Masculine love and sensuous reason: the affective and spatial politics of Egyptian Ultras football fans

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Masculine love and sensuous reason: the affective and spatial politics of Egyptian Ultras football fans

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ABSTRACT
This article uses a feminist spatial approach attentive to masculine affect and difference to analyze the language, cultural production, and practices of the two largest Ultras football fan groups in Egypt – White Knights (affiliated with Zamalek Sporting Club) and Ahlawy (affiliated with Al-Ahly Sporting Club) – both established in 2007. Egyptian Ultras cultivate embodied passion, joy, love and anger. By excluding girls and women, the Ultras reflect the sexism that permeates Egyptian social and political life. However, sexism does not appear to be the most important reason for Ultras homosociality and misogyny is not particularly relevant to their practices and cultural oeuvre. The Ultras do not encourage sexual attacks on girls and women, let alone boys and men, and explicitly discourage sectarianism and racism. Ultras groups in Egypt, I contend, offer a masculine alternative to a government that represents itself as a militarist ‘factory of men’. As they battle state efforts to control space and reinforce the dominant order, their practices challenge rationality/affect and mind/body binaries, as well as divisions between street/stadium and corporate/commons. Informed by fieldwork in Egypt, the article uses semiotic and discursive methods to analyze hundreds of Ultras’ images, songs, chants, Facebook pages, and live performances on multiple sites, as well as scholarly sources in Arabic and English and a book-length Arabic account about the Ultras in Egypt by the founder of the Ultras White Knights.

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Introduction
On 1 February 2014, a cool overcast day in Gezira, Cairo, I attended a memorial at the Al-Ahly Sporting Club to mark the second anniversary of the massacre in Port Said of 74 Ultras boys and young men (Figure 1). The Egyptian Ultras, homosocial football fan groups, established themselves...
beginning in 2007. The Ultras mobilize tens of thousands of teenage Egyptian boys and young men – working-, lower middle-, and middle-class – with an anti-commercialization, anti-containment, and anti-authoritarian approach to football and space. During the memorial, I stood in silence in the terrace for a few hours as one of three women among thousands of boys and men (Figure 2). We had scrambled into the stadium with Ultras from the back, climbing over an aperture of crumbling cement. With few exceptions, the government has banned Ultras from attending football games in Egypt since 2012 because it does not tolerate protest and it fears their effective street fighting abilities, which emerged during the 2011 revolution. Hundreds of Ultras are in prison and hundreds more are underground at this writing. The danger is so pervasive that Ultras’ Facebook pages now blur the faces of individuals except when an Ultras person is dead or in prison (Figure 3).

This article emerges from a larger research project on space and bodies in revolutionary and post-revolutionary Egypt that included fieldwork in 2011 and 2014. It examines the language, cultural production, and spatial practices of the two largest Ultras football fan groups in Egypt – the White Knights (affiliated with Zamalek Sporting Club) and Ahlawy (affiliated with Al-Ahly Sporting Club). It does not rely on ethnographic fieldwork for reasons I explain in the next section. Leftist and feminist activists in Cairo often remarked on the Ultras’ prominence and efficacy in street battles against
security forces, although their opinions split on Ultras’ exclusion of girls and women. I argue that feminist critiques of the Ultras’ based on their male homosociality limits our understanding of the masculinity they cultivate. In contrast to European football ‘hooliganism’ (e.g. Radmann 2014; Bairner 1999), Egyptian Ultras do not engage in gratuitous destruction and violence against anyone, including girls and women. Instead, they enact the
ungendered attribute of *gad’ana*, the skill of using violence in limited situations for defense and aid (Ghannam 2013, 121–22).

Ultras in Egypt dramatically differ from a repressive government that proudly represents itself as a militarist ‘factory of men’ (Figure 4). They battle state and capitalist efforts to partition space (Rancière 2001) between street and stadium. Ultras practices and expressive repertoires refuse, in Gillian Rose’s claim in relation to women, ‘to separate experience and emotion from the interpretation of places’ (Rose 1993, 160). Although state and media rhetoric associate Ultras with violence, the groups largely cultivate embodied passion, joy, and love and rely on sensuous reasoning. They challenge, I contend, gendered rationality/affect and mind/body binaries as they enact love and outrage together with wide-ranging effects in Egypt. Egyptian Ultras are far more political than most football fan groups studied by geographers and other social scientists, and their impact extends well beyond the football pitch. While not attached to partisan politics or a specific ideological frame (nationalist, Islamist or Marxist, for example), they harken to leftist football fan groups dominant among Italians in the 1970s (Guschwan 2007) and the more recent anti-neoliberal and anti-corruption sensibilities of Porros fans in Mexico City (Magazine 2007). Their culture and practices most closely fit within autonomist traditions, but uniquely shaped by the early twenty-first century conditions in which they emerged and evolved in Egypt.

Figure 4. Tahrir Square, hundreds such posters are on the ground for sale, February 2014: “Egypt is the Factory of Men.” President Abdel Fattah Sisi in the foreground. Photo by author.
Methodological and theoretical problems

This article cannot speak to the motivations and desires of a systematic sample or group of Ultras because the Ultras resist interviews and ethnographic study, distrust outsiders, and reject the idea of the celebrity leader. It is particularly difficult for women to study them, as I learned through persistent efforts in 2014. Understanding the ‘emotional states’ of men (or anyone) and their relations to ‘lived and felt experience’ is a tentative endeavor with or without ethnography. Researchers without direct access to particular periods or marginalized men must use a wide range of sources and methods (Peel et al. 2007, 248–249; also Bondi et al. 2007, 1). In this case, the Egyptian field has since 2012 become exceedingly dangerous for researchers interested in contemporary opposition movements or activism. The government has arbitrarily imprisoned thousands of people it deems politically dangerous and punishes expression of opposition. State-sponsored torture and killing are widely normalized if the rationale is ‘security.’ I had multiple conversations in Cairo and a few experiences that reinforced the difficulty and danger attached to my research endeavor. A Skype conversation with a well-known former Ultras individual while I was in Cairo in 2014 left me wary of persisting and alert to the limits posed by my age, sex, and U.S.-affiliation, as did evidence that I was being tracked by security services.

Egyptian Ultras performances and rhetoric have a wide presence on YouTube (with multiple dedicated channels) and other social media, and sports and other media outlets in Egypt regularly cover their activities. This article uses semiotic and discursive (Rose 2012) methods to analyze Ultras’ images, songs, chants, Facebook pages, and live performances on multiple sites, which I translated. I watched, listened to, and analyzed hundreds of such images, songs, and videos. I also analyze every scholarly source I could find in Arabic or English and a book-length Arabic account about the Ultras in Egypt by the founder of the Ultras White Knights, Mohamed Bashir, also known as ‘Gemy Hood’ (Bashir 2011). Ultras heavily criticized him for publishing the book and ejected him, although he continued to discuss the Ultras publicly through 2012, including on Egyptian television (Mohamed ABADY Gemyhood 2012). While ethnography is impossible at this historical moment, the article also considers and theorizes the Ultras’ known spatial practices—not only their symbolism and rhetoric. My intent is to persuade rather than make definitive truth claims.

A project such as this is typically expected to anchor itself in theories of masculinity largely developed in Western contexts in relation to white men. Lawrence Berg and Robyn Longhurst found in an overview essay published in *Gender, Place and Culture* in 2003 that geographic scholarship remained ‘Anglocentric’ despite the ‘temporal and geographic contingency’ of masculinity (351–352). They point to an international ‘scaling’ of knowledge
production that constitutes scholarship on non-Western ‘peripheral’ contexts
as ‘case study’ and on Western contexts as the basis of universal theorizing
(355–356). Cultural geographers have developed spatial understandings of
masculinity and criticized ‘typological’ models that assume dominance (over
women and lesser men) to be a structuring or ‘framing concern’ (Hopkins
and Noble 2009, 812, 813, 816). Peter Hopkins and Greg Noble argue for
greater recognition of ‘an array of vectors of relationality’ with respect to
masculinities, stressing the limits of ‘intersectional’ approaches that simply
include ethnicity or class (ibid., 815, 816; also Gorman-Murray and Hopkins
2014, 10). Such problems are acute in sociological scholarship on masculinity,
which articulates the necessity of recognizing plurality and relationality while
persistently reinforcing a hegemonic general rule built on an invisible universal
boy or man subject formed within familiar sites in the United States,
Europe, and Australia. As Berg and Longhurst write, ‘given the importance of
contexts, relationships, and practices in both the (re)construction of mascu-
linity and the way that we come to understand the meanings of the term, it
should be very clear that masculinity is both temporally and geographically
contingent’ (2003, 352).

The focus of the majority of critical masculinity and feminist geography
scholarship centers the subordination of femininity within and without. In
relation to the ‘Middle East,’ which stretches from Morocco to Iran, analyses
of spatiality, gender, and sexuality typically occur through a hegemonic
framework structured through colonial and imperial knowledge, often internal-
ized by the colonized even when it takes the form of authenticist opposition.
This framework assumes we already know almost all we need to know
about masculinity, femininity, and homosociality. My training in interdisciplin-
ary gender and sexuality studies of the Middle East – as well as my feminist
research on Arab societies that differ in their politics, histories, and gender
and sexual practices and norms – attunes me to radical plurality among
boys and men. In turn, male homosociality in Egypt and elsewhere operates
plurally, depending on historically situated and site-sensitive norms, sensibil-
ities, and the raison d’etre of a group.

The problem of masculine homosociality?

History, ideology, and socioeconomics pattern which bodies have access to
particular spaces and how different people experience these spaces
(Chouinard 2004; Rose 1993, e.g. 140–149). Feminist geography is especially
concerned with masculine exclusions and enclosures of womanly differences
as patterned through race, class, and other positionalities (Rose 1993, 15,
137–138, 150) and has relatively neglected the ‘formation of masculine iden-
tities and spaces’ (van Hoven and Hörschelmann 2005, 5, 9–10). The
Egyptian Ultras exclude girls and women, reflecting the sexism that permeates Egyptian social and political life. However, sexism does not appear to be central to their homosociality and misogyny is not particularly relevant to their public practices and cultural oeuvre. The Ultras’ exclusion of girls and women does not encourage hypermasculinity or require the ‘feminization’ of other men (e.g. Free and Hughson 2003, 138). They discourage attacks on girls and women, as well as boys and men. If female homosociality is not necessarily a mark of subordination, as feminist scholarship on the Middle East has persistently argued, masculine homosociality is not by definition motivated by a desire to subordinate the feminine. Afsaneh Najmabadi reminds us that we should assume neither the ‘naturalness’ of heterosociality nor the ‘backwardness of homosociality and homoerotic affectivity’ (Najmabadi 2005, 133). As Elen-Maarja Trell and Bettina van Hoven find in their study of rural Estonia, ‘depending on the physical setting, but also opportunities stemming from, for example, the presence or absence of adults or girls, different practices and opportunities for different expressions of masculinities arise and are actively constructed by young men’ (Trell and van Hoven 2014, 328). Drawing on Eve Sedgwick’s work, Clifton Evers points to the range of homosocial bonds and desire – ‘friendship, mentorship, camaraderie, brotherly unity, rivalry, economic exchange’ – which for ‘some men’ are prioritized ‘over male-to-female relations’ even as they are ‘meant to be strictly platonic and asexual’ and pose no challenge to heterosexuality (2009, 895–896).

How do Ultras explain their exclusion of girls and women? During a two-week sit-in by the Ultras in April 2012 outside government offices in Qasr al-Aini, the group banned women who joined in solidarity from smoking or participating past 10:00 p.m. Some explained that women could not stay overnight because Ultras wanted to avoid rumors being spread by ‘aggressive’ media and government officials that they were having ‘sex with girls and are using drugs in the tents’ (Abdelhameed Ibraheem 2015, 44). Dalia Abdelhameed reports viscerally feeling both visible and invisible on a five-hour bus ride with Ultras fans to an away game because no one spoke to her (Abdelhameed Ibraheem 2014; Abdel Hameed Ibrahim 2015, 43–46). They thoroughly ignored me, as well as a young Egyptian woman reporter and her woman photographer, when we joined thousands of Ahlawy Ultras on the terraces to mark the second anniversary of the Port Said massacre in 2014.

In interviews with about twenty Ultras in Cairo between 30 March and 2 April 2011, James Dorsey found that many shared ‘the conservative social mores of the Islamists,’ including ‘protectiveness of women, frequent separation of men’s and women’s spaces,’ and believing that a ‘women’s duty [is] not to provoke male lust’ (Dorsey 2012, 416). During a February 2014 interview I conducted with Abdelhameed, in contrast, she argued that Ultras
fraternal logic is less misogynistic than it is paternalistic. While doing research for her master’s thesis, she found them to hold diverse opinions regarding the exclusion of girls and women, including being neutral. Leaders, however, say they consider women to be fragile and link Ultras strength and effectiveness to male-exclusiveness. If women and girls are included, they argue, Ultras would be compelled to focus on protecting them from police violence. Maybe more importantly, they understand girls and women to weaken ties between boys and men (Abdelhameed Ibraheem 2014). I explore the production and implications of these masculine bonds below.

**Ultras genealogies and repertoires**

Ultras groups first emerged in Italy in the 1970s and were partisan in the leftist sense, although they became ideologically diverse. Groups developed throughout Europe in the 1980s and Latin America and Africa in the 1990s. Spanish Ultras often participated in racist, fascist and right-wing violence by the late 1980s, although a substantial portion (‘anti-ultras’ Ultras) in northern Spain are anti-fascist and anti-racist (Spaaij and Viñas 2005, 145–147, 159).

Andrew Hodges, a queer man who was involved in an antifascist Zagreb Ultras group with a handful of other openly queer men, argues that academics and journalists often wrongly project onto them a kind of unruly and violent ‘primitivism,’ a lower level of Europeanness they also attribute to the former Yugoslav states. In the process, the ‘respectable’ classes absolve themselves ‘of responsibility for the violence and disorder,’ especially social inequality (Hodges 2016, 410–411, 413, 424).

The intensified privatization of spaces in the 1980s through zoning and pricing structures, as well as regulations that enable football ‘professionalism,’ helped spread Ultras groups in Europe (Guschwan 2014, 885; Kennedy and Kennedy 2012, 335). European Ultras groups condemn the ‘globalization of football,’ including greedy owners, ‘expensive tickets, mercenary players, doping, false passports and police repression’ (Guschwan 2007, 256–257). These practices have produced innovative forms of resistance among hardcore fans (Kennedy and Kennedy 2012, 327, 329, 330). Pumas UNAM fans in Mexico City similarly argue that ‘soccer should not be used to showcase scientific or technological progress, increase profits, or reproduce clientilistic hierarchies, because passionate, spontaneous, creative and beautiful soccer play is an end in itself’ (Magazine 2007, 48). Owners and officials however, prefer to channel the energy of sports fans into nationalism and to use sports to consolidate state power and legitimacy, as did former President Husni Mubarak and his family members when they attended Ahly SC football matches at important political moments (Abdelhameed Ibraheem 2015, 91; Guschwan 2014, 889). Many fans similarly
argue that the stadium should be ‘apolitical’ and ‘escapist’ despite the saturation of athletic bodies and spaces with visual and sonic evidence of commercial and governmental interests (e.g. Guschwan 2014, 895–896).

Ultras football fan groups developed in Tunis, Morocco, and Algeria in the mid-1990s and accelerated in the mid-2000s (Rharib and Amara 2014). In Algeria, Ultras groups battle for employment, dignity, and freedom of expression and threaten the state and the economically privileged (Amara 2012, 41–47, 50). Ultras White Knights (UWK007) was the first Ultras group in Egypt, debuting on 7 March 2007 during a game to support the Zamalek SC football team against the Sudanese Hilal team. Ultras Ahlawy (UA007) debuted less than a month later during a 13 April 2007 football match in Cairo Stadium. Additional Ultras Ahlawy fan groups quickly established themselves throughout Egypt, as did tens of Ultras groups to support clubs beyond Al-Ahly and Zamalek (listed in El-Zatmah 2012, 802).

Why did North African teams develop at these historical moments? I suspect that the rise of Arabic satellite television in the mid-1990s and the internet in the late 1990s facilitated the ability of North African fans to follow their favorite European team (often with North African players) and fan groups. In Egypt, intensified state repression and authoritarianism constricted spaces for rising contention in the aught years of the twenty-first century. It is possible, as Roger Magazine argues for the fans he studied in Mexico City, that Ultras fandom in Egypt offered a ‘site for actors to congregate and to imagine, contest, and implement social alternatives’ (Magazine 2007, 6, 25).

The predecessors of the Egyptian Ultras are ‘terso fans,’ a term derived from the Italian word for three for third-class ticket holders (El-Zatmah 2012, 801). Such fans brought ‘chants, songs and celebrations’ into Egyptian stadiums from the 1950s and were largely nonviolent (ibid., 801–802). Terso fan culture in Egypt atrophied by the early 1990s because even third-class tickets became unaffordable for the working classes. Women terso fans disappeared from the third-class seats by the late 1980s with the Islamicization of society (ibid., 802).

Ultras value face-to-face encounters (Guschwan 2014, 887–888; Kennedy and Kennedy 2012, 334) and experiences that build bonds and trust. For Italian Ultras, ‘La Mentalita’ requires each of them to ‘be an active spectator, overtly display identity, and confront authority and [competing] ultras within the limits of an honour code’ (Guschwan 2007, 254). Ultras groups in Spain similarly consider themselves different from ‘regular football fans,’ who they understand to be ‘passive, consumer-oriented spectators’ (Spaaij and Viñas 2005, 145). Egyptian Ultras look down on television football fans as weak supporters with no identity or commitment (Bashir 2011, 23). When they emerged in 2007, Egyptian Ultras brought terraces to life as fans had increasingly been watching football games on television (Abdelhameed Ibrahim
Like teso fans before them, Ultras took over the least expensive curve (curva) third-class seats behind the net, where it is difficult to see the game. Ultras the world over prefer these seats since their ‘hardcore’ mentality requires unconditional support for the team (Bashir 2011, 12, 78–81; Guschwan 2014, 896; Abdelhameed Ibrahim 2015, 12, 19, 34–35, 58).

The concept of freedom (hurriyya) in ‘spirit’ and ‘mind’ permeates Egyptian Ultras music, chants, and storytelling. The Ultras White Knights song, ‘My Name is Fan, Not Guest,’ which exists in multiple video forms with lyrics that slightly change, stresses that a true fan is not a guest of the stadium, state, or society (UWKmedia 2016). Egyptian Ultras consider themselves free ‘individuals’ (sing, Ultras fard) in an Ultras ‘group’ (grub) that is part of a larger ‘entity’ (kayan), rather than ‘members’ (Bashir 2011, 9–12; Abdelhameed Ibrahim 2015, 10, 21). Ultras believe that ‘Being an autonomous entity’ is necessary ‘to feeling the meaning of life.’ They focus on ‘the meaning of country, attachment, and giving without limits and without waiting for something in exchange’ (Bashir 2011, 9, 10, 39). Ultras songs express a deep knowledge of and resistance to systemic violence as reflected in the refrain of the Ultras Ahlawy hurriyya story, written soon after the 2011 revolution: ‘We said it ages ago to the despot: freedom is inevitably coming… I no longer fear death. My heart has seen the inside of your terrorism’ (OMAROMAR1995’s channel 2011).

The Ultras have resisted infiltration by police and intelligence forces or hired provocateurs by using decentralized methods and by organically developing multiple leaders (e.g. Woltering 2013, 300–301). The Egyptian Ultras’ anarchist impulse, refusal of authoritarianism and dogma, and disinterest in working within the system makes them similar to autonomist activists who work on alter-globalization, environmentalism, food, feminism, and workerism (Katsiaficas 1997, 6–9, 198, 201, 235–236). As with such movements, ‘theory and practice [are] in continual interplay’ (ibid., 196). Given such sensibilities and their popularity, it is not surprising that the Egyptian state fears the Ultras. They are difficult to trivialize or dismiss as thugs or terrorists and they are not merely a subculture of football fans. They engage in a politics of emancipatory rupture informed by concrete experiences. Like Chantal Mouffe (2007), they recognize that consensus will not emerge in striated public spaces so they encourage everyone to struggle for positional hegemony through practices that claim space and fuller forms of life.

Battles for space

While scholars have focused on the crisis of sexual assaults and sexual harassment of girls and women in parts of Egypt before and since the revolution, this attention misses the degree to which violence largely occurs
between differently situated men and boys (Amar 2011) and includes state-sponsored sexual torture and assault of boys and men (Tadros 2016). Salwa Ismail argues that the Egyptian revolutionary ‘infrastructures of protest lay in the micro-processes of everyday life that developed at the quarter level, in community forms of organization and in popular youth’s modes of action and interaction with state government’ (2013, 873, 874, 878). Although unmarked by her, youth stands for the boys and men violently subordinated by male security and intelligence officers. Ultras similarly were targets of such violence in neighborhood alleys, police stations, and prisons. They have clashed often with the Interior Ministry’s Central Security Services (police) on the streets and while getting into stadiums since their establishment in 2007.

Mouffe (2007) defines the political as always agonistic between hegemonic and non-hegemonic forces. The Egyptian Ultras are political in this sense even as they resist the term politics given its association with parties and state power. Robbert Woltering argues that Egyptian Ultras have a ‘political consciousness’ that some trace back to their protests against Khaled Said’s death by torture in June 2010 (2013, 294). My sense from analyzing hundreds of Ultras digital sources from 2007 to 2010 is that radical critiques were older but remained largely performative within and around stadiums. For example, in May 2007, the Ultras Ahlawy had their first conflict with club management during a match with the state oil company-sponsored Petrojet club when fans used the game to challenge the raising of ticket prices to attend the 100th game with the Barcelona team (Khamees 2012, 55). Conflict spilled outside these boundaries in response to radicalizing experiences and as everyday life was revolutionized in the region with the Tunisian uprising that began in December 2010.

In resisting arbitrary attempts to restrict fan practices into authorized channels, times and spaces, Egyptian Ultras use the transnational Ultras motto, ‘A.C.A.B.’ (All Cops are Bastards), or its equivalent, ‘1.3.1.2,’ using Roman letters and English words (Figures 5 and 6). They frequently refer to the police as ‘crows’ (ghurab) in their chants and consider them stupid and brutal employees of the Interior Ministry. Their chants include the widely used, ‘The Interior Ministry [Employees] are Thugs’ (al-dakhiliyya baltagiyya), which rhymes in Arabic. Ultras have produced tens of songs about ‘crows’ on YouTube channels. These undermine the story the Interior Ministry tells of itself as a protector of the people (‘Ghurab’ UltrasAhlawy07Media 2013a).

Egyptian Ultras maneuvered stadium versus street and fun versus politics divides as demanded by the changing political field. An Ultras interviewed in 2010 after his co-fans overran a police barricade designed to prevent them from entering a stadium with accoutrements illustrates resistance limited to the stadium: ‘We steer clear of politics. Competition in Egypt is on the soccer
pitch. We break the rules and regulations when we think they are wrong’ (Dorsey 2012, 411–412). During a June 2010 match, the threatening anti-government content of an Ultras Ahlawy chant, likely inspired by the recent death by torture of Khaled Said, was possible because the opposing team...

Figure 5. January 2014, Downtown Cairo. Ultras Pirates; Sisi is a Policing Dog; Remember 19 November [2011, Mohamed Mahmood St. battle with SCAF]. A.C.A.B. [All Cops are Bastards]; Fuck SCAF [Supreme Council of the Armed Forces]. Reasons for Loss of the Revolution – Activists and Love of the Self “I.” Photo by author.

Figure 6. 1 February 2014, Gezira, Cairo, 1.3.1.2 = A.C.A.B. Photo by author.
was a police football club: ‘Fear us, government/We are determined tonight/ Al-Ahly audience puts things on fire/Fuck the officer and the sub-officer’ (in Abdelhameed Ibrahim 2015, 95). Beginning in early 2011, the Ultras worked to escalate clashes to allow revolutionaries to win (Bashir 2011, 92–93, 71). They were able to act collectively, to hit and run, to survive and escape prolonged exposure to tear gas, to change their front fighters so as to rest them periodically, to bang the drums to warn of police attacks, to identify provocateurs, to cheer and whistle when in need of tactical withdraws, to avoid collective running knowing the danger of stampings and panics, to regroup, and return fireworks, [and] to suffer and endure pain (Tuastad 2014, 378).

An Ultras Ahlawy (interviewed May 2012) who led a procession from the Haram neighborhood on 25 January 2011 explained: ‘It is a way of saying [to the police] I have broken you…. You humiliated me and belittled my dignity. You made me take off my clothes when entering the stadium’ (Ismail 2013, 877).

The dominant definition of political as partisan or intent on acquiring government power allowed the former Ultras White Knights Bashir to make this paradoxical statement in early 2011 as Ultras were leading revolutionary battles against security forces: ‘Egyptian Ultras are apolitical. They do not participate in politics. They only demand freedom, justice and social equality, and encourage the participation of its members in the community’ (Bashir 2011, 74). In an April 2011 interview, Bashir explained: ‘I was against corruption and the regime and for human rights. Radical anarchism was my creed. Ultras ignore the system. You do your own system because you already own the game’ (Dorsey 2012, 413). An Ultras fan interviewed in May 2012 insisted: ‘Everything we did is politics; the slogans and chants. We practice politics using our language, the language of the people organized in the public square’ (my emphasis) (Ismail 2013, 879). These intense experiences not only change subjectivities, they also transform space. Muhammad Mahmoud Street remains at this writing segmented by massive concrete blocks installed by the government following the famous November 2011 battle between revolutionaries supported by the Ultras (who did not use guns, tanks, or bombs) and military forces who intended to clear Tahrir Square of protestors. Approximately 50 people died in that six-day battle.

The Port Said massacre occurred immediately after an Ahly away game won by the Masry football club. In 20 minutes of what seemed to be facilitated mayhem, 74 Ultras Ahlawy fans were killed and hundreds injured. The military-led state and its media acolytes attempted to constitute the massacre as the result of ‘hooliganism’ (shaghb al-mala’ib), a ‘competitive grudge’ worked out on the soccer pitch, or regional tensions about restrictions imposed by Cairo on the port city’s ability to trade since the early
1990s (Khamees 2012, 8; El-Zatmah 2012, 810). However, much evidence points to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and Interior Ministry seeking to punish the Ultras for continuing to lead and participate in demonstrations against military rule. Police did not search entrants (many without tickets to the game) for knives and machetes, stadium floodlights were turned off during the violence, and a major gate that would have allowed fans under attack to flee was closed (Tuastad 2014, 379). State authorities suspended football matches in Egypt for two months after the massacre.

On 8 February 2015, security forces killed 20 Ultras White Knights in another massacre outside a football stadium in Cairo. Before the killings, security forces had limited the entry of the 20,000 fans to a game by opening only one door. Police dropped teargas bombs and shot bullets to disperse fans eager to enter a stadium for the first time in three years to watch the Zamalek team play against another Cairo club. Fans lit performance flares to protect themselves from teargas and screamed, ‘Open! Open! Open!’ (UWKmedia 2015; ‘The Entryway: 8 February’ 2015). The match continued, provoking further outrage and forcing the Egyptian Football Federation to suspend the remainder of the domestic league season (‘Egyptian Football’ 2015; Maher and Mourad 2015). The Ultras are acutely aware of partitioning strategies by team owners, state officials and security forces who decide to open and close, constrict and widen, entrap and release. During the 2012 massacre, the state trapped and wreaked violence on Ultras fans and the Ahlawy team within and outside the stadium during and after a game. During the 2015 massacre, state and football officials trapped White Knights Zamalek fans outside the gates of the game and police attacked them. The Ultras’ stance against the state and its oligarchical backers hardened given intensified violence and pro-state media collusion (‘war against us’) (UWKmedia 2014).

On 16 May 2015, an Egyptian court upheld a ban on Ultras as ‘terrorist organizations.’ The case was brought by Ahmad Mortada Mansour (Linn 2015), elected chairman of Zamalek SC in March 2014. Mortada is an outspoken supporter of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Sisi and hated by White Knights Ultras. Mass ‘preventative’ arrests of Ultras before major football games in Egypt are now common. The state occasionally lifts a ban they imposed against fans attending football games to ‘test the waters’ (‘Police detain’ 2016; ElDeeb 2016).

The Ultras use song to tell counterhegemonic stories that challenge the state’s attempt to saturate sonic space. ‘We Will Never Stop Singing’ is among their most important slogans. The White Knights song, ‘Open, We Are Dying,’ which is about the 2015 massacre and available on their YouTube channel, is set to the melody of ‘Do You Hear the People Sing?’ from Les Mis. It describes
White Knights as occupiers of the *curva sud* who wanted to cheer with voices that ‘travel and cross borders,’ but were massacred by authorities who refused to ‘open the door’ (UWKmedia 2015). Ultras’ songs also render stories that tell the history of their sporting club (‘Al-Kayan’ UltrasAhlawy07Media 2013b), explain triggers of the revolution (stealing ‘our resources’ and ‘all my dreams’) (Abdulrhman Salem 2013), analyze their own and wider Egyptian experiences, and challenge state practices.

Such accounts include the widely memorized and sung Ultras Ahlawy ‘Our Story,’ produced after the 1 February 2012 massacre (excerpted): ‘Football was full of lies and deception when we arrived. It was a distraction and a mask for the authorities. They tried to beautify it to be a campaign [nationalist] for the country, to make the stadium filled with thousands who forget. They keep trying to kill our thinking while injustice is everywhere…. (UltrasArabe 2012). A few months earlier, the Ultras White Knights released, ‘The Sun of Freedom – 7: The Revolutionary Song which similarly stresses a mentality of freedom, continuing state repression, and a refusal to forget: ‘The Revolution produced an idea that cannot die… Revolution and struggle… a method of life … a part of my mentality that the tyrants do not understand… Kill and imprison anything new … and build your prisons around it’ (UWKmedia 2012). These songs name and challenge the carceral logic governing Egypt and express alternative ‘methods of life’ (Figure 7) that affirm forms of thinking and living that exceed existing ideological, institutional, and spatial boundaries.

‘More than a brother’: Love and sensuous reason

The Ultras use physical and virtual spaces to express and cultivate lifelong dedication and principled passionate support for each other as ‘more than brothers’ (Figure 8). They neither delimit such emotions to the home nor associate them with the feminine. Deborah Thien argues for attention to emotion
in geography, as well as dissolving gendered ‘public/private boundaries’ (Thien 2005, 450, 452). Masculine identities are produced in relations between ‘mind, body and emotions’ (Gorman-Murray and Hopkins 2014, 7), but also in site-specific relations with others. Attending to the ‘ethnopoetics of space,’ Stuart C. Aitken argues: ‘If we think of spaces as events that have history and encourage change, then spaces and people can become something different through complex, emotionally-charged relations’ (2014, 270).

The Ultras are highly oriented to producing such ethnopoetics, and have multiple site-specific intense bonding experiences they insist they will ‘never forget.’ They remember them in songs, chants, videos, texts and images imprinted on posters, walls, Facebook, and clothing. An Ultras White Knights Facebook image and status update titled ‘Blood brothers’ from 1 December 2013 (Figure 3) illustrates their ethnopoetics of relationship. The slogan ‘blood brothers,’ the author writes, ‘clarifies the depth of each individual’s ties to the others even if he does not know them/expresses the importance of sacrifice, sincerity, and resistance among all individuals in the group.’ The update continues that an Ultras who does not apply ‘such fundamental’ principles will be considered an ‘intruder or a parasite’ and expelled.

A long line of feminist philosophy has challenged the gendered opposition between reason and emotion, a critique much better developed in relation to women since the label ‘irrational’ often legitimizes their lower status. In contrast to findings on white Western masculinities (Gorman-Murray and Hopkins 2014, 8), Ultras are not ‘disengaged’ from their ‘emotional and sensuous embodiment’ (ibid.). They actively work to produce such emotions in their physical, spatial, visual, vocal and textual practices. Interestingly, while Matthew Klugman (2015, 204) found that others questioned the masculinity and sexuality of passionate Australian Rules football fans (and fans sometimes questioned themselves), this does not seem to occur with the Ultras,
possibly because of their physical capabilities but more importantly because of the centrality of intimate male friendships in Egypt and elsewhere in the region.

While male passion, devotion, and desire directed at sports players or a club are common (though rarely studied) (Klugman 2015), in the Ultras’ case passionate fandom exceeds the club and sport. Its affects and effects project well beyond the pitch, disrupting the sensibilities and rules of a militarized government and capitalist property relations. Moreover, I contend that the Ultras love and work to support each other at least as much as they love and support their teams. While ‘love’ is impossible to universally define, Klugman found it ‘is one of the most frequent terms used by Australian Rules football supporters to describe their feelings for both their teams and many of the players for these teams’ (ibid., 198, 204–205). He observed an embodied eroticism among ‘straight-identifying male fans’ of football that does not ‘fit easily into the aggressive heterosexual hegemonic masculinity that spectator sports like baseball and the football codes are supposed to uphold and perpetuate’ (ibid., 204). Expressions of love, sometimes referred to as ‘hard love,’ are ubiquitous in Ultras performances and communications (Figure 9).

Clifton Evers finds in his phenomenological study of men’s surfing practice in Australia that embodied sensuality becomes ‘a way of life’ even as such
surfers are inaccurately referred to ‘as straight as steel, strong as granite, austere, inviolate’ (Evers 2009, 893, 894). Ultras similarly consider themselves to follow specific ‘methods of life’ that structure their lives in relation to and beyond football. Evers’ point that surfers’ ‘Masculinity is built on intimacy—a sensual life’ (ibid., 901) also applies to the Utras. Examining Sudanese refugee boys’ involvement in football in Australia, Evers found that they turn to the game largely to ‘make friends and have fun’ – to create ‘intimacy and trust,’ that is, to bond. For the boys involved, more important than playing the game was that physically doing things together and ‘feeling things together builds trust’ (2010, 58–59).

Porros fans explained to Magazine that their youth protects them from ‘corruption and clientelism,’ as well as the dulling of feelings produced by ‘scientific objectivity or democratic rationality.’ They believe that as a result, they are more ‘free to experience genuine emotion such as love, passion, or joy’ (2007, 11, 47). Egyptian Ultras, like porros football fans in Mexico City, invest a great deal in symbolic repertoires and physical practices that cultivate and express joy and love for the game, their team, and each other. Rarely looking at a camera, Ultras choreograph visual fields and transform sonic space, priding themselves on highly energetic physical and performative innovation and stamina even if their team loses. This is why they remain standing and cheering throughout a match (Bashir 2011, 79). On the same logic, they defend themselves and each other and challenge technologies that enclose and restrict them. They consider visceral cheering to be about fully living, as expressed by their motto: ‘The day I stop cheering, I’ll definitely be dead’ (ibid., 56).

Egyptian Ultras use the Italian words tifo (fan) and koriyo to refer to original choreographed terrace displays by thousands of fans using banners and colored plastic and fabric squares (Figure 10). They revel in fresh banners, chants, and songs unveiled at particular moments. They ignite flares in coordination and ritualistically strip their shirts off at a certain point in a match. Although they repeat refrains in songs and chants, ‘no two performances [in a stadium] are exactly alike’ (Abdelhameed Ibraheem 2015, 54). Pyrotechnic shows are a major aspect of Ultras terrace performances and often illuminate a banner message. Fans amplify all performances by uploading videos on YouTube and by sharing recordings of songs and chants on internet channels in pedagogical practices that facilitate memorization and cultivate an Ultras sensibility. While usually honoring the team, such displays also condemn sectarian violence, glorify fans and martyrs, and most often, threaten to hold to account team owners, politicians, and police.

During games, Ultras wear coordinated colors, dance together and alone, jump in choreographed fashion with fists in the air, and chant and sing together. The Egyptian Ultras express ‘together forever’ in multiple registers
and forms in their songs, art, graffiti, and videos. ‘Together forever’ connotes attachment to the club team but more importantly bonds of loyalty, affection, and commitment to each other. It is worth considering the contrasts with the poster, ‘Egypt is the Factory of Men’ (Figure 4), which expresses ideal masculinity as the mass reproduction of an armed militarist hierarchy with tens of conscripts marching in the background, a weighty block of the English word ‘EGYPT’ in the colors of the flag threateningly suspended over them. In the composition, Sisi oversees and embodies a national frame completely dominated by military men. The military tableau is disproportionate to the sky and tall building behind them. The emotional and spatial field produced by Egyptian Ultras, in contrast, relies on loyal and relational methods of living and thinking, understood as part of an ‘Ultras spirit’ (Bashir 2011, 88). It is worth sharing their philosophy statement at length, noting the intimacy produced by shifts in pronouns, as well as the unbounded nature of the project (excerpted):

The Ultras is a spirit that takes over its owner to become a method of life. The Ultras is the spirit of adventure, risk, cooperation, courage, talent, honor and loyalty… The Ultras is my weakness and your strength… his temper … and the loyalty of the person sitting in his neighborhood… it is our tears and our nights… it is our exhaustion and our joys … it is what gathers us and gathers you … it is your arm on my shoulder … to dance and sing … and your standing with your back to mine during a battle… it is our hugs and our well-being … it is our claps and songs … it is your ability to rely on me when I am sick in bed and it is my standing at the front of your wedding. It is my need for a warm hug to cry into… and your need for a friend to share the moments of your success. It is me

Figure 10. 1 February 2014. Preparing for the Dakhla, or entry event, on the terrace. Photo by author.
... and you ... and him ... so that we become ‘them’ [masc.]... At the point when the force of the earth itself cannot ban you from wearing the shirt of your group and singing for the 90-minute match, you will continue to sing during your work...daydreams ... as you eat and drink, until you may surprise yourself into jumping, cheering, and singing without feeling it in any place. Do you now feel how the meaning has become deeper than cheers for 90 minutes? (Bashir 2011, 12–13).

Older Ultras teach younger boys to defend Ultras’ group honor and themselves against bullying and to not abuse them. They are trained not to attack or insult others unless attacked and condemn racist and sectarian attacks. The intimacy they cultivate easily accepts alterity among boys and men:

We are Arabs and Egyptians and before all else we are Muslims. We respect our creed and sacred rules that insist we do not humiliate or mock someone on the basis of their color or creed. We always follow honorable qualities that make it imperative we not attack an individual from an adversary group when they are walking alone... We only attack those who attack us and show our real teeth only in honorable defense (2008 collective Ultras statement in Bashir 2011, 11)

Nevertheless, the Ultras express outrage and threat against the dominant order. White Knights, for example, remind Zamalek SC owner Mortada and state authorities that they will not forget the 8 February 2015 massacre. Ultras Ahlawy banners and songs similarly repeatedly affirm: ‘We will not forget’ the 1 February 2012 massacre of fans or the Egyptian Revolution and its vicious battles. More dangerously for the state, Ultras refrains promise a future reckoning (Figure 11). Another White Knights song threatens: ‘We have not forgotten Tahrir, you sons of dogs ... the Revolution was considered a setback for you ...’ (Mohamed Majdi 2014). There are multiple videos set to this song, some with montages of major revolutionary battles and others of fans singing as they jump in coordination facing security forces on the pitch (Ahmad Alsharaky 2013).

Understanding the Egyptian Ultras in purely performative or symbolic terms, to use Magazine’s argument for Mexico City porros, ‘leaves little room for treating fans’ cheering practices as creative, engaging, concrete action constitutive of the material world’ (2007, 15, 62–3). Moreover, passion, George Katsiaficas (1997) reminds us in his analysis of autonomous movements, is fundamental to the decolonization of everyday life: ‘So long as apathy defines daily life for the majority, those who choose to live differently have little choice but the alternatives of confronting the system or escaping it through exhilarating otherworldly states’ (1997, 237). In a context where ‘the system colonizes eros,’ he argues, ‘autonomous movements respond by recusing eros from its commodification, expanding its space, and moving beyond patriarchal relationships, beyond conceptions of love as physical love. The politics of eros infuses everyday life ...’ (ibid.). These ways of living
are particularly important, Katsiaficas continues, for young activists given the repression, blockages, and depression produced by capitalism (ibid., 238–240). Yet rationalist and hierarchical leftist approaches to social transformation too often dismiss or underestimate ‘conscious spontaneity’ and ‘sensuous reason’ grounded in ‘concrete demands’ (ibid., 223, 226, 230, 231). Sensuous reason and embodied resistance are central to the life worlds produced by the Ultras.

At the heart of Ultras principles and methods of life is unconditional love of the group. In Klugman’s analysis of Australian football fans, he argues that the ‘heterodox love’ they had for their favorite players might be a ‘recuperative form of masculinity, rather than a challenging one,’ but he was not sure (2015, 207). I similarly suggest leaving this question open in relation to the Egyptian Ultras.

**Conclusion**

Aymon Kreil points out that scholarship on intimacy and desire in Egypt largely focuses on ‘family and marriage’ when in fact different kinds of ‘manly performance’ are cultivated depending on the site of sociality (Kreil 2016, 167). In his case, homosocial *baladi* (local) coffee shops were settings for much sex talk among men, whereas different talk and anxieties were
expressed in family settings (2016, 167, 172–3). Because its basis is discursive analysis, this article cannot determine the degree to which Ultras’ cultural productions and practices align with individual behaviors and sensibilities outside of public settings. Not surprisingly given the massive number of boys and men involved, they express individuality and difference.

Feminist and queer scholarship have demonstrated that masculinity and femininity are unstable signs and historically contextual subjectivities rather than essentially connected to particular kinds of sexed bodies. Boys and men have multiple subjectivities, positionalities, and desires. Manifest masculinist power hides the degree to which elite men consider other men rather than women the main threats to their preferred social order (Hasso 2011, 166, 169). Ultras masculinities and affective geographies are largely illegible (Neal 2013) within current frames for understanding gender and sexuality in Egypt. This article contends that the homosociality and masculine enactments of the Egyptian Ultras are worthy of consideration beyond their exclusion of girls and women. It does not necessarily condemn the Ultras’ cultivation of intense male camaraderie because gender-based subordination does not appear to be central to their existence. The authoritarian state, the ruling class, and police consider the Egyptian Ultras dangerous and fear them because they seek full forms of living not easily contained by the category of ‘fun’ or the stadium. Their cultural repertoires and discourse rely on sensuous reason and undermine binaries of mind/body and rationality/emotionality. They remake space and sensibilities and militantly challenge the partitions and deadening aspects of the Egyptian security state through their language and embodied enactments. They express anger at arbitrary control, resist containment physically and rhetorically, and cultivate love and joy. In the process, they engage in politics in its agonistic fullest sense. Fundamentally different kinds of masculine energies and visions are at work and in conflict in Egypt and elsewhere in the region. Feminist and social movement scholars, as well as activists, would do well to pay much more attention to them outside of typical frames.

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