art and activism (ibid). Critical expressions of the regime were reflected in works of literature, music and the visual arts (Tripp 2013). Well-known Egyptian authors, such as Sonallah Ibrahim or the poet Mohammad Foad Negm, used their writing to

¹⁸ Retrieved from <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/5978/the-revolutions-barometer->

¹⁹ Kefaya (Enough) emerged when former president Mubarak had the intention to run for presidency for a fifth time in 2005 with the possibility of the succession of his son Gamal Mubarak, which led to discontent. Kefaya united several political parties in demand for rotation of power. (Oweidat, et al 2008: viii).

critically intervene in the social and the state's fraught relationship with its people, as Tripp (2013: 6) puts it "they had helped to weaken the grip of the dictator on the imagination of their subjects." Humor and sarcasm likewise constituted distinct artistic expressions in both professional and non-professional genres and fori. With the emergence of social media humor, sarcasm, counter-stories to the state's production of truth increasingly became a venue in which people told their stories. The chants, songs and marches, the performativity of the uprising, were instrumental in drawing people from all walks of life to express themselves artistically. People were composing chants, others were writing songs, all performing together to critically engage the state. According to Abaza (2013: 125) the square became "the space per se of contestation, of grieving and public performances... [for] reshaping street politics .. [and for] trigger[ing] a new visual culture that is raising political consciousness" (ibid). Artists, who wanted to use public space for their art, did not need to be "commissioned" or had to have permission or ask anyone, they just did what they felt like.

The art that emerged focused on the everyday life of a revolution, the reflection of a monumental occasion to reflect upon oneself in the political experience through art. By experience, I mean what one has sensed through seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting. Art was a medium and an attempt to reflect the affects that were produced in the uprising and to experiment. Songs were composed and stories told during the various sit-ins, public space became a space of performance, graffiti emerged as a powerful everyday form of engaging this revolution. The affects produced were strong and overwhelming, even for people that did not go to Tahrir Square during the 18 days, the images circulating in the news and social media were powerful, they moved something be it happiness, despair, sadness or hope.

The uprising produced new story-telling groups, such as *Hakawaty ElTahrir*, and affected those that existed prior to 2011 such as *Ana Elhakaya* that began working on stories from the revolution. Public space, with the disappearance of the control of the state became a space for experimentation, self expression and artistic production. Maltzahn (2014: 234) observes that „attitudes and awareness of one’s own agency and role in impacting and redefining the use of available structures has changed... people are no longer waiting for the state to act, but take their rights, and question existing institutions with a much louder and more critical voice“ (ibid.). In Tahrir square people were taking the initiative of organizing, cleaning the square and protecting each other. Groups such as Opantish²⁰ came together to fight sexual harassment and assault against women and men. Shady, a member of *Bussy* and *Hakawati ElTahrir*, for example, later was to tell a story of his being caught up in mob harassment while trying to pull a woman out of a circle of men.

While sexual harassment has been a site of activism since 2007, the intensity of violence that accompanied the revolution brought this topic centrally into the lives of storytellers, performers and artists. Sondos, the director of *Bussy* and *Hakawati ElTahrir* performed three scenes of sexual harassment against both men and women on the street in downtown Cairo in July 2012 with the rest of the members of the group, calling it the *Bussy* Street Experiment. The experiment was recorded with a video camera and consequently uploaded online. Later *Bussy* held a storytelling performance in the women’s car of Cairo metro in collaboration with Mahatat.²¹

²⁰ An initiative that started December 2012 The group aims mainly to combat sexual harassment incidents and collective sexual assaults that women face in squares during sit-ins, protests and clashes in the perimeter of Tahrir square. Information from the social media page https://www.facebook.com/opantish/info?tab=page_info

²¹ Mahatat for contemporary art is an initiative for art in public space and community art based in Cairo, Egypt that was as founded in 2011. Retrieved from

Storytelling Groups and Transformations of Desire

Hakawati ElTahrir was formed in 2011 to perform stories of the revolution by Sondos Shabayek. Sondos, who has been a member of *Bussy* since 2009, and later became the group's director, observes that "in 2011 we stopped working on *Bussy* and called the project *Hakawati ElTahrir*." On their blog,²² *Hakawy Eltahrir* describe their activities as collecting stories of the everyday experiences of people during the 18 days in Tahrir Square and thereafter. People who sat at home and watched TV were also asked to send in their stories. In the words of Sondos, "we wanted to tell stories about what we went through and how we felt." The eventual performances were staged as monologues, stories told by the people who the story belonged to. Sondos Shabayek, a former journalist, says that the news was not reflecting what was happening in the revolution, "very impersonal" and "incomplete," theater gave a space for the "personal and the emotional." For Sondos these stories are "an alternative source of history." *Hakawy Eltahrir* held performances throughout 2011 and 2012 in Cairo and other cities in Egypt such as Alexandria and Minya. They also performed in Geneva and numerous festivals and conferences in European capitals.

Some of the people who joined *Hakawati ElTahrir* were like Shady, who worked in marketing before the outbreak of the revolution. He joined *Hakawati ElTahrir* out of curiosity and was not sure if he would stay. Eventually he became a professional storyteller. According to Shady the revolution changed so many things in his life, from his job and friends to his desires. And I might add this change happened to all Egyptians. The revolution produced different tones of affects, as Deleuze

https://www.facebook.com/pages/Mahatat-for-contemporary-art/322582157767851?sk=info&tab=page_info

²² <https://tahrirmonologuesblog.wordpress.com/>

describes it, happiness, outrage, relief and “breaking of the hold of fear on the subject populations“ (Tripp 2013, 9).

Hakawati ElTahrir and *Ana Elhakaya* are connected to the two groups that this thesis focuses on. *Bussy Monologues* and *Hakawati ElTahrir* both have the same director and rely on activism, testimonies or confessions, and *Al Batt Al Iswed* is a breakaway group from *Ana Elhakaya*. There are two different forms of storytelling that predominate in Cairo, which defines distinct storytelling communities. *Bussy* and *Hakawati ElTahri*, and a third group called *Dayra* (Circle) on the one side. *Dayra* is directed by Shady Abdallah who works in all three groups in addition to his personal storytelling projects. These three groups usually collaborate with NGO’s for funding and commissions of themed performances. *Bussy*’s performance of *Ash ya Wahsh* (Stories on Masculinity), and much of the work by *Dayra* focuses on sexual violence, and work closely with the feminist NGO Nazra. In the words of Sondos, “a space would call us up and tell us they would like to do something on harassment, for example, so we say fine and we do it.“

The other community is descended from the NGO Women and Memory Forum and already has three generations of storytellers. While individual storytellers move in and out of groups within this circle, yet this community distinguishes itself by its style of narrating and performing with a focus on the social and everyday life. *Al Batt Il Iswed*, does not apply for funds for its shows or does commissioned performances for NGOs. This group does not recruit new storytellers for each performance, but works with permanent members. *Al Batt Il Iswed* has about 25 permanent members all committed to writing if not to performing. They have a money box and each member contributes a small amount to it each month depending on his/her financial situation at

that moment. This money is then used to rent a space to perform the stories. *Al Batt Il Iswed* performs publicly much less than *Bussy* does.

Bussy produces and performs a new show with a new topic almost every two months in different cities. *Bussy* also has core members that perform, and additionally recruits new storytellers based on the theme of a show. When the group is invited to perform outside of Egypt, or in an important event like the D-Caf (Downtown Cairo Art Festival) a highly commercialized festival that takes place every spring, the director, Sondos, selects professional performers, including herself. *Bussy* has performed internationally in France, Jordan and Lebanon. It effectively makes use of these to raise funds. *Bussy* is registered as a business in Cairo and has an office in upscale Zamalek. Today, according to Sondos, “they have a system in place” to navigate commissioned shows by local NGO’s. I have previously referred to their latest crowd sourcing campaign. All of their emails are in English, although their social media is both in Arabic and English.

Ana Elhakaya (out of which *Al Batt Al Iswed* emerged) was formed in 2009 by four core members, three professors of literature at Cairo University and one medical doctor. These core members, all of which are women, were part of the *Qalat Al Raweya* project that was initiated by the Women and Memory Forum in 1998. Other members joined later. At the outset the group’s main focus was to re-work well-known Arabic literary texts such as the works of Naguib Mahfooz from a woman’s/feminist standpoint in an attempt to draw attention to the role played by these canonical texts in shaping social categories. This remains an ongoing focus of the group. Members of the group also connect their own personal stories and experiences to characters in the literary works, to create a situation around the character that is similar to a situation in the storytellers own life. They rework their own experiences by reflecting on

characters in literary works. *Ana Elhakaya* publishes their stories and tells them in performances.

Bi Basata Keda (Simply Like That), which I have mentioned in my opening chapter, was a performance held for the first time in Cairo in February 2012 based on stories of the 18 days prior to the abdication of President Mubarak on February, 11 2011. *Bi Basata Keda*, were stories written by the permanent members of the group focusing on their experiences during the revolution. The performance was not limited to Tahrir square, but significantly included experiences out of the personal lives of the group members. *Bi Basata Keda*, focuses on the different experiences of revolution for individuals. An older woman starts her story by addressing the audience:

This is a performance about stories from the revolution, and maybe you would be expecting to hear adventures and heroic stories...but it is not. This story is my story... I never stood in front of a tank or was shot at or smelled any tear gas. I went to the street only after a few days after it began, I was not there on extremely violent days. It was not because I was afraid as I usually have taken part in other marches with Kefaya or 9th of March...and I always motivate others to go to the streets because the street is made of us...but with the revolution of 25th of January, I have till then have not been on the street for six months... some people believed then, even the ones that were on the street that anything would really happen. And I was watching the news on TV and I did notice that the marches were different, there were not only the usual 200 people that are normally marching. I expected that by the end of the day Al Amn Al Markazi would come, throw tear gas, water and scare people to go home ... this all happened ...but the thing is, people did not go home. It was the same the next day and the after. I thought this is it! A revolution at last!! All my life I went on marches awaiting this day! Never thought it would happen! But on 29th of January, I went down. I put on my revolution outfit... stretch jeans in order for me to feel comfortable in the square and sit on the floor, light pullover and a scarf a small bag with the necessities and I ran down to the square. When I got there, I realized that my role was very insignificant, I was just filling a space, and adding to the number of the people. Something I never did before. When I usually went to demonstrate, it was always us, the same 200 people, we were doing everything... but then on some days of the revolution I used to feel lazy and want to stay home and I think, I'm just another one among this big number, what difference does it make? but then I think, no! What if all thought like me, then no one will be there. And I get up and go, and I stand in the square and do not move

from my place. The best time was when Mubarak stepped down, I was so happy. I watched later on TV, on the private channels of course, and I felt very happy and very proud to be a small dot in this beautiful painting. And because I was so happy I gave it a name; I named it the number 848956 and I thought, this is an extremely important role that I have there, for if this number was not there, then we will never reach the million.

A second story featured the relationship between a mother and her son. The mother complained that her son was irresponsible, part of the young generation that wanted to oust Mubarak. The mother mocked the new generation as she did not believe this would ever happen and “those kids are wasting their time.” As the revolution unfolded she saw a young man, who refused to move from in front of a tank, get shot. She felt horrible and something inside her happened, growing in intensity until “the next day I was on the street with the people chanting, I felt extremely happy. I felt that with all those people around me, it will never be the same again.” Both stories reflect changes and transformations of two people during the revolution, and how they came to question their lives and desires similar to the lines from Shady at the beginning of this chapter.

In an interview I conducted with Amna, a young member of *Al Batt Il Iswed*, on how she came to join the group she said that she actually started in the group *Ana Elhekaya* as a stage manager in the performance of *Bi Basata Keda*. Referring to that play two years later she said to me excitedly ‘Do you know it? It was on the revolution, stories from the revolution!.’ “*Bi Basata Keda*. was Amna’s start in storytelling. Amna told me that it was shortly after *Bi Basata Keda*, working on a new theme on the body, that the future members of *Al Batt Il Iswed* separated from *Ana Elhakaya*. I spoke with Zainab, who was the co-director of *Bi Basata Keda*, and now is a writer and performer in *Al Batt Il Iswed*, about the reasons of the separation. After a moment of hesitation and with discomfort she said:

We had fights with them (the group)... a lot of issues. The group still exists and the main people in the group (she mentioned some names) were very patriarchal (Zainab said that although they are all women). For example they would criticize our stories on the basis that some things are inappropriate.

I asked her if the uprising had anything to do with this separation given that the split occurred after *Bi Basata Keda*.

It is probably that was why we left *Ana Elhekaya*. We thought fuck this shit! We are not taking your crap anymore. We are not accepting that somebody tells us what to do or what not to do and what is right and what is not right ... it was the situation at that time, "we are not taking this crap anymore!"

Zainab said that the decision to leave was made collectively. Zainab and Reem, director in *Al Batt Il Iswed* were the first people to leave the group. According to Zainab they "did not want to take their interference anymore." If they wanted to do their thing, they should do it on their own, if you are going to interfere in my work then fuck off!"

they were interfering all the time in everything, in the workshops for example, they did not like some things in the stories, and this and that is not appropriate. They did not have any tolerance and acceptance for anything new, and anything different like a different way of writing, or different opinions or people. And the whole time we are talking about patriarchy and feminism and they were practicing patriarchy on us.

Referring to the four senior core group members Zainab said, "They used to tell us this and that is not right. They put rules that each member had to write a story and tell it every time they perform, some of us wanted to write only and not perform, but it was not possible with them." She said that they were offered a grant for four members to go to London to present their work, and Sahar suggested that one of the younger members should go. The response from the core group was "this is out of the question! We are the core members, the four of us, and we will certainly go."

Acknowledging that the core group members were the founders of the group, Zeinab responded “I do not care... I went to talk to one of them and asked her why we cannot go, she said you cannot, this is not open for discussion, we are the ones going...there was this constant you can not, should not, have no right, not appropriate and other bullshit.” Following this encounter between the senior professional core group members and the younger generation aged 18-35, they made a collective decision to leave that very day, including one of the founders. According to the younger members, the senior group members wanted to control their stories, were concerned about the image of the group in the larger Egyptian public, and denied them the option to travel, represented power and authority, something that they had risen up against in the revolution.

Mona Ibrahim Ali, one of the core members who teaches at Cairo University, wrote an article about women’s storytelling in which she also talks about *Ana Elhekaya*. There she argues that “the Egyptian culture, and of the Arab countries, has great respect for their elders the older the people, the wiser and more knowledgable they are believed to be. Young people are taught since their early childhood not to argue with the older generation but rather listen carefully to what they say and try to learn from them“ (Ali 2013, 99). In her essay Ali is proud of this Egyptian culture that respects her for being older and wiser. She is nostalgic for the days when the young listened “carefully“ in contrast to the present. As Zainab put it, “no one listened to us.” Ali’s argument though continues that “only recently young people have learnt to examine such values as blind obedience to the older generation; the result was a revolution” (2013:99). Discussing the fact that *Ana Elhekaya* has young members Ali notes that “this generation needs to be given space.”

The timing of this separation, I argue, is important. As Kelada argues (2014: 2) “everyday momentary victories that are performed and their performativity is the only grantor for things to continue to be different at least on a personal level.” Zainab and the other members of the group were part of that momentum that changed their lives. I asked Zeinab how they came up with the name *Al Batt Il Iswed (The Odd Duck)* after their separation from *Ana Elhekaya*, “Sahar suggested it and we hated it! We stayed without a name for month. Then we voted on it.” In my interview with Zeinab she said that she appreciated the name, but was unsure if she liked it. “I find it silly, the name is supposed to convey the idea that we are different, I am not really sure I like this.”

On the Question of Feminism

I attended a workshop *by Al Batt Il Iswed* on March 28, 2014. This was not the usual workshop the group held, rather a special event featuring a lecture by an English literature professor from Cairo University on feminism. There were around 25 people in the room, 5 of them were men. The professor distributed an arabic language leaflet titled “The feminist standpoint and story writing” providing a definition of feminist consciousness drawing on Gerda Lerner’s *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy*. The lecture itself focused on women and writing stories, women’s voices and issues of solidarity. A vibrant and angry debate broke out as the lecturer proceeded to comment on women’s shared experiences and the inability of men to be feminists except “compassionate with feminism.” The various fault lines that became exposed in the audiences reactions, between women, between men and women. as to what exactly “feminism” is, haunted me. Thereafter I decided to pose that question to my interlocutors to try to understand what they think of the term.

In my interviews I never received a clear answer. My interlocutors seemed unsure or did not want to define themselves as anything. Reem, the director of *Al Batt Il Iswed* found the lecture, especially the historical material of interest. however, as she continued,” but as for me personally, I am more into the idea of thinking about all humans regardless of gender. Sure feminism is important and its good to know all that and to be aware of ones position towards it, and those position towards feminism differ and this difference in position was one of the reasons why we separated from *Ana Elhakaya* in the first place.” I then asked her in what sense did she find that the position of *Al Batt Il Iswed* differs from tthat of *Ana Elhakaya*:

Ana Elhakaya had a more limiting view towards feminism. They had a clear definition, very structured and as for us we imagined it to be more open and wider and inclusive. I mean they were not radical or anything but still they were resisting some ideas, which is good. They aimed to break some stereotypes and to share some moments and ideas, but they had a very structured view on things and prefer to follow certain categories to which things fit in or they don't... I mean I find it very limiting if we want to measure something all the time to whether its feminist or not, and to think is this for the cause or its it not... I prefer to be more open to things and not fixed to certain topics, I don't mind for it to be different in order to serve something bigger.

She added that “she does not feel it represented her and that she does not like to be labeled as anything and that she does what she does because she simply likes it.” She is part of the group because she likes to write and direct and she likes storytelling. Reem did not feel like pushing anything or forcing a category or a label to what she was doing, she did not aim to define her work as activism or feminism. Certainly, being part of a group that calls itself feminist or that is working towards justice in any form means that its members are conscious of what they are doing and what is it that they are telling society. Yet they refuse to reduce their work to a one word description, and hence carry the burden of being narrowly identified within specific categories.

Another member Amna when asked why she joined *Al Batt Il Iswed*. responded that she likes to write and wants to experiment more with that. As I moved to other questions she jumped and said, “ah concerning the previous question, I want to add to it that I am part of the group because I am a feminist.”

I joined because it is a feminist group, a feminist storytelling group ... and this interests me in general, and the five stories we tell are as well without the clichés, the aggression, and this is important as well. It is a feminism that is not aggressive, that I go on the street to shoot people. And we are trying to raise an awareness and to change the way of thinking but in a mild and an acceptable way to the people. So this was a reason as well why I joined the group.

I asked her what she meant by a feminist group, what feminism is it to her? Her only response was to distance herself from the popular perceptions of feminists as “aggressive, exclusive, and man-hating.” Amna, echoing other members of the group, was not interested in engaging in the feminist debates and the space, energy and tensions these identity and authenticity debates have taken, focusing instead on bringing out the energy in the actual work. Amna then proceeded to talk about the story she wrote and performed. She told me that she does not tell her story or chose the story she wants to tell based on that she is a woman. She tells her story because it is what she chooses to write about , such as her performance in *Qaws Quzah* “ I am telling a story on my body and my story is how I feel.” Emphasizing that her story was not written based on her gender or on feminism. Amna’s story is a personal journey and experience with diabetes and how this affected her as an athlete .

This refusal to be defined underlies the separation of *Al Batt Il Iswed* and *Ana Elhakaya*. The need of *Ana Elhakaya* to define itself, have strict guidelines, felt constraining to the younger members who wanted a space to experiment, and not be squeezed into a particular box. With the January 25, 2011 uprising many pressing issues came to the surface, such as sexual harassment, and groups formed to engage

these such as Opantish. And words such as feminism, women's rights and equality were part of the agenda, everybody was speaking the language. Someone like Amna was part of this moment, deeply affected by it and was part of the youth that rejected the situation they were in, and hence felt that she had a space to try something new.

Likewise at the time. "the role of women in the revolution" was a topic in every second international magazine and newspaper and an often debated topic in the news, in conferences and in interviews. This influenced many young women such as Amna who refused to tell stories of oppression, but rather focus on experiences in her everyday life despite her gender. As she put it, "I tell stories that anyone could go through, man or woman." Even though the group adapted the name "feminist story telling group" similar to *Ana Elhekaya*, *Al Batt Il Iswed* members consciously focus on experimentation, producing their own stories outside of the buzz words and categories that make women's issues visible,

I interviewed further members from the group and asked about the *Ana Elhakaya* lecture on feminism. Doaa told me that she did not feel that the lecture has brought anything new to her, she said it was useful but the outcome was not what we expected, everything said did not present anything new. "I mean sure it was very academic and I do appreciate it but I felt that it had so many rules and everything was very structured, and when it comes to writing stories I do not feel I want to stick to a certain mold while writing, I found it not taking me any further." Another *Al Batt Il Iswed* member reflected:

I mean who does this feminism include, how does one practice it with the different social class in the society. For example the woman who is rich and the wife of the *bawab* [doorman] those are things I think I would have wanted to hear. If we are talking about oppression, how come men cannot be feminist because they did not do the same experience that women did.

For this group member as men do not understand the experiences of women, how can we presume to understand the experiences of another social class that we do not belong to and to speak in their name in the name of feminism. “What do we actually know about those women and how they live their lives and their relationships. We do not.” Reflecting on other such encounters she recalled that she had once been accused of having a disorder in her perception of feminism because she refused to discuss menstruation. She perceived this pressure as a form of oppression that *Ana Elhakaya* was reproducing.

Following the lecture I was told a number of attendees left the group, thinking “this is not me!” Reflecting on *Al Batt Il Iswed* Zeinab noted that, “In our texts we do not have to give a direct message on feminism or what it is or what we reject, but we do try to integrate some aspects of injustice among gender, be man or woman.” With the separation *Al Batt Il Iswed* has taken a step towards recreating and rethinking what they are, what they do and what they want. The 2011 uprising affected a younger generation, rejecting what Reem calls “the rigid and the structured,” seeking to experiment and reclaim new spaces in which they can experiment, think, share and say what they want. The separation permitted *Al Batt Il Iswed* members to get out of a mold, a comfort zone, a pre-designed script, and create a space to rethink the self and rethink the seeing of the self. In other words, taking a break within an ongoing present that has an unknown future. According to Zeinab this is one of the reasons they selected one of the stories of Naguib Mahfouz for one of their workshops. Working through this material allowed *Al Batt Il Iswed* members to critically reflect on the costs of generational scripts.

Fetishizing the so-called “Revolutionary Art”

During the so-called “Arab Spring“ increased attention was given to the cultural productions emerging out of the region. Many artists were invited to exhibit their work abroad, theater directors were called upon to show plays about the revolution, filmmakers who made films on the revolution became very popular. Art events with themes such as “Voices of Resistance“, “Occupy“ and “Art and Revolt“ were taking place in major capitals in the world such as in London, Berlin and Paris.

Artists from Egypt became the new celebrated artists for “breaking boundaries,” “rebellious against injustice” and “calling for democracy!” This art represented (and was marketed as) variously “free,” “revolutionary,” “new,” “different” and “politically charged” and broke the orientalist-metaphors in which art emerging from the Arab region is generally received. Now it became something people “paid money to see!”

The first *Al Batt Il Iswed* workshop I attended at the end of March 2014 featured a conversation about the group and the name they gave themselves. The Odd Duck represents a duck and how it sees itself and how others see it. Through the act of writing and storytelling, the discussion that day, members are transformed, they become conscious of their individuated bodies in the forever changing social domain. Zeinab shared an experience she had at a workshop in London in the spring of 2011. At the workshop she talked about the script she was writing about physical intimacy on a Cairo street. The other workshop participants immediately responded with why she is not writing about “the revolution.” Taken by surprise she responded that she wanted to write her, this, story. One of the organizers that had invited her then asked her directly why she did not write about the 12 days? Zainab was perplexed, she responded “what 12 days???” The organizer responded “the days before Mubarak stepped down.” At that moment Zainab felt like the “odd duck.”

She was told that this is what people want to see and hear, and this is why they will come to the show. She told me that she felt disappointed and sad. They asked her to write something about the revolution and from a woman’s perspective, use those fashionable buzzwords that would sell tickets, “revolution”, “women”, “Arab”, and “Egypt.” The organizers expected, presumed and banked on these categories due to the fact that she is an Egyptian woman who took part in the revolution. Locke (2013, 1) argues that “creativity itself, as process and field, has been reduced to the status of

commodity.“ Zainab was offered this writer’s residency in London to be creative and produce a play script about something she felt was important to her. This was the story of the public kiss. For the English committee that gave her the money to participate in the writer’s residency this did not seem the pressing topic, especially in a time when her country was burning. This would sell tickets, not some story about a boy and a girl who kissed on the street. Zainab was made to feel bad for wanting to tell a silly story, while there were more heroic things for her to talk about. She was asked to produce art that will attract audiences who want to hear about the revolution in Egypt, about those who call for democracy, about people who are willing to die for a cause. Yet, the revolution was not what Zainab wanted to talk about, she did not want to be marketed under the category of “revolution” or “women and revolution.” She did not want to participate in the hegemonic empowerment frameworks in which the question “so, how would you describe the role of women in the revolution?” becomes a must!

Capital has the ability, as Locke (2013, 1) argues “to extend its coverage and to contract the spaces in which non-productive and non-profitable processes may occur.“ The story of the kiss was the story that drove Zainab’s art. The imperative to “sell“ and to open the way for her work to become of “value” was paramount at the workshop. Her story had to change, and in the workshop session with the committee her existence was reduced to that of a commodity that took part in a revolution and now she has to “sell it.”

Chapter Five

Towards a Conclusion

I start this chapter by thinking through a short story taken from a performance by *Bussy* called *Ash ya Wahsh* (You are such a beast!-Stories on Masculinity) as an attempt to contemplate the issues this thesis raised. The performance took place in August 2014, at the peak of the re-consolidation of the state's control of the streets. A curfew was enforced in Cairo following the violent dispersal of the *Rabaa AlAdaweyya*, check points returned like never before on the streets of Cairo. Stories of violence and arrests at the check-points became part of the everyday. Without provocation police men at check points arrested people for no reason, dragged them to police stations where they were questioned, sexually harassed, tortured and in some cases killed. Against this background of the 'new normal' I reflect on one story in *Ash ya Wahsh* told by a young woman performer:

A woman along with her male colleague was stopped at a check point on the street while going returning home from university in the evening. The police man asked for their IDs, harassed the young woman and threatened her male companion. At that moment, the movement on the stage came to a standstill and the girl said "I don't accept the way this person is talking to me." The incident is repeated a second time, and upon being harassed the female university student shouts firmly at him telling him to stop treating her this way

One of the reasons I became interested in storytelling was to understand the capacities stories set in motion. This story squarely fits into how *Bussy* defines itself as "a project intended to empower women and raise awareness about women's issues." I read this story as an attempt by the group show their audiences what empowerment is, how it feels and how it is done. In other words, they are on a mission to guide the audience into how empowerment is embodied and enacted. Yet, given the place and

space and the particular historical moment, as a member of the audience the question that emerged for me was if it really is possible to think of doing what the young woman did in the situation without thinking of the consequences? In other words, what do we make of this strategy seemingly stripped of historical, social and political context?

Bussy's explicit mission is to "challenge Egypt's social boundaries." Yet, the incident depicted in the story is not 'merely 'a social problem, it reflects the tyranny of the state that terrorizes its citizens, locks up its youth and uses systematic violence to discipline population and eliminate protest. Over the last four years there have been many cases of women being beaten up, sexually assaulted and raped by authorities for protesting against sexual harassment that the authorities perpetrated. This story haunted me for a long time. Could I really do something like this? An individual woman confronting the state on her own? Given the saturation of everyday violence that confronted all of us in the streets, circulated in the media and among friends at that historical moment, I would think twice before I would "empower" myself in front of the representatives of the state. As a member of the audience, I am not sure if I felt "empowered." I felt that the moment was surreal. I actually felt afraid to even contemplate such an action. Was I then "disempowered?"

I do not want to be misunderstood. I sympathized with the storyteller. One can read the second rendition of the story as a dream; something one could do in an ideal fantasy world outside of the political present. However, this act of protest, and its easy resolution, that is, stand up and say "not with me you don't" has consequences in the real world, in Egypt but also elsewhere. The easy resolution of the problem in this story in *Ash ya Wahsh* elides, simplifies and conceals the complex world of power we live in. Imagining other worlds, fantasy, is part and parcel of artistic practice. I am not

sure, though, if the work of Bussy can be described as art. The group itself uses the language of “creative means” in speaking of their method. Observing Bussy’s work, interviewing its members, reading their social media, attending their performances I got a sense that the group is on a mission to tell me, as a member of the audience, how things should be done, not giving any space for my imagination to unfold or for me even to think and feel it. As Ranciere (2007:258) reminds us “art is emancipated and emancipating when it renounces the authority of the imposed message, the target audience, and the univocal mode of explicating the world, when, in other words, it stops wanting to emancipate us.” I eventually came to realize that the “possibility” coming out of this situation which the performer enacted on stage, and the “message” that Bussy tries to deliver to its audience, is distorted and illusionary. Do they really understand the society and the political in which this story is situated? Did they really understand what they were doing? I felt they were underestimating the awareness and the intelligence of their audiences. As I argued in chapter 3, *Bussy’s* performances deal with issues at the surface, they do not attempt to go deeper, their performances do not pose questions or give space for the audience to look at different dimensions of the story. What the check-point story left me with was a story from the perspective of the elite, or the powerful mainstream, for only they would dare to “speak up” to authority at check points. For most Egyptians, I contend, the story was not “in time with what’s happening” (Stewart:2007:54). The revolution produced different affects and one of them was what Tripp (2013, 9) called “breaking of the hold of fear on the subject populations.” Or is it I that need another revolution and another Tahrir square to get over my fear of just telling a policeman to fuck off at a check point?

Al Batt Il Iswed’s stories are taken from ordinary daily life experiences and reflect the open ended complexity of the ordinary. I pose the same question as I did

above, what is the significance of these stories? What makes talking about stories from ordinary daily life experiences, the repetitive everydayness, so significant, for after all it is ordinary (*'ady*)? I contend that engaging everydayness, something that happens even during revolution, is important and opens up potentialities. *Al Batt Il Iswed's* multi-layered stories allow us to think of different aspects within a story and relate it to ourselves. Their stories give space for the audience to talk about them from different points of view, to discover different things in them, to begin to imagine. This is the beauty of stories, the space they give us, as an audience, to reflect on how we feel, how we can connect to them, to think something new, and find potential in our sensing of them.

Al Batt Il Iswed defines itself as a feminist group. One of the questions I posed to the group was what does it mean to be part of a feminist group, and how do they define feminism in the first place. One woman said that feminism was a necessary response to patriarchy, “we need it because we need to have something that opposes the social system we are in.” Another member commented that “it is about changing the way we think.” The response of another woman was that “I do not relate to it at all, I really hate labels. I do storytelling because I enjoy it, not because I have a message to give about feminism.” During my interviews when I asked questions about one thing or another, when she felt cornered or did not know how to respond, one of *Al Batt Il Iswed's* member always answered, “because I am a feminist.” I never received a clear answer from my interlocutors on what this thing called feminism is.

In the aftermath of the January 25, 2011 revolution feminism became a nomenclature of the mainstream. A trend, a fashion, everyone was a feminist, and the language of “women’s empowerment” and “women rights” and women are humans too was everywhere. Certainly *Al Batt Il Iswed* was swept up by this trend, even

though they broke away from a group that defined itself as feminist with concrete ideas of what that term means. *Al Batt Il Iswed* is still looking for what it is and is experimenting with it, I find this reflective of the open-ended possibilities and potentialities that characterize the stories and performances of the group. Zainab's refusal to write about heroic women in the Egyptian revolution at her UK writing workshop, instead insisting on writing an ordinary story of a boy and girl who wanted to kiss on the street, is a case in point.

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