

Facebook Bras and #digitalharems: Fantasies of Mimesis and the Transgressions of Aliaa Elmahdy and Amina Sboui

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ABSTRACT *This article presents a horizontal reading of Aliaa Elmahdy's and Amina Sboui's corporeal interventions alongside the efficacy of digital platforms in order to consider how algorithmic and normative protocols related to content filtering on social media amplify certain forms of political communication while prohibiting others. I argue that readings of Elmahdy's and Sboui's bodily politics through the lens of liberal feminism rely on what I call discourses of mimetic networking, where particular mediated events become reterritorialized as part of an archival knowledge of 'Arabness'. This is done through the organization of data via hashtagging and content moderation, and through rhetorics of techno-optimism that mirror 'first contact' narratives which gender, racialize, and flatten complex and fluid engagements with new media in non-US/European contexts. The article concludes with a consideration of how the persistence of their corporeality relays with both normative and programmatic parameters online to make alternative visions of communication possible.*

Keywords: social media, Arab uprisings, nudity, Egypt, Tunisia, gender

Introduction

The massive popular uprisings of 2011 that uprooted four long-standing dictators in the Middle East were, in large part, experienced by audiences in the United States and Europe via mediated events that tended to crystalize around narratives about the liberatory potential of social media.* Among them, the bodily transgressions of Aliaa Elmahdy and Amina Sboui, whose images were rapidly disseminated on a global scale across and through multiple social networking sites, were filtered through a composite of salvationist discourses celebrating the triumph of 'Western' progressivism in the region and the liberation of 'Arab' female sexuality through the use of so-called democratizing technologies. A popular reading of their actions—that proprietary

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*The images discussed in this manuscript can be viewed at the URLs provided in the endnotes.

social networks had given Elmahdy and Sboui their voice in the uniquely patriarchal and repressive context of the Middle East—eclipsed the complexity of each woman’s corporeal interventions. Further complicating their ability to represent themselves were their differing relationships to the organization FEMEN, competing liberal feminist critiques of their bodily protests, the range of responses from celebratory to life-threatening in local contexts, and the overt censorship of their images on the same platforms credited with providing them a space for political and artistic expression.

As culturalist accounts of their ‘titillating’ acts of rebellion proliferated online (Crocker, 2013), more nuanced engagements with Elmahdy’s and Sboui’s particular politics of exposure have situated their actions within emphases on the corporeal form as a corrective to the technological determinism implicit in the ‘Facebook Revolution’ narrative (Kraidy, 2013), as well as critiques of gendered sexual violence in Egypt and Tunisia, including the arbitrary arrest, detention, and assault of political dissidents, and the introduction of new conservative legislation directed at women’s bodies (Hafez, 2014). I wish to broaden this discussion of Elmahdy’s and Sboui’s bodily performances further to consider the interplay between these more mature readings of their actions, and the efficacy of digital platforms in the organization of discourse, visual aesthetics, and material labor. Their interventions have meaningful implications for considering the gendered and racialized dynamics of content filtering and management on social media, and the ways in which algorithmic and normative protocols imbedded in platforms such as Facebook amplify certain forms of political communication while prohibiting others. Particular modes of censorship reveal how the algorithmic management of content on social media disciplines and manages women’s bodies by organizing ambiguous female forms—simultaneously political and artistic, inviting and riposting, provocative, and grotesque—into sexualized and racialized categories of *excess* that must be bureaucratically tracked and policed via multiple layers of digital-material labor made up of ‘vigilant’ users, spambots, and a hidden network of low-wage content moderators tasked with managing these flows. Consequently, political images of gendered bodies become depoliticized through practices of digital archiving and behind-the-scenes content filtering.

Rather than superimpose decontextualized theories of networked communication onto Elmahdy’s and Sboui’s corporeal interventions, or perpetuate an exhausting obsession with what their actions might mean to the development of liberal sensibilities in the so-called Arab world, I’m interested in how the material relations that make their performances possible have relevancy for new media theory and the politics of global communication for, but also beyond, an area-specific focus. As such, this article attempts to bridge theories of mediation and Middle East scholarship in an effort to address long-standing calls for interdisciplinarity in the study of regional politics, and to ‘shift the epistemic grounds’ upon which knowledge within these fields is produced (see Teti, 2007, p. 117). This article also seeks dialogue with a growing literature on the internationalization of the study of race, gender, and the Internet (Franklin, 2003; Koh, 2014; Landzelius, 2006; Nakamura, 2008) through shifting discussions of unequal access to digital technologies exemplified by the term ‘digital divide’ toward a more complex engagement with how the production and organization of digital knowledge reflects racialized and gendered bias (Nakamura & Chow-White, 2011).

Technologized ways of understanding the world have always and continue to inform the ideological organizing principles of US and European interventionism in the region (McClintock, 1995; Shohat & Stam, 2014; Spivak, 1999; Stoler, 1995). Social media operate according to a set of codes that reflect, but also intensify and exceed programmatic and norm-infused beliefs and assumptions about race and gender. The claim here is not that digital media are merely

tools of ‘Western’ corporate and political interests, or that the people using these new platforms are being duped, but rather that certain modes of visibility and knowing are supported by specific ways of organizing data, and that claims about data neutrality elide the way these biases inform the expansion of global communicative platforms and entertainment markets. How Elmahdy’s and Sboui’s bodily interventions have been managed and disciplined online reveal the way these knowledges are inflected in particular modes of computing, and in the idea of a networked cosmopolitanism facilitated by cultural and ethical transferences in and through proprietary social media platforms.

In the following section, I provide some context for Elmahdy’s and Sboui’s 2011 interventions, and how they have been interpreted in both popular media and a selection of academic scholarship. I consider how readings of their actions through the lens of liberal feminism rely on what I call discourses of *mimetic networking*, where contemporary readings of social media use in the Middle East mirror ‘first contact’ narratives that flatten complex and fluid engagements with new media in non-US/European contexts, as well as how particular media events become part of an archival knowledge of ‘Arabness’ through hashtagging. Finally, I argue for a horizontalizing of the body in theorizing how the normative parameters and programmatic functions of social technologies interact to shape the ways that particular bodies are coded within the global spectrum of networked communication.

Fantasies of Mimesis in the Network

In October 2011, 20-year-old Egyptian activist and American University in Cairo communications student Aliaa Elmahdy posted a nude picture of herself on her blog *A rebel’s diary*. The post, titled ‘Nude Art’, featured an otherwise black and white self-portrait of Elmahdy wearing only a pair of thigh high stockings, red shoes, and a red flower in her hair.¹ The image was accompanied by the following text:

Put on trial the artists’ models who posed nude for art schools until the early 1970s, hide the art books and destroy the nude statues of antiquity, then undress and stand before a mirror and burn your bodies that you despise to forever rid yourselves of your sexual hangups before you direct your humiliation and chauvinism and dare to try to deny me my freedom of expression. (Elmahdy, 2011; as cited in Kraidy, 2013)

Elmahdy explained that after her image was removed from Facebook, a friend asked to repost the picture on Twitter (Fahmy, 2011). Within a week the post received 1.5 million hits, making her ‘digital’ transgression one of the most polemical topics to emerge during the contentious lead up to the first parliamentary election held after Mubarak was deposed (Mourad, 2014).

Sixteen months later on 1 March 2013, 19-year-old Amina Sboui, who later said she was inspired by Elmahdy (Namazie, 2014), posted two topless pictures of herself on her Facebook page under the alias Amina Tyler. The first image featured Sboui reading a book with the words ‘My body belongs to me and is not the source of anyone’s honor’ written on her chest in Arabic. The second image depicted Sboui giving the middle finger to the camera with the words ‘Fuck Your Morals’ written across her chest and stomach. While her images were also immediately removed from Facebook, accounts of Sboui’s bodily protest similarly went viral soon after posting to the social networking site.² Approximately three months later, on 19 May, Sboui was arrested on contempt and defamation charges, and faced up to nine years in prison after being accused of spray painting the word ‘FEMEN’ on a cemetery wall next to the main mosque in the Tunisian city of Kairouan, as well as for being in possession of a canister

of pepper spray, which she stated she carried for protection after receiving death threats (Human Rights Watch, 2013; Salek, 2013). Her arrest sparked an international outcry from members and supporters of the Ukrainian-based topless activist group FEMEN.³ Women and men from around the world posted pictures of themselves topless online in protest of a possible extended prison term for Sboui's non-violent acts, and the subsequent piling up of charges that seemed to have no relation to what she had actually been arrested for while awaiting trial, including 'belonging to a criminal organization' and 'undermining public morals' (freeamina.blogspot.com; Human Rights Watch, 2013).⁴ Sboui was released from prison in August 2013.

Journalist Mona Eltahawy (2011) compared Elmahdy's interventions to Mohammed Bouazizi's self-immolation, provocatively referring to her as 'a Molotov cocktail thrown at the Mubarak's in our heads'. Sboui has similarly been credited with 'jumpstarting a whole new level of protest in the Middle East' after three European FEMEN activists traveled to Tunisia and took off their clothing in front of the Palace of Justice on 29 May 2013 to protest her imprisonment (Bouazza & Schemm, 2013; Rosenbaum, 2013). This protest was heralded as the first of its kind in the region, as images of the three young women being forcibly removed from the parameter of the building by an irritated 'mob' of Arab men quickly spread across multiple online news sources and social networking sites.^{5,6}

Underlying these discourses is the presumption that social media has provided people in the region with the capabilities and technologies to empower themselves and alter their political circumstances through participation in networked communities (Castells, 2012; Khondker, 2011). Social change is ascribed to 'wired' women activists and the outcome of flows of information is imagined within the context of what Massad (2007) has elsewhere described as a Western liberatory telos, where markets are seen as the engines of democracy. Extending Massad's insights here, corporations such as Facebook are assumed to be best able to provide the communicative infrastructure for democratic contestation and organization in countries with authoritarian governments and a highly-censored state-dominated media infrastructure.

This framework flattens Elmahdy's and Sboui's actions by reading them as synonymous with the arrival of a global feminist politics of identity in the region, one that relies on narratives of cultural and ethical transference that serve as justifications for both market and military interventionism. These discourses resonate with the problematic collusion between liberal feminism, the 'War on Terror' ethic of saving the homologous 'Arab woman' from depoliticized and culturalized environments of religious and patriarchal oppression, and an emphasis on 'deveiling' in US and European articulations of freedom and emancipation, which marks out and reduces women to their sexuality (Norton, 2013). The unique context for each woman's interventions notwithstanding, the continued reference to ready-made discourses about the poor predicament of women in the Middle East for contextualizing why they chose nudity as a mode of political expression has obscured rather than revealed the pluralism of feminist politics woven into the various iterations of their corporeal performances over time.

I want to argue that techno-utopian narratives about the Facebook and Twitter Revolutions in the Middle East can be read as reflecting a kind of contemporary colonial 'first contact' narrative, where social media as a Western technological innovation reproduces liberal progressive modernity through shared sensory experiences and habits enabled by digital platforms and devices. I refer to this as *mimetic networking*, or the underlying presumption that these particular forms of imitation, contagion, and embodiment happen through quotidian acts of online connectivity. Narratives that reflect this presumption exaggerate both the accomplishments of so-called Western technology and mechanical reproduction at a time when the cyclical excitement following the introduction of a new platform or device becomes routine, and the initial thrill of novel

consumption passes into the realm of mundanity. Vis-à-vis the ‘backward’ Arab mired in custom, tradition, religious conservatism, dictatorial politics, and gender oppression, the ‘Westerner’ (read citizen of the world) can become master of these technological wonders while simultaneously celebrating and clientalizing the subjects of a postcolonial body politic, whose agency is ‘eviscerated as “magic” in frontier rituals of technological supremacy’ (Taussig 1993, p. 208). Taussig sums up this dynamic as ‘the technological substance of civilized identity formation’ (pp. 207–208).

Following this, the relay between the ‘techno-modern’ and the ‘magico-primitive’ (Whitehead & Finnström, 2013, p. 2) informs the dismissal of, for instance, the tactics of Ukraine-based topless activist group FEMEN as irrelevant to real (meaning secular-liberal) feminism, while Elmahdy’s nudity becomes a ‘titillating act of brave rebellion’ in the Muslim world (Crocker, 2013). To the extent that social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Blogger are represented as new global public spheres through which ‘trailblazing’ feminists like Elmahdy and Sboui can further an international feminist agenda in the Arab world, this is in effect the presumed expression of the mysterious power of technology as mimesis performed in the act of networked participation. The gift of social media to the next billion ‘digital natives’ is thus less about impressing these so-called natives than it is about convincing ourselves of the power of Western technological innovation to mold the world as it sees fit.

Consider Howard and Hussain’s (2013) brief yet illustrative sketch of how digital information technologies are thought not only to provide, in their words, ‘opportunities to redress gender disparities in developing communities,’ but also ‘platform[s] for learning about gender politics in Muslim countries’ (p. 63):

Networked information technologies are, at the very least, partly responsible for exposing citizens [in the Muslim world] to liberal cultural values. Certainly some internet users in these countries can be radicalized through their internet use, but many will be sensitized through the internet . . . One of the next steps in researching the impact of digital media in countries with large Muslim communities will be to investigate the overall impact of internet use on tolerance.

In their analysis, the Internet exposes Arabs and Muslims, otherwise presumed intolerant, illiberal, and potentially prone to radicalization, to liberal cultural values assimilated through a mimetic process of contact, for instance through activities performed on social networking platforms. Here, whole populations are conceived as copies that draw power and influence from an originary source, that is, Western technologies assumed to be ontologically linked to liberal cultural values. In Howard and Hussein’s reading, every post, tweet, and hashtag carries this original authenticity, which, as Coombe (1996) has articulated elsewhere, ‘distinguishes the copy by connecting it to an originator and connecting the originator with a moment of consumption’ (p. 205). The imagined political and economic milieu from which these platforms emerge are thought to act like a fingerprint on their users across global networks, regardless of the historical, political, and economic contexts in which they are adapted and utilized.

Within the context I’ve described, Elmahdy and Sboui’s bodies are read as examples *par excellence* of this sensuous imitation, where liberal feminist notions of women’s emancipation seep into identity through networked contact, and are performed through public displays of nudity as a form of ‘deveiling’. The implied realism in photography, as opposed to the presumed subjectivity of language and the interpretation of texts, intensifies the experience of mimesis in the sharing of Elmahdy’s and Sboui’s nude images online. These mimetic exchanges, between online users in the Middle East and Europe or the US, represent a mark of authenticity and

authority that can be traced back to an originary source, that is, an imagined ‘West’ that imbues social media platforms with the ability to link change, resistance, and democratic participation to technological advancement and information access. Even accounts that described Sboui’s and Elmahdy’s actions as epitomizing the dystopia of user-generated content and its tendency to reinforce ‘depraved behavior’ (Mourad, 2014, p. 65) resonate with discourses of mimetic networking in the sustaining assumption that social media produces liberal subjects for good or ill. In both celebratory and cautionary tales, social media is duly conceived in the context of a ‘frictionless mediation of networks’ (Hui & Halpin, 2013, p. 3), where one’s participation leads to either a tech-fueled utopia of freedom and prosperity, or alternatively, incites a rejection of conventional ethics and values.

These discourses also resonate with developmentalist models of progress in which only nodes in the network can acquire global currency, both materially and symbolically. To the extent that social networks are thought of as tools for creating and extending liberal sensibilities within a global community of users, the normative structures and algorithmic languages that frame the parameters of communication on these sites also shape what this new cosmopolitan citizenry can be, who is on the outside, and who is on the inside as these platforms are increasingly adopted as sites for trans-communicative politics. One effect of this is that everything that is not a node in the network becomes invisible or unintelligible, or what Mejiias (2013) refers to as ‘nodocentrism’. As these platforms are increasingly used for mapping how images, ideas, and other forms of knowledge travel, they produce digital archives through, for instance, ‘top tweets’ on Twitter that function as ranking systems of discourse. As Mejiias (2013) has noted about digital archiving on social media more generally, ‘algorithms serve as allegories of social acts that give new meaning and content to those social activities in the process’ (p. 47). Specifically, algorithmically-generated archives of knowledge about Sboui and Elmahdy operationalize decisions about the parameters and content of online discourse related to their corporeal interventions.

#digitalharems and Algorithmic Governmentality

Algorithms transform social activities into something that can be read and performed on the network, for instance ‘liking’ something in ‘real life’, ‘sharing’ a photograph on a blog, or bracketing conversations through hashtagging. As a form of algorithmic governmentality, these processes functionally create modes of digital organization and archiving that point to a politics of knowledge, which shapes the parameters of online communication through systems of coding and data organization. While Elmahdy’s and Sboui’s transgressions were media *events* in 2011, in their current iteration they speak to a politics of the archive, where algorithms are not neutral in their organization of data (even if they are automated and impersonal) but rather can and often do resonate with colonial archives of knowledge in how they arrange online content.

Consider for instance the shifting content and frequency of posts surrounding the now popularized #FreeAmina hashtag. A survey of Twitter content archived in 2013 under this hashtag depicts mostly informational commentary showing support for Sboui, including videos of her protests, retweets of self-produced video commentary by Sboui, and news updates from primarily French and Italian presses detailing her legal situation. In 2014, far fewer posts were produced using the hashtag, but #FreeAmina had brief resuscitations with users referencing articles and images related to support for the organization FEMEN. As a digital archive for and about Amina Sboui, #FreeAmina reveals a persistently limited framework for interpreting

her corporeal engagements through the European topless group's activities, despite Sboui later distancing herself from FEMEN and denouncing its 'Topless Jihad' protests as Islamophobic (Hamadi, 2013). The Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris, France on 7 January 2015 prompted another resurgence of #FreeAmina hashtags as Twitter users reposted illustrations related to Sboui that had been previously published by one of the magazine's illustrators Renald Luzier. In one image, Luzier has drawn a conservatively dressed Muslim couple, the male counterpart of which is too consumed by a licentious interest in FEMEN's nude agitators to notice that his partner is also baring her breasts in support of FEMEN's fight against women's oppression.⁷ As the image and related text show, Sboui's corporeal transgressions are reterritorialized through the hashtag as part of the 'Je Suis Charlie' meme following the attacks on the magazine's staff. One sees a related aesthetic in another series of images archived under the #FreeAmina hashtag featuring women who presumably wear the burqa in their public life exposing their breasts while covering their faces in support of Amina.^{8,9}

I draw attention to these images in order to highlight how the #FreeAmina hashtag is captured by the digital equivalent of a colonial image archive, where an intense preoccupation with veiling persists within structures of perception and visual/data arrangements. These photographs resonate with genres of colonial photography similar to those depicted in Malek Alloula's *Colonial Harem* (1986), however with the presumption that the technological and political disparities that defined early-twentieth-century colonial photographs of Arab women have been transcended through the production and sharing of images by willing subjects.¹⁰ This is not to say that such images can only ever be Orientalist, nor do I wish to detract from the agency of the women posting the images online, whomever and wherever they are. Still, their digital reproducibility expresses particular modes of expedition and a plasticity of meaning as they travel across and through digital platforms, because the originary authors of these images cannot control how they are used or what archives they become a part of. The ownership of the image is captured by hashtags that organize them into archives of meaning through processes of algorithmic intervention.

We should analyze these archives without necessarily having to make declarative statements about the authenticity or original intentionality of the image creators. Questions about whether or not the women who posted these images are actually Arab or Muslim, if they are harbingers of an emerging subversive current within socially or religiously conservative communities, or if they point to some new affinity between Islam and liberal feminism, are impossible to answer credibly and also endorse narrow interpretations of gendered agency, religious practices and meaning, and mediation. Rather what I am interested in is how these images become part of a dedifferentiated non-geography that functions to reproduce a new kind of colonial harem in the digital age. In other words, by examining the politics of the archive itself, rather than what the producer of the image may or may not have intended the image to do, we can explore the larger dispositif of Orientalism informing the organization of the archive without making claims that there is something intrinsic about the images themselves that are Orientalist.

Digital archives that reify the de veiled body serve as visual economies meant to both titillate and affirm particular kinds of feminist reforms in recognizable Others, who are, as Bhabha (1984) argues in his discussion of colonial mimicry, 'subject[s] of a difference that [are] almost the same, but not quite' (p. 126). While it is true that the eroticization of 'Arabness' animates the promiscuity of these images online, this difference also produces excesses that resist easy cooptations and bring a series of frictions to light that more utopic visions of networked communication tend to obscure. For instance, Elmahdy's joint naked protest in 2014

featuring herself and another FEMEN activist menstrating and defecating on the Islamic State (IS) flag received comparatively less attention in the international media than her original 2011 Blogger post. This is, in part, because of the unsettling tableau of the different affective registers produced within the image, which did not lend itself to easy appropriations by ‘girl power’ narratives nor colonial-pornographic desires. The combination of the IS flag, feces, smeared menstrual blood, the partial hijab, breasts, buttocks, and Elmahdy’s direct visual engagement with the consumer of the image comes together in an uneasy combination of confrontation, subversion, violence, stimulation, Orientalism, and aversion.¹¹ It is emancipatory to bleed and defecate on the IS flag in protest of ‘religion and rape’ as the image’s accompanying statement suggests? What kind of autonomy does the image assert? What otherwise political yet obscured statements does the image make perceptible? The image is subversive not because of any affinity with a liberal or internationalist form of feminist expression, but rather because it points to the limits of its commodification. Images like this and others that circulate with far less intensity in the network (I would include here images of Sboui on Facebook in direct confrontations with French police during protests) point to an excess beyond not only global feminist cooptations of these ‘naked bloggers’ but also an excess beyond the disciplining apparatus of the network itself. It is a deformation of mimicry that ruptures dominant visual and discursive regimes, inspiring an uncertainty that, to quote Bhabha (1984), reflects both resemblance and menace.

The image also reveals connections between algorithmic archiving and a loss of agency in the ability to represent one’s self in the context of particular technological paradigms, where data must be organized into something that is consumable to large numbers of users. The techno-optimist presumption that because we have direct access to the modes of production through social media, as opposed to having to speak through the corporate bureaucracies of major media outlets, assumes that communication has become democratized as a result. However, having direct access to the mode of production does not address the problem of hegemony, and the power structures that shape what we can see, hear and read. In other words, the problem of whether the ‘subaltern can Tweet’ (Priego, 2011) is not about dismissing what Sboui or Elmahdy say, affirm or deny, but is precisely about how whether or not the subaltern can speak is still a relevant one in the context of so-called democratizing technologies.

Having direct access to the modes of production doesn’t make the problems of ‘speaking’ any easier. Whereas the problem of the native informant is very much the result of major corporations publishing only what is in their economic and political interests, looking at the racialized and gendered dynamics of the digital archive shows that producers of content do not always control or steer their own resonance, as that resonance is often directed by hegemonic discourses and interests in other ways. Whether or not something goes viral, gets retweeted, or shared is no more or less democratic than earlier forms of mass communication—in fact, quite the opposite. We have yet to effectively map the techniques of knowledge production in new media, and subsequently we know quite little about how hegemony reproduces itself through the networks and nodes of proprietary social media platforms. One does not need to be for or against the tactic of nudity as protest to engage the problematic of hegemonic communication. This is not to say that there is no difference between user-generated content and content generated by multinational media corporations, but instead it is to say that neither steps out of relations of power, and therefore the tactics and technique of resistance will dwell in the architectures and algorithms of these new media.

'You Have to Put On Your Facebook Bra'

To the extent that the range of individual experience and performance are defined and conditioned through digital communicative platforms, what we think of as 'humanness' is already implicated in its relationship to technology (Hookway, 2014, p. 1). Mapping the materiality of digital mediation in ElMahdy's and Sboui's interventions points to an assemblage of forces and a surface of inscriptions of social codes, technological devices, biological materials, and algorithmic organization that constitute the production and dissemination of these images. As such, their actions provoke several ways of conceiving of new kinds of gendered politics and global chains of communication and exploitation within the experimental spaces of digital activism. Digital forays into the use of nudity by these women as a form of protest in and about contemporary politics do not happen in a disembodied virtual reality, but rather are the effects of particular political experiments. It is important to consider these dynamics so we are not left with an outmoded binaristic model of virtual/real and body/machine that ignore these crossings between the biological and the digital realms (Balsamo, 1995; Braidotti, 2013; Hayles, 1999).

One way to think about these engagements is to consider how Elmahdy and Sboui both continue to push the boundaries of Facebook's 'Community Standards' policy by using the platform for their nude activism despite its selective refusal to allow images of women's breasts, nipples and full nudity on the site. Both Elmahdy and Sboui have on numerous occasions expressed their frustration with the removal of their images from Facebook (Fahmy, 2011). It is in fact quite difficult to find unaltered images of Sboui's and Elmahdy's bodies online, as their publication generally requires they be truncated above the breast or that their nipples be pixelated, blacked out or deformed in some way.

Facebook's Community Standards are, according to the website, designed and enforced to 'balance the needs and interests of a global population' (Facebook.com). Details of the company's policy on this issue are covered under the section 'Nudity and Pornography', where a brief and ambiguous mention of limitations on the display of nudity on the site follows another similarly brief mention of the company's strict policy against pornographic content and explicit sexual content involving minors. Facebook's privacy policies are complex and non-transparent in terms of how data are collected and used, and the platform tends to marginalize certain political views and tactics, in this instance the use of nudity as a form of political expression. Part of the reason for this is that potentially controversial content can alienate or incite users, and thus is bad for business (Fuchs, 2013, p. 213). With regard to political nudity, Facebook's user agreements elicit certain proscriptive controls which are not particularly novel in that public nudity is also seen as a marginal and often controversial political act. What is also important is how the performance of this social norm is translated into data structures and symbolic logics within the programmatic language of the software. For instance, Blogger, one of the few social networking sites where users can view Elmahdy's unaltered images, describes itself as 'a free service for communication, self-expression and freedom of speech' (Blogger.com). Here 'free speech' is algorithmically reflected in the blog's source code, which places Elmahdy's images behind a mature content interstitial requiring her viewers to acknowledge what they are about to view is considered 'only suitable for adults'.

In Chun's critique of Baudrillard's argument that contemporary forms of communication leave all things 'immediately transparent, visible, [and] exposed' (as cited in Chun, 2004, p. 27), she explains the false conflation of information and transparency. Information for Chun is a form of computation; computers must generate information by sending and receiving light pulses in order to create what they are programmed to refer to. Hence computers are not

‘transparency machines’ that simply reflect some original referent, whether text or an image, but must actively create information so that it is readable to human beings (p. 27). Software, like ideology, perpetuates certain notions of seeing as knowing (p. 27). In other words, software through its programmatic languages—which themselves are the product of gendered systems of command and control—discipline programmers and users in such a way that the invisible systems of transcoding and algorithmic protocols create a system of visibility that obscures the vastly complex processes and languages that produce what we see as simply information (pp. 27–28). For Chun, software is a ‘functional analog’ to ideology because the choices that operating systems offer limit the set of actions that are imaginable or visible: ‘software and ideology fit each other perfectly because both try to map the material effects of the immaterial and to posit the immaterial through visible cues’ (p. 43).

Chun’s argument allows us to see how ElMahdy’s and Sboui’s corporeal politics point to an allegorical relationship between software and ideology in the managing of mature content on Blogger and Facebook. With the full expression of their statements promptly erased or altered, their confrontations with these platforms become the terrain for constituting community norms on a global scale. When operating systems determine appropriate content on the network, Sboui’s and ElMahdy’s bodies become a technical coding problem in that they must either be removed or labeled ‘mature’ along with pornographic content, rather than as sites for public contestation over what forms of protest are appropriate and how those forms of protest can be mediated.

I want to emphasize here how this ethos is transposed as *ideology through software* to users everywhere in ways that seem naturalized in their invisibility, despite women having developed a broad range of narratives and practices about bodily display and its meanings and purposes. For those who have a very different conceptualization of how bodies can be used expressively, politically or otherwise, these negotiations become a matter of algorithmic protocol based on a series of abstractions about the proper place of the gendered body for public consumption. Thus Sboui, ElMahdy, and those who interact with them or their images on social media are appropriated into a form of participation where community standards are determined by the disciplinary parameters of the platform unilaterally. Any ‘democratic’ appeal to a different set of community standards is ultimately decided by any combination of spambots, the platform’s content management team, or its cadre of outsourced low-wage content moderators.

Still, as Galloway (2006) notes, there are tensions between the operations of code and attempts to make visible or operable alternative social expressions on a computer. Chun similarly argues that software has both the capacity to reveal and conceal, and that this dual action gives it the ability to break from the analogy of software as ideology (p. 319). At the site of the interface, the aggregation of ideas and knowledge is combined in a particular location, where users test the expression of these ideas in relays between Facebook’s normative and programmatic parameters. This interchange facilitates particular forms of knowledge and expression by producing a range of ‘partially transformable rules, resources, tools and behaviors’ (Fuller & Goffey, 2012, p. 92). For example, Sboui’s public Facebook profile image posted 1 May 2014 shows her being arrested by two French police officers; one is behind her holding her wrist, and the officer in front appears to be grabbing her other hand to prevent her from making a peace sign. It is clear that Amina is topless in the image, but because her breasts are covered in paint, the image falls within Facebook’s content guidelines, evidenced by the fact that it was not removed from the site.

Facebook has come up against criticism for its anti-breast policies, in particular for banning images of breastfeeding mothers while alternatively being slow to address content promoting gender-based hate speech and violence against women (Hern, 2013). The company has since moderated its policy on breastfeeding in part due to the increasing popularity of the

#freethenipple campaign, which Sboui has been an active supporter of, by allowing moderators more leeway in ‘using common sense’ to determine whether or not a breastfeeding photo is considered a content violation (Matyszczyk, 2014). This demonstrates how, as Raessens (2006) argues, ‘users are not only caught in the system but also appropriate and domesticate [. . .] technologies’ (p. 54). In another example of testing and play at the interface between permissible and impermissible content, Elmahdy posted a picture to her public profile taken during an interview with French *Elle* published in December 2013. The photograph features Elmahdy in a similar state of undress to her iconic image, except she is wearing a black skirt and standing outside in the snow (Trétiack, 2013). Elmahdy reposted to her Facebook account an altered version of the image with the blue Facebook logo banner across her breasts.¹² As one commenter chastised, ‘you have to wear your Facebook bra’. In response, another user posted a picture of himself shirtless in the comments section of the photo wearing his own ‘Facebook bra’ over his chest with the OOs removed to reveal his nipples.¹³ Whether or not the photo was posted as a sympathetic jibe against Facebook’s gendered nudity policy, or as a taunting antic, it points to several layers of gendered forms of discipline at the site of the interface, as well as the gendered politics of content moderation. While social media conglomerates are still considered quasi-feminists despite their anti-feminist conflation of nudity and pornography, these mediations reveal symbolic systems and ideological constructions operative below the screen.

Conclusion

ElMahdy’s and Sboui’s corporeal transgressions, as well as the field of distributive agency entangled in their on/offline activities have important implications for thinking about how the technological platforms of social networking sites shape formations of sociality, and mediate the ambiguous relationship between proprietary networks, technological interventions, algorithms, postcolonial sexualities, nationality, and revolt. Elmahdy’s and Sboui’s interventions have been used to reproduce narratives about the triumph of Western liberal progressivism and Arab female sexual liberation, even as these discourses come into tension with their specific politics of exposure. By broadening the analytic focus of their nude activism to also consider the technological agencies and archives at work in the mediation of their bodies, I have tried to engage possible new spaces for thinking about emerging problematics in digital politics and digital activism that we might encounter and seek to contend with. To the extent that social media platforms perpetuate a networked logic of sociality, these technological mediations are changing how and what we think about ‘human’ community. Elmahdy’s and Sboui’s nudity speaks to the presumption of the networked subject as the basis for a connected global cosmopolitan citizenry, and how this occludes or distorts the particularities of digital politics as if participation is all that is required. The disciplining and managing of their bodies in the spaces of informatics point to channels of content excess that their bodies travel in, which can be traced to expose new centers of exploitation with real consequences for real bodies, but also potential new avenues for pluralist feminist politics that should be engaged on their own terms.

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Notes

- 1 Image: Aliaa Elmahdy from her blog 'A Rebel's Diary'. Retrieved from http://arebelsdiary.blogspot.com/2011/10/nude-art_2515.html.
- 2 Image: Amina Sboui from The New Yorker. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/1kjuTs>.
- 3 Image: 'Freedom and dignity for Amina'. freeamina.blogspot.com. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/1leaef1>.
- 4 Image: Women protestors supporting Amina Sboui. FEMEN France on Twitter. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/1SCAiM55>.
- 5 Image: FEMEN members protest Sboui's arrest in Tunisia on 29 May 2013. European Press Agency. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/1WKCAJC>.
- 6 Image: FEMEN members protest Sboui's arrest in Tunisia on 29 May 2013. European Press Agency. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/1XYvUKb>.
- 7 Image: Illustration by Renard Renald Luzier from #freeamina on Twitter. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/1PjKqe6>.
- 8 Image: Woman with face covering from Bahrain protests Sboui's arrest on Twitter. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/1kjuIXZ>.
- 9 Image: Woman with face covering protests Sboui's arrest on Twitter. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/1MRavB1>.
- 10 Image: Early 20th century picture postcard of Algerian woman featured in Malek Alloula's The Colonial Harem. Retrieved from <http://veil.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/yachmak.jpg>.
- 11 Image: Aliaa Elmahdy and FEMEN defile the ISIS flag. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/1iMAyLv>.
- 12 Image: Elmahdy alters a photograph by Guillaume Herbaut for Elle France by placing a Facebook banner over her breasts. Retrieved from <http://on.fb.me/1QnXRZI>.
- 13 Image: A commenter on Elmahdy's Facebook page posts his own version of the doctored image. Retrieved from <http://on.fb.me/1NDuFx4>.

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