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Duality in Bouazizi:
Appraising the Contradiction

Alec Jacobson

2011

We know that Mohammed Bouazizi lived in Sidi Bouzid and that he was often the sole income for a poor family. We know that he sold fruit from a cart and that, while vending on December 17th, 2010, he had an altercation with the police, and later doused himself in flammable liquid in front of the municipal offices and struck a match. There are some who know more – childhood friends, neighbors, customers, cousins – who knew the man and interacted with him over the course of his relatively short life. But for us, the general public of the World, to move beyond these spare details is to move into the realm of things-we-are-told, of facts intuited or debatable, because we never met Mohammed Bouazizi, did not see the confrontation on the 17th and were generally unaware that he existed until perhaps the first days of January 2011.

Because protests followed his self-immolation and because those demonstrations spread to topple one de facto dictator and then another, and shake the World during the yet unresolved Arab Spring, we know Mohammed Bouazizi's name and these few things about him and have heard stories that delve deeper. Without ever suffering an interview, writing an editorial or organizing covert subversive meetings of minds, he was rocketed to celebrity status as an individual synonymous with revolution. So conveniently poetic, he was the spark that started the blaze. For this, he is apparently celebrated: protesters carried photographs of him as they took to the streets, Facebook groups, some massive, are dedicated to his memory, squares and roads – even one in France – are expected to be named after him and a film is set to be made about his life. And yet, in the suburbs of Tunis, even those who took to the streets themselves are quick to debase the man who seems to

be treated elsewhere as a hero. It would be so easy to celebrate Bouazizi, but the Tunisians with whom I've spoken prefer to cast aside the man who could be the figurehead of their success.

There is a disconnect between the public narratives of Bouazizi – in print, across the airwaves and through the Internet - and what is felt towards him. Mass media and public presentations of the story consistently paint extraordinary pictures, but private discourse reveals an outright contradiction. I understand this as indicative of another, though subtler, separation that occurred when Bouazizi set the flame to his body. From the perspective all but those in close proximity, the Sidi Bouzid resident transitioned from not existing to hagiography without ever appearing as a knowable or approachable man. Never speaking to the public consciousness but for a brief, superheated moment witnessed by only a handful, Bouazizi's carte blanche life was captured and rewritten into a thing other than the man: claimed by protesters, manipulated by Ben Ali and spread through various media without a real reference to the person. Thus, there this is a man named Mohammed Bouazizi and an idea called, and so well known, by the same name, fluid and based in unconfirmable truth. The people of La Marsa, where I did my fieldwork, like others, including members of the international press, outside the small town in the center of the country, interacted only with the later. The content of the concept came from outside Bouazizi - from others' frustrations and interpretations that were celebrated in the most important way on January 14th – but was read backwards by those farthest from the source to the nexus of visible and audible revolution. If it seems that those within Tunisia celebrate his life, it is

due to the external construction of his celebrity in terms of past revolutionary frameworks. Though Mohammed Bouazizi was born to and mourned by a mother and a family – though he was a man – the fact of his humanity is superseded on the level of mass public interactions by the multitude of interpretations of his life and deeds in the context of national and international revolutionary discourse. At the same time, this non-humanity, as an airy and ungrounded abstract, serves as the grounds for his summary rejection on the level of conversation over coffee. For the sake of a cohesive narrative and on the level of the symbolic, Bouazizi plays a role as shorthand, but that falls apart on the level of the specific.

I here undertake to explain the construction, manipulation and ultimate rejection of the conceptual Bouazizi in the consciousness of Tunisians. My interviews are limited to residents of La Marsa and the surrounding suburbs, but I will draw also on more public narratives so that the two may inform each other to unpack and ultimately resolve the apparent contradiction between private and public perception. I will begin by describing the conversations, formal and informal, I've carried out on the subject of Bouazizi, opening this study with the reality of the negative opinions of the man. From there, I will return to the nexus of all narratives – the immolatory act – and then trace the lines of story back to the present to thickly describe the acquired perceived role of Mohammed Bouazizi in the Jasmine Revolution and how that has shaped memories – specifically the lack of memorial desire – related to him.

Reflections on Bouazizi

“It is up to God to decide whether or not he is a martyr. That is all I will say.”

–Ahmed, 21

“He’s just a man.” This statement, verbatim, paraphrased or parallel, began almost every conversation about Bouazizi. My expectation had been an outpouring of at least moderate amusement, a wink or a nod in the direction of his celebrity, an implication of his heroism, but instead I was made to understand that he played no real role in the Revolution. When I asked in the corner café, the high school kids looked around and two rolled up their sleeves to show me little scars from their action in the streets on the 14th of January. They puffed up and laughed about police violence and snipers. Someone asserted that I surely wanted to study someone else. Mohammed Bouazizi was not the Revolution, nor was he the cause, surely I wanted to talk with people who had actually participated in the protests.

Issam, 23, diploma-ed and jobless, turned to me and laid out the roots of discontent – poverty, joblessness, lack of dignity, corruption – using himself as an example, “my dad died and left me with my mom, face to face with this difficult life and my history resembles other stories.” Another day and a different string of questions, and he moved into metaphor, describing Bouazizi as “the title of the story” of the Revolution, and the underlying and longer lasting social problems as the body of the piece. “Bouazizi was one man,” he said, “How could he start a Revolution alone?” Again and again, Issam returned to his employment trouble: a string of unimpressive and demeaning jobs held briefly, and a dream to teach French. Life for him and for countless Tunisian youth in what is becoming a lost

generation is lived “as in hell.” One day, when he felt that he could not make himself any clearer, he sent me to his high school philosophy professor.

Bouazizi is no more a hero for Chokre and his colleague Taib than for their ex-student. Neither has extravagant means, but both are well established in their work and took a more distanced position in our dialogue: intellectuals removed, if only a step, from the crowds in the streets. Together, they described the undignified life lived in recent years, wrapping poverty, corruption and joblessness into a single bundle of the Tunisian condition. Bouazizi fit the bill, but hardly more than any of his neighbors. Thus “uncultivated,” “uneducated,” “not political,” and without a message in addition to his lack of a truly outrageous history, he was in no place to make a statement that could be interpreted as a meaningful protest. Beyond that, Chokre explained that, given the materialism of Tunisians or their interest in only “the things close to them,” the people of Sidi Bouzid could not have taken their grievances to the gates of the government for any reason but the grievances themselves. Those who protested would not have done so if they weren’t thinking about it already and wouldn’t have started if they didn’t see their action as benefiting themselves. As Chokre sought to ground his point in the lust for cars, houses and beautiful women epitomized by the Trabelsi family, I was reminded of a passage in Triste Tropiques (Levi-Strauss, 1955).

A Brazilian student returned to me in tears after his first travels in France:

Paris had seemed dirty to him, with its blackened *bâtiments*. The

whiteness and cleanliness [*propreté*] were the sole criterion at his disposition to judge a city (105).

“Like throwing matches in the woods,” said Fawzi, a young elementary school English teacher. Bouazizi’s act became important by inevitable chance, and that does not make the man important. Without a manifest plan, a goal, a dream to be made a reality, there is no hero according to Fawzi. Einstein is a hero, and Abraham Lincoln, Lenin is a revolutionary: these are the sorts of men that should be honored. “In fact,” he said, “I am not convinced by this Revolution. It is more like an uprising.” Though he does not deny the reality of Ben Ali’s departure or the correlation between Bouazizi and the manifest existence of rebellion, he does question the value and the validity of such events in the absence of known guiding principles. “People need heroes,” he said, telling me the story of a friend who put his education on hold to become a lifeguard: hearing the tale of a rescued girl whose wealthy family paid a handsome reward, this friend let the hope of such serendipity dominate his life. This is to say that a heroism was foisted upon Bouazizi that does not fit: the reality of his act, judged not on the basis of its own morality but rather upon the fact of its telling, is subsumed by the underlying desires for personal gain. This is not a true label of the heroic, but a means convenient interpretation to harness his chance fame towards the ends of demonstrating one’s own unhappiness.

Dalenda, a French teacher at the same school, finds heroes in the everyday world. Teachers, firefighters and, generally, those that consciously help others – combating the grandiose or the mundane – without a thought of recompense are all

heroes. “If [Bouazizi] had found a way to get out of his situation” then he would have been a hero, but instead he committed suicide, an act “*strictment interdit par la religion.*” Dalenda is not particularly religious herself, rather her point is that everyone suffers and “feels the pain of the fire at his feet.” Bouazizi was unheard in his pleas, but he might have gone elsewhere to “fight his case.” When her own career was threatened by a disgruntled and fowl-mouthed classroom inspector, Dalenda walked out in what she considers to be her own little revolution, leaving to explore education in America until her colleagues begged her to return. “Bouazizi is a Tunisian like me,” she said, demonstrating that he too might have found a solution to share a message, rather taking the easy way out. Yet, she told me, given the power of “regionalism” – the bond between neighbors – it is not surprising that his suicide happened turned into protests in Sidi Bouzid, as discontent had long been brewing and would have spilled out even without his act.

The sum total of these conversations and others is the rejection of the importance of Bouazizi based upon his lack of intentionality, the long-standing, underlying social and economic situation in the country, and the importance of individualism and the power of a unified whole to the Revolution. The conditions for uprising existed, everyone felt a pain, and action would have been taken somehow regardless of Bouazizi. To give the man more credit than that is to distract from the multitude of voices that came together during the course of a month to oust Ben Ali.

Act and React

The Act

Though accounts of the 17th vary in teleology and dramatization of the events, there is a core set of acts that are universally accepted. The Bouazizi family lived in a rented house in a poor town in a depressed region that suffers from a chronic lack of employment. Mohammed was the oldest child and sole provider to his mother and siblings, earning a their living by selling fruits from a from a cart, almost certainly without a permit. Such modes of living are somewhat common and more or less tolerated, though it is agreed that tensions with the police are an inevitable part of the trade, as it is, after all, their job to enact the law of the land. Adding to the tenuous relationship between vendors and cops, and associated with the lax and fluid enforcement of the law, was a pattern of graft: a sort of trade-off and product of the police looking the other way.

On the now-well-know day, Bouazizi entered into some sort of interaction with the town's police. The specifics of the exchange are lost to hagiography, but it is usually held that the cops tried to take Bouazizi's scales and that he resisted. They may also have taken some of his fruit. A female cop may have taken charge of the incident, may have insulted Bouazizi's family and may have spat at the vendor. He may have grabbed her breast and may have slung his own obscenities. What supposedly certain is that female officer eventually slapped Mohammed. Agitated, Bouazizi went to the Town's municipal offices to register a formal complaint, but was unheeded. He walked out of the building, found some inflammable fluid and struck a match. It is said that it took a significant amount of time to find a working

extinguisher and to calm the flames. It is said that it took at least an hour for an ambulance to arrive. Regardless of these details, it is clear that a crowd was drawn by the commotion. Later that day, Bouazizi's cousin uploaded the first cell phone videos of the Revolution to Facebook depicting the manifestations that ensued. Bouazizi died on January 4th.

Self-Immolation

Bouazizi's act was by no means unprecedented, and so I think it important to its understanding that we start by looking at the phenomenon of suicide by self-immolation more broadly. This particular mode of suicide is not especially common globally, but has been documented as being particularly prevalent amongst young Muslim women in Middle Eastern and Central Asian countries, specifically Iran, Tajikistan, Pakistan and Uzbekistan (Campbell and Guiao 2004:783). Though generally attributed to women's reactions to their lack of agency within such societies, the specific rationale is thought to fall into two approximate categories: 1) as a "protest" against the social conditions of discrimination in which "such women have no opportunity for self-realization either in the professional sphere (a job outside the home) or in the socially normative sphere (as wife and mother)" (Khushkadamova 2010:83), and 2) as a preferable alternative to a life of "domestic violence and suffering" (781). In the former case, death is not necessarily the goal of the immolation, which is often performed in the presence of others in hopes of being rescued or of inflicting guilt upon the oppressive actors (781). Those who choose this form of suicide rarely die immediately, but rather linger on for days or weeks of

agony during which their pain, in the form of ghastly wounds, is clearly manifest to all who look on.

The patients are severely ill with multisystem complications and treatments. They are almost uniformly intubated, delirious for long periods, in pain or sedated from analgesia, and unable to contribute history. Frequent operative procedures and postoperative recoveries are to be expected, even as the patient's mental status clears. Having more than 15 uninterrupted minutes is almost impossible because of constant needs for tub treatments, physical therapy, respiratory therapy, radiographs, nursing care, and dressing changes (Antonowicz, et al 1997:53).

Thus, those who are subjected to witnessing self-immolation are not only assailed by the initial violence of an act far beyond the normal bounds of human experience, but also privy to the wrenching decline of one familiar yet so transformed by their own action.

The sheer force of gruesomeness – not only willingness but also desire to char one's own flesh and the results therein – demands explanation. The statistics on female self-immolation are considered to wildly underestimate the actual occurrence, as family members are reticent to hospitalize the immolees and, even when compelled, often chalk the injuries up to cooking accidents (Campbell and Guiao 2004:788). Knowing the intention of the act, the families prefer to keep the story to themselves so as not to open the door to the knowing glares of doctors and the public criticism, if veiled and indirect in the form of gossip, that would surely follow. In reviewing the news coverage of a rash of self-immolations in Tajikistan, Khushkadamova relates the tendency to cite “the names of the guilty people, for example, a brother, a husband, a team leader, or others who had brought the women to such a state” (2010:77). To accept the act as it was presented, to allow it to

achieve its goal, is to bring the poignant shame of peeling flesh and constantly replenished gauze pads. Society and its members need an explanation for such violence and so drive to the obvious roots in the immediately present, assigning someone to stand opposite the “victim.”

Though Bouazizi does not fit into exactly the same profile, his act can be analyzed as analogous. Important to understanding the women’s suicides seems to be the fact of their oppression. It is explained in light of their situation as women in a strictly Muslim and patriarchal society (Campbell and Guiao 2004), but what is stressed is their lack of agency: specifically their inability to realize their social or economic potential, and to exert any significant degree of liberty. Bouazizi was neither a woman nor a resident of Central Asia, but was subject to a distinct form of oppression. Poor and performing demeaning work in a liminal field, the profits of which – whether they cross the fine line between failure and success – are contingent on the whims and moods of the police, Bouazizi lived a tenuous life. Regardless of how reports paint the grim details of the family, it is clear that they lived on the fringes of society and, like the poor the world over, lived the limited freedom of their country on a restricted scale. Thus, Mohammed’s story jives easily with the generalities of the profile.

To extend this general into a particular it is important to recognize the role of emasculation in the subtext. Living such a life of poverty is itself, by virtue of delimitation, inherently of lesser humanity. Unable to enact all degrees of liberty afforded to him due to lack of stable and above-board income, Bouazizi was

positioned as a sort of sub-class. The liminality of a life based on whim degrades the actor generally, but this case extends beyond that simple and inherent debasement. Stressed in all accounts is the fact that the female police officer slapped Bouazizi. Whether or not she also insulted him or he her, this alone demonstrates his subjugation to the feminine. Though Tunisian society is generally considered relatively accepting of women's rights and though the nation has consistently been on the forefront of related legislation, "ingrained attitudes die hard" (Boussedra, *Gender and Women in Tunisia*, 2011). A slap from any source would have put Bouazizi's manliness into question, but when carried out by a woman it represented an absolute destruction of his masculinity in the eyes of those who witnessed the act, to his mother (personal interview 2011) and, perhaps to Mohamed himself. Though it is impossible to know what he thought as he the match caught flame, this apparent emasculation compliments the general oppression, building a case to analyze this immolation in the context of the other, better documented if less celebrated, cases of dire reactions to lacking agency. Specifically, the degree to which the female suicides are held to influence public emotion, even beyond immediate family, may offer a framework for explaining Bouazizi's celebrity.

Protest Suicide

Protest suicide attempts to draw the attention of others to something that, in the suicide's perception, constitutes a wrong of moral, political, or economic dimension, a wrong that affects the lives of many. If a protest suicide were to reach its ideal goal, attention would initiate action that, ultimately, would right the wrong (Androlio 2006:102).

Androlio here constructs a subcategory of suicide, the focus of which is the act of protesting. This implies that the other immolatory acts labeled, previously as “protests,” are not in fact geared towards this goal or that they are not true acts of protest. Distinguishing Androlio’s category is a measure of intentionality and publicity, both of which fall under the general emphasis on the presence of a third party. Where other suicides are intended to evoke guilt within their tormentor, invoking the wrath of karma manifest through the knowing glances of physicians and neighbors, the protest suicide makes an appeal to a broader audience that they may take up a cause and punish the oppressor. In some ways, this boils down to a matter of scale and location, and yet Bouazizi’s suicide that was followed by demonstrations lacked the clear intentionality and expression of grievance that would label it distinctly as a protest suicide. Bouazizi did not hold a sign as he burned. He is not said to have made a public announcement or even particularly indicative remark that he was after revolutionary retribution. There have been rumors since the act of a suicide note and a final word of freedom, but there is little substantiation or basis for truth. One can construct and infer the action’s formulation in relation to its context, but Bouazizi made no apparent effort to express that inner dialogue and thus it is wrong to try to fit this event objectively into the frame of a rallying cry, even though it was highly public and inflammatory. If he did not make explicit his motive and goal – did not himself imbue his action with distinct meaning – then it is not an act of protest in the sense of banners in the street, and yet considered in the context of understanding self-immolation Bouazizi did make an act called earlier “protest.” Thus, a more sophisticated understanding

of protest in this context is needed to make sense of Bouaizi's act, and here I turn to Lionel Wee's work on "extreme communicative acts" (2003).

Wee presents "EACs" as acts of self-harm through which "illocutionary force is boosted, never attenuated" as part of an act of protest (2175). All of the cases that he analyzes fit under Androlio's category of protest suicide, but his analysis begins to express the way in which a third party becomes included in such interactions: not only the protester and the "authorities," but also the general public that acts as an audience and is hopefully swayed (2173). Though this does lend itself well to explicit protest suicide in which an actor hopes to incite his or her peers to protest, it is also important to understanding the emotional responses of those privy to self-immolation. Unable to sway with words or more common gestures, he or she, oppressed and without other means to make his or herself heard, turns to this extreme act in hopes that it will act as a trump card for its shock value (2169). The punch of that shock must come from an external source – guilt or riots – that brings home the point that was overlooked up to that moment in the dialogue. Thus the "protest" associated with the two differentiated suicide acts can be considered as the strong communicative act that follows the perception of an absolute breakdown of communications and attempts includes a third party intermediary, be it karma, the neighbors or the masses. To protest then is not merely a change of scale but a shift in type of dialogue to one in which the actor, unheard by their opposition, may be recognized by a force with different leverage. A self-immolation may or may not engage the audience, whatever its members, and that audience may or may be able to resolve the conflict and seek the requested recompense, but that act of gambling

adds power to the statement and emotionally loads its failure.

Too public for the original discourse on self-immolation and too unspecific for Androlio's definition, if sharing aspects of both, Bouazizi's action takes shape in the light of Wee's dialogic framework. When he lit himself on fire in front of the municipal offices, he unleashed public, both literal and supra-linguistic, cries of generalized pain and desperation, and it is to this, drawn by the former and held on the spot by the latter, that the people of Sidi Bouzid must have reacted.

The Reaction

“Pain, in this rendering, is not that inexpressible something that destroys communication or marks an exit from one's existence in language. Instead, it makes a claim asking for acknowledgment, which may be given or denied” (Das 1996:70).

Bouazizi's action, within the notion of protest inherent within self-immolation, made a demand that his pain be recognized. He did not specify what that pain was or how it should be dealt with, and those present seemed to respond to this neither-picky-nor-eloquent ask by making their own, more conventional protests.

To the extent that the international news media can be trusted (and I'll get there later), the first manifestations in Tunisia were centered on unemployment and poverty. In my own (brief) visit to Sidi Bouzid, this was corroborated by conversations with the local youth who were still, in April, carrying on their own, smaller scale demonstrations in hopes of securing more job sources for their town. Diplomas of the unemployed plastered the gates of the municipal offices and the

youth described the lack of industry: one tomato canning plant that opens here and there in the summer and a little agricultural land, owned by the wealthy of the coast and often left unseeded. Though it is easy to read into these current demonstrations and to trace them back to the impoverished Bouazizi, his lack-of-message certainly does not implicate or make explicit this idea as the sole tenant of protest, suggesting that the correlated protests were authored by another source.

The part of the process that involved listening was in Bouazizi's hands, but the hearing lay under the control of the audience in Sidi Bouazaid. To hear is to distinguish a communicative act from an undifferentiated sound and implies a degree of recognition that may produce understanding. Listening suggests a passive process while hearing begins an activity. Listening begins with the sound, hearing with the differentiation of that sound from background noise and understanding with the internalization of the heard and the decision of reaction. To hear the message and to react in kind with the speaker is to be convinced: for the external, private rational to become shared and common resident of the two and beyond. Bouazizi's immolation publicized – shouted loudly – his private pain, seeking, in any conception of such a suicide, a home in the body of his peers.

Das, based upon Wittgenstein's formulation of feeling pain in another body, expresses the linguistic manifestation of pain as a process of negotiation, requiring response for its validation (1996:70). To share pain – you say you are in pain and I feel your pain – is to close our eyes and find the pain in our left hand to be felt on our neighbor by our right (70). Impossible to the extent that the precise sharing of

any set of words or statements is unattainable, empathy or a unity in pain-generalized is the basis of the human ability to interact. The presence of another's raw wound produces a knee jerk reaction, the sight of blood may lead to faint, and it is here, pointing to the gash that we recall a pain and it comes to inhabit this new location present to our senses. It is by this process that self-immolation calls for a response.

Arthur Kleinman's (1988) discussion of chronic illness focuses on the need of such patients to justify their pain visibly through the medical apparatus. In his examination of those with pain inexplicable and irremediable by any medical process, he finds the patients constantly relying on the understanding of their peers and families. They live in hope of a diagnosis and live in agony between failed surgeries and medicines, while those around them look on question the veracity of the claim. This is to say that pain that is unverifiable by doctors – those who know pain and its remedies – is no pain that can be shared or understood. A claim of pain without any evidence but that claim as to its existence goes only so far in drawing sympathy.

Unable to verbally demonstrate the way in which he has been wronged, Bouazizi opens up his skin and demands effectively, "Look! Here is my pain!" The rending of flesh is undeniable and the act of seeing asks for the audience to take the pain that was foreign before and bring it within themselves. That is the hearing and the understanding is for the audience members to take their own pain and point to the smoldering body, "This pain is also my pain." The reaction, then, is based upon

this shared pain, but here, Bouazizi absent from the dialogue of the unspecified pain, the message is turned on the whim of those who have claimed the pain; Bouazizi expressed a pain, the audience claimed it as their own. So long repressed by Ben Ali, a pain is made public, and, like Kleinman and Kleinmna's analysis of "dizziness" and "fatigue" in the aftermath of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1994), physically embodies the social experience of suffering, making it visible and thus irrevocably real. It is through Bouazizi's manifest pain that the residents of Sidi Bouzid, claiming that pain as their own, were able to elaborate their woes. This recognized communal pain, inscribed from the minds of the bystanders onto the body of Bouazizi, could thus be considered in light of a spirit possession that transforms the structure of interpersonal relations and "local psychologies," and allows the witnesses to the immolation to speak through it of subjects they were before unable to verbalize;

The voice of a jinn spirit, or for that matter of a possessing god or ghost among Chinese, not only expresses accusation, resentment, and recrimination, but demands retribution (Kleinman and Kleinman 1994:718).

It is at this moment that Mohammed Bouazizi is both recognized publicly and separated from his bodily self. What is manifest as protest is neither the man Bouazizi nor his ideas, but rather the fact of his having been in pain and the recognition of resonance. Though demonstrations here follow his act, they are not related to the act, but rather derived from a pre-existing pain that found its form in Bouazizi's demonstration of misery. Moving forward, the reality of Bouazizi is left behind and replaced with an idealized and imposed Bouazizi, wielded in name only,

in memory of the efficacy of the wielding, to present pain. Those beyond the residents of Sidi Bouzid, and, in fact, beyond those immediately present, will experience only the latter Bouazizi, the fact that a group harmonized their own pain with his, and never the original who shouted in agony between being unheeded and mute.

The Narratives

Bouazizi did not associate himself with a revolution, but was rather incorporated into a movement through a process of reflection, which is to say the recognition of the familiar witnessed through opaque glass. The thing itself is obscured in part by the diffractive shroud and in part by hazed mirror image of the viewer so that the mind blends the lot into a sensible whole. The narratives of Bouazizi stem from this process of making sense – the principle of exchange and shared pain – but are themselves not the pain, but the codification of the pain into words or the expression of rational. To rehash: a pain expressed, a pain regarded, a pain realized, a pain interpreted, a pain inscribed and a pain described. The pain internal of the viewer was seen to be made external by Bouazizi and thus the mode of describing the pain turns upon its expression in terms of the physically present if abstracted. The focus of demonstrations from the beginning is other than Bouazizi, but his name stays attached as a talisman, given social import as an idea and not as a thing, and thus the facts of Mohammed Bouazizi's life are rewritten and contested in the public sphere, with a variety of narratives using his name to spin revolution.

This is not to say that the demonstrations in Tunisia spread on the back of

Bouazizi or on the basis of his act, but rather the opposite: that his name was brought to the eyes of all as the movement picked up steam and gained its own credibility. After all, it was videos of the protests that followed Bouazizi's immolation that first appeared on Facebook, and cell phone images of bullet wounds that captivated the attention of and incited the Tunisian public; "When you see people getting shot when they're trying to share opinions..." (Lilia, Facebook and Jasmine Revolution, 2011). From the perspective of the evolution of the rebellion, the broader interest in Bouazizi writes in his importance retrospectively.

News Media and the Spread of Narratives

From the 17th, the protests and word of them spread. At first, Ben Ali worked to strong arm the outcries into silence as he had done in 2008 in Gafsa, but this time he cracked down harder in an attempt to scare off future demonstrations. As is clear by the events of history, this failed. The role of Facebook in breaking the siege and the flawed tactics of Ben Ali have were, as has now been written uncountably many times, crucial to the success as it played out, but this is not the subject of this essay. Important here is the simple fact that the protests did spread through and beyond the country's hinterland, making enough noise to eventually draw international media attention. National press sources were almost entirely government controlled and thus made no particular mention of the uprisings or falsified outright the events, leaving the gathering of a cohesive description to the external sources.

In good journalistic form, the reporters roamed the country, reading banners,

listening to crowds and questioning their participants to glean names and motives. The earliest accounts seem to appear around December 28th in Le Monde, and contain the skeletal information about the origins of the revolts, the number dead or injured and speculation as to the motivation. In the context of this sort of fact-finding Bouazizi's name surfaces consistently, ringing a clear bell in terms of the clarity of the story. It is one thing to say that the riots were caused by the conditions of dictatorship, but the obvious question from the international audience is "why now?" The easy answer, given again and again, is that "one man ... set himself on fire last month, setting off the riots" (Reuters, New York Times). Though there is no way or attempt to frame Bouazizi as the leader of the Revolution, I believe that there was a general desire to fit a name into the slot of the rebel leader to make readers/viewers/listeners more comfortable and confident in the reporters due to the presence of the concrete.

I can remember reading the papers myself, slightly panicked in the weeks before my scheduled arrival in country, trying to piece together the stories to understand just what was happening. It made sense to me, having read through this and that, to say to those who asked that there were protests related to poverty and joblessness brought on by high food prices and the inflammatory act of, I believe, a student. The expectation is that reporters will give a clear account of events and, asking around, this is what they found off the bat and this is what the world read.

I don't mean to insinuate that the international press misrepresented, intentionally or not, the situation on hand. The events were confusing to those

present, and even the scholarly recountings today are somewhat muddled in their teleology, and thus certainly disjuncting for even the experienced reporter newly on the ground. The Jasmine Revolution broke precedents, overthrowing a long-standing government in under a month without leaders and at the hands of a thought-to-be-oblivious youth. It is said that even on the 13th of January, almost no Tunisians would themselves have thought it possible to *dégager* Ben Ali. The journalists, following and reacting, reflecting on conflicts past, remembering Jan Pallach and the Buddhist priests from the Vietnam era, can hardly be held responsible to capture the complex subtleties without using a know, if imperfect, framework. The story, told as strangely as it happened while it was happening, would have been thought outrageous, and thus the papers ran what they ran, fitting the facts into old patterns.

In this framework, there is no need to decide whether or not Bouazizi is a hero, but, given that his name must have come up in the questioning, it is enough to note his apparent role. The correlation between his self-immolation and the protests at the gates of Sidi Bouzid's municipal offices is an unavoidable fact and, to those not immediately present but rather reading along at home, it so happens that it fits into what could easily be the role of a hero or a martyr by any other name. Thus, as the world sought to pick apart the details of the riots, the eyes and ears on the ground gathered notes about Bouazizi that were formulated into articles, videos and special reports.

But, by then, the man by that name was lost to the speaking world before he

ever gave a statement to the press and only the fact of his pain as understood by those present – and the way in which they would tell and spread that story – was left. Out of the gate, articles talked about Bouazizi as a college graduate who, like so many of his countryfolk, was unable to find a fitting job but, like any good son, belittling himself for the to put food on the table for his family and poor mother. No doubt that the interviewees believed these stories, after all they fit and resonate. Marc Fisher’s story (Washington Post, March 27) stands as the archetype of these reportings: leading with a pseudo-proverb, he moves beyond the realm of objectivity and spells out the drama of the Revolution.

On the evening before Mohammed Bouazizi lit a fire that would burn across the Arab world, the young fruit vendor told his mother that the oranges, dates and apples he had to sell were the best he’d ever seen. “With this fruit,” he said, “I can buy some gifts for you. Tomorrow will be a good day.”

He later makes not of a payment of “10,000 dinars (about \$14,000)” from Ben Ali to the Bouazizi family, reversing the approximate 1.4 conversion factor between currencies. This is not to say that his article ought to be discredited, but rather to express, quantifiably, the degree to which the narrative comes from a source other than “fact” in the standard sense of the word.

I have heard so many times from youth even in La Marsa that they live lives of “misery” or as residents of a certain brand of hell. Bouazizi’s body was public property after his pain was shared: it was made the home of the public pain, and these are the sorts of stories that envelop that pain and are shared, their veracity as unimportant as the truth is unknown. Weeks later, the truth about Bouazizi’s

education would slowly emerge, but in the context of his having become a celebrity; through the attention initially drummed up by the timing of his event and its correlation, a portion of international attention became obsessed with learning more.

The optimal source for these investigations were those who knew Bouazizi best, bringing huge media attention to Sidi Bouzid and particularly to the Bouazizi family. News articles and evening specials that focus on the here are effectively a move of marching back through the family tree to find a reason for the Tunisian Revolution. Pressed now herself to the microphone by the swirling pack of journalists and dignitaries – including Ban Ki Moon - from every corner of the globe, and asked why her progeny – a product of her raising – did something so crazy, what can a mother do but love her son? Across globe, Manoubya Bouazizi and a rotating group of her young children became essentialized mourners: the sad mouthpiece in memory of the only revolutionary name. She eventually moved from Sidi Bouzid to La Marsa in order to save her children from the constant barrage, and thus I was able to talk with her myself.

That the interview happened was a matter of chance and boasting high school kids, but the reality stands that we knocked on her door and, recognizing me as foreigner, she let us in. Manoubya sat me on the porch and hustled inside to change from a simple blue dress to finer and cleaner black outfit. Joining me again, she launched into the routine fact parade, speaking rhythmatically and without pause: father left when Mohammed was three, he graduated from high school, he

was very sweet to his mother and his family, but sad. She returned again and again to her poverty and the problems of Sidi Bouzid, her detachment from politics and her hopes that the Revolution would remember her son and the other young men of Sidi Bouzid. At the end, she pressed me to take her picture and turned her eyes to the ground until I was done. As we walked away, the boys who came with me, glowing and boasting from their brush with a star, told me the popular stories about the money the family received from a variety of sources. Her house and clothes, they said, attested that she was lying about her poverty. The experience struck me as a sort of show: the telling of the selected half-truths that the media wanted to hear, the sound bites that frost the revolutionary story. To me, she presented a story of the hopelessness and goodness befitting of a man fit into the role of the archetypal Tunisian revolutionary.

Ben Ali tried to evoke a similarly symbolic image on a large scale through propaganda, in the hopes that the manipulation of a single man could quell the temper of the country. Jokes aside about the president's detachment from his people, Ben Ali's gaze followed the presumptive interest of the international finger to his famous citizen in the final days of his life. Bouazizi was originally taken to a clinic in Sidi Bouzid, but was shortly there after to a more sophisticated hospital in Sfax. As Mohammed's name swirled in the journalistic gale, Ben Ali oversaw his transfer to the burn unit in the flagship trauma unit in the capital. On December 28th, he staged a visit to the ward for the eyes of the press. Now widely circulated, a photo was taken of the encounter: Ben Ali in the upper left of the frame, surrounded by what seems to be every doctor in the unit, looks down at the entirely gauze-

covered Bouazizi. The intent is to demonstrate Ben Ali's compassion as the father of the country for the sorrows of his children, any of which could impose their face on the blank white mask of the Bouazizi figure. The reality, unfortunate for the President, is not the same as what is implied by the media produced celebrity: the man Bouazizi was irrelevant to Tunisians who suffered their own pain and thus the comforting of this one man missed the point entirely. Beyond the original inscription of pain that spurred protests into the open, the demonstrators had ceased to consider Bouazizi as an important figure. In fact, with this photo, Ben Ali somewhat eloquently drew the connection that was sought in the media by placing himself, a vision of power and uncaring not wearing a mask in the burn unit, as standing over the faceless and savaged victim known to be voiceless. Ben Ali's attempt at propaganda, a misunderstanding or the separation of the man from his name, succeeds only in drawing interest to the hagiography of Bouazizi as his antithesis.

Based upon these media games, a tie is produced between the symbolism of Bouazizi and the revolution that makes attending his funeral an act of subversion. Ben Ali is said to have asked the family to keep Mohammed's death and funeral quiet. They were prohibited from walking his body down the main street in front of the municipal offices in fear that doing so might insight riots. Ultimately, hundreds showed up to accompany Bouazizi's body, but I would argue that it had less to do with the commemoration or adoration as the fact of his fame and the enforced taboo of association. Though the act carried out is one of manifest memorialization, the substructure is one of rebellion in the context of what was made internationally

important. Ben Ali's desire to manipulate a symbol and the media fascination with the man of the same name produced a celebrity status entity through which the revolution came to be labeled. It is generally held that the presence of global media protected the citizens of Tunisia, and I would argue that it also directed, in some ways at least, the flow of events. Following the evolution of meaning on a larger scale, their own acts of protest meant for a third party, some Tunisians were led into the manipulation of externally proscribed symbols.

Post-Dégage Commemoration

On January 14th, Ben Ali fled the country. Word broke later in the day, leaking out across the Tunisian grapevine, but the public did not celebrate. The crowds on Avenue Bourguiba were dispersed by sniper fire, and gangs of Ben Ali's thugs set to attacking the suburbs. Neighborhoods quickly coalesced to protect their houses and the army, declared defenders of the revolution, brought order to the streets, and within a few days the citizens, heirs to the fruits of their revolution, were able to shout their pride in public. There has not yet been a formal celebration of independence from Ben Ali – and many would argue that the revolution will continue until the day that a government is elected, freely and fairly, by the people in the context of a new constitution – but euphoria and patriotic zeal abounded in the aftermath and, in more ways than will ever be known, Tunisians rejoiced: for the first time in years, they were proud to be Tunisian. In this aftermath of flag waving and road trips around the country to share the spirit from the capital, some took a moment to commemorate the famous name associated with the uprising's ignition.

Facebook

During this period of release, a slew of pages dedicated to Mohammed Bouazizi appeared on Facebook, but, though the titles display his name and the fact of the act is the recognition of his life and death, the reality, expressed in the manner of action, shows little interest in any one man who ever lived. Though there are many groups, only three stand out as significantly sizable: “Je ne vous oublierai jamais ya Mouhammed El Bouazizi” with 3030 followers, “Mohamed Bouazizi Legend Never Dies. RIP” with 1533, and “Fruit Vendor Topples Dictator” [note: translation] dwarfing the others with 172825 members. Despite apparent appeal to different audiences, both in type given the language of choice in the title, and in scale, all three follow the same trends of use and display similar content. I will not argue away the agency of those who expressed themselves through these sites, their will to pay homage to a celebrity, but rather I hope to elucidate the subtleties of that celebrity as they have presented him. What appears on the screens, the Bouazizi celebrated therein, seems to be the idea that was separated from his body and redubbed with the same name by the news media’s fixation.

Founded on January 14th or in the days immediately after, all three groups are thus inherently associated with the success of the Revolution. Mohammed Bouazizi died on January 4th, days before the Revolution would even reach the capital and before a serious upswing in international media coverage, but not unknown to many Tunisians. Even if the rebellious spirit had not been carried across the country, the rumblings of the south were beyond what could be ignored

by this point and Bouazizi was well enough known to worry Ben Ali. Yet these groups origins lie later, correlated with the president's departure and thus inherently of and tied to that era and event.

In all three groups, the initial content is grieving, but the subject of that emotion is shown to be more complex than a single or simple man though the profile pictures of the pages. The first mass of posts, more than I would care to count on any of the three pages much less all of them, is dominated by the repetition and permutation of "Allah yer Hammouh." Translating approximately to "God bless his soul" or, more idiomatically, "May he rest in peace," the phrase is used by Arabic speakers to refer to and respect the dead. Some add extra verbiage to denote Bouazizi as a martyr, though most do not, and the comments rarely become more complicated. While it is impossible to know the source of each individual post's motivation, the forum in which they are shared at least demonstrates the thing towards which they are expressing themselves. Facebook is massively public, and thus a positive demonstration of association – a post visible to the world – is a public statement of affiliation: a choice of this and not that group and message. Defining these groups are the images that act as figureheads. They are mostly images of Bouazizi, but they are also mostly modified: a comic strip of a fruit vendor pushing his cart and a presidential caricature off a cliff, Bouazizi's face superimposed onto a modified version of the cover of the film I Am Legend ("Mohammed Bouazizi: You Are Our Legend"), or his image surrounded by pictures of eagles and Tunisians flags, or by photos of those killed by Ben Ali's police. The sum effect of the photos is to direct attention away from any factual Bouazizi and his

life, and towards a summary of the Revolution: a collection of the dead (in much more realistic photographs) and the reality of success. The comedy and the patriotism play with essentialization and do not pretend to relate to a truth. This does not negate the fact of Bouazizi's name, and yet the thing memorialized by the groups' followers looks a lot more like some sort of Tunisian spirit and success; a glass [of mint tea] raised to life and the future rather than a reconstruction and commemoration of the life of a citizen.

Confirming the passing interest in Bouazizi in these groups is the trend of use. Mixed in with the initial blessings, and becoming increasingly prevalent in the discussions on the groups' "walls," are political statements, offering support to the other revolutions in the Arab world and calling for the members of Ben Ali's party to follow their leader and *dégage*. The most popular group, still updated multiple times daily, has shifted entirely to a platform for the dissemination of videos, images and opinions. The second largest group, diminished in use, has changed its profile picture to a revolutionary fist painted in Palestinian colors. The smallest of these three groups is almost defunct, with new posts dwindling since late February though still trending increasingly to the sharing of news and events. While it is unreasonable to expect a continuous outpouring of grief, the fluidity of the group and the omnipresence – if somewhat shadowed – of politics demonstrates a lack of sincerity to the titled subject matter.

Tracking along with these trends and more easily quantifiable is interest in a Facebook "cause" to change the Place 7 Novembre to Place Mohammed Bouazizi.

The current name commemorates the day that Ben Ali took power from the aging Bourguiba, celebrating a time that few have wished to remember in the last decades. Thus such a renaming would be emblematic of an exchange of the start of one era with the origin of another. Started on January 15th in a moment of post-Revolutionary excitement like the other groups, the movement currently has 12489 supporters. However, based on the graph displayed on the cause's page tracking the number of new supporters per day over time, the vast majority of that interest stems from the first week after the 14th. Thousands signed daily from the 15th until the 19th, just as they originally commented on the other Bouazizi pages, but within a week the flow was reduced considerably and within a month had slowed to a trickle so that there are now generally fewer than 5 people per day signing the petition. Particularly given the known and lasting interest in politics on Facebook, represented by the 172000 members of the now activist Bouazizi-titled group, the following of this cause is a small drop collected mostly in a passing fad.

There is no doubt that the public commemorations of Mohammed Bouazizi are in his name, nor do I wish to assert a lack of sincerity on the part of all posters, and yet the content of the groups, the subject of the posts and the timing of all elements suggests a celebration of a victory rather than a true memorialization. Absent is information about the supposedly bereaved – accounts of his life and distinctly accurate depictions – and in that gap abounds nationalist symbolism and political discourse. If any dimension of Bouazizi is present, it is the celebrity produced externally. Writing here on the digital body of the only name remembered from the Revolution, the followers of these groups seek attach their statements of

celebration of the most popular and simplest fact of the successful uprising. Superficial, the attachment lasts only until the reality of other conflicts and the difficulties of rebuilding a democracy kick in at which a point the commemorating groups either fall silent or shift entirely away from apparent subject matter.

Sélim Tlili and Tarek Ben Ammar

On January 22nd, the “specialist in speed painting” Sélim Tlili set up on Avenue Bourguiba to produce a portrait of Mohammed Bouazizi with the help of “10 million Tunisians” (Art for Tunisia brochure). In February, the internationally known producer, Tunisian born resident of Hollywood, Tarek Ben Ammar announced his intention to support a project to shoot a film about the life and death of Mohammed Bouazizi. Like the messages of support on Facebook, the timing of both of these projects sets them as more commemorative of Ben Ali’s departure and their context suggests a stronger connection to a fictionalized Bouazizi, but another level of personal gain is added to the equation.

Tlili’s painting, following his interest in “*des symboles de la culture populaire*” (Art for Tunisia), is a copy of the only known photo of Bouazizi’s face. Though painted in black and white, the style resembles the now-famous portrait of then-presidential-candidate Barak Obama by Shepard Fairey, seen now emblazoned on tee shirts and posters across the states. In and of itself, this style abstracts the image from the original, making a recognizable face into a symbol: a likeness as an evocative reference. It is a style based upon the power of celebrity, as the redux nature of the paintings requires the wide dissemination and knowledge of the

subject for meaning to be attached and a statement to be made. This project in particular is thus a motion of Tlili attaching himself to a popular symbol, a famous name, in order to boost his own fame. It is a picture of Bouazizi and the stated goal of the project is to raise money for the “economic and cultural” development of the poorer regions of Sidi Bouzid (Art for Tunisia), but the Tlili’s biography appears next to the celebrity’s. The website dedicated to the project presents a version of Mohammed Bouazizi that elevates his heroism, depicting him as having acted against the corrupt government for the sake of the “10 million Tunisians” who can now commemorate him. This interpretation makes the artist’s work apparently more important and the ultimate effect, staged in the center of Tunis, is to turn the paining into a spectacle. Despite the surface presentation, Tlili is drawing all manner of post-revolutionary energy and excitement towards himself through a well-known conduit.

Ben Ammar’s announcement makes the same aggrandizing move, though refers more explicitly to the media narrative known to his stated target audience at the 2012 Oscars. At every turn, the producer seeks to claim authenticity for his project: he is Tunisian, he will use a Tunisian director and cast, the dialogue will be in Tunisian dialect, the content will be the “reality of what happened,” and the project has been approved by the Bouazizi family (Ritman). My own conversation with Manoubya Bouazizi suggested otherwise and is indicative of Ben Ammar’s lack of grounding in a Tunisian reality of opinion. He frames his film in terms of the mass media narrative, heroizing Bouazizi as the fundamental revolutionary,

"I'm a Tunisian producer and this is a Tunisian story. And that story is a symbol of youth. Bouazizi could have been the Chinese guy in Tiananmen Square or Jan Palach in Czechoslovakia" (Ritman).

By defining his film as depicting the most accurate portrail of the most important event of the unprecedented Arab Spring, Ben Ammar not only moves into a realm of framing and thus a degree of functionality, but also does so to the effect that his project is made important. Like Tlili, he attaches himself as a public figure on a public stage to a celebrity, giving him instant credibility and media attention.

I would note that, on a single occasion, Bouazizi's name was met with reverence and the label *shaheed*. Talking with a group of high school students, friends of a friend and more loosely connected, all of whom had what they seemed to consider a more intimate connection to Bouazizi – one was a neighbor in his childhood in Sidi Bouzid and the other neighbors of his mother in La Marsa – I heard all of them add notes of admiration. As we walked, on a whim, towards the Bouazizi household to try to talk our way in, they chatted excitedly, nervously, about the celebrity we hoped to meet. At other times, some of the boys had nodded along and concurred with the asserted rejection of Bouazizi, but here, in their moment to shine as my connection to a star, they played up the image and waxed patriotically.

Conclusion

When Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire, he yielded his self, actualizing and totalizing his longstanding lack of agency. The gesture resonated with the hardships of those present and so, in the spirit of what they saw as the man's implied target, the people of Sidi Bouzid began to complain. The silence of 23 years

was broken by a cry of pain that was simultaneously understood by a public. Feeling that the truth was in the open, knowing that their own pain was shared, many took their protests to the gates of authority. In the ensuing spread of unrest, the fact of the sharing of pain was remembered in a way that the original pained was not. When now it is said that Mohammed Bouazizi was “just a man” and that “we remembered him and that is enough” (Taib), it is in memory of that transaction.

What followed, the fame of the name, was based on the interpretation of actors external to the movement. While a revolution brewed on the basis of widespread poverty, unemployment and corruption, those interested in reassembling the pieces, working to understand the actions as a narrative, read backwards to the nexus of the movement’s appearance in public. Though it was the nameless many that heard Mohamed Bouazizi’s cry who were responsible for the preservation of his collectivized memory, it was his name as a concrete fact that was built into story. The external scripting gave new meaning to the internal struggle, adding “Mohammed Bouazizi” as a label for the unity and anonymity/individuality that was considered important. If the name seems to be celebrated it is in light of the ideas behind it that held up a successful uprising. If the man will be commemorated, it will be as a means of simplifying the ensuing story for the sake of mass consumption or of using shorthand to stand in for their unity, success and all that is encapsulated in the Jasmine Revolution.

Those with whom I spoke do not seek to deny the reality that Bouazizi’s name is famous. Rather they seek to state what is subtext below the name without

that title. They do not contradict the importance of the things that Bouazizi is said on the level of the media public to represent, but instead have internalized the separation of the man and the ideals. It is not important to create heroes when the people can succeed on their own.

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