“Graffiti of Mubarak.” Photo by Ramy Raoof. Taken January 31, 2011. Image cropped. https://www.flickr.com/photos/38290178@N06/5405409376/. This photo is licensed under the Creative Commons CC BY 2.0. https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/.
DIGITAL HISTORY REFLECTION

Graffiti of the Egyptian Revolution in Cairo

Nala Chehade
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This digital history reflection is based on Nala Chehade’s “Graffiti of the Egyptian Revolution in Cairo,” which won the Virginia Tech Department of History’s 2018 Undergraduate Digital History prize. Nala’s project is an interactive map which shows readers images of graffiti made during the 2011 revolution in Cairo, accompanied by a description and analysis of the image. Nala’s work on this topic began with an undergraduate research paper that won the Virginia Tech Department of History’s Best Paper Prize in 2017 and appeared in volume seven of the Review. In this reflection Nala talks about her decision to turn this research into a digital history project and the advantages and challenges of this process. You can interact with her project at the following link: https://prezi.com/view/XCoC9pbNROoytDivVea/.

—The Editors

After spending a year writing my first independent research paper on the sociopolitical implications of graffiti created in Cairo during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, I eagerly applied to several conferences to share my results with other historians. I attended five conferences as a senior at Virginia Tech, including the American Historical Association (AHA) Annual Meeting in Washington, DC, in January 2018. This conference fulfilled many of my hopes about exchanging ideas in a stimulating academic setting. I shared my work in a poster session with a diverse range of historian-presenters, from undergraduate students to respected professional historians. Although the poster style generously lent itself to a display of images that may not have been possible through a panel-style discussion, many individuals at this conference suggested that my work would
be most effectively communicated through an interactive online map. I decided to pursue this option as a way of sharing my research with a public audience.

An interactive web-based map provides several major advantages over an image-based poster. First, an online archive can be widely accessible to the general public, especially those outside of academia, who can then engage with cultural productions of the Egyptian Revolution without attending a conference or reading a journal article. Secondly, a website allows scholars and archivists to share a greater number of their images without the limitations imposed by space on a poster, allotted time for a presentation, or suggested length for a paper. Finally, the web-based map allows for the user to engage in a more interactive experience than either a poster or a traditional paper.

A few weeks after attending the AHA Annual Meeting, I returned to Virginia Tech to begin my final semester of senior year. With support from Dr. Carmen Gitre and Professor William Taggart, who led my “Islam, Art, and Social Change” course, I began the journey to transform my research paper into an interactive graffiti map. I did not intend to create a comprehensive archive of every piece of graffiti created in Cairo in 2011, but rather to tell a particular narrative about contemporary social engagement through sharing select images. Despite my enthusiasm for the project, as well as the unrelenting support of my mentors, I encountered several difficulties throughout the process.

Most notably, I struggled to find the proper software. As someone who has never used online maps, I went through nearly fifty websites in search of one that would accommodate my vision: sharing images in a certain order, pairing text and citations with images, and displaying specific locations on the map of Cairo. I often felt frustrated at the prospect of compromising my vision due to my inability to code an original website.

Furthermore, I struggled to select textual content to accompany images. Following ethnographer Cathy Stanton’s definition of public history, I wanted this website to make my insights “accessible and useful for the general public.” However, I felt torn between maintaining the

\[1\] Cathy Stanton, “‘What Is Public History?’ Redux,” Public History News 27, no. 4 (September 2007).
advanced, analytical language used in my original paper or reworking it with a brief and conversational tone. In many ways, I conflated the latter with compromising the theoretical work I had spent so many hours pursuing. After internal debate and much discussion with my mentors, I decided that I had indeed spent a lot of time on this project thus far—from selecting a topic, pursuing research, writing a paper, creating a poster, and now working on a website. Therefore, it would be shortsighted of me to limit nonacademic audiences from accessing my work. I pushed through these difficulties by reminding myself of the times I spoke about my research with my non-historian friends, many of whom enjoyed hearing about my work when filtered colloquially.

As a result, I’ve learned a lot about the overlap between academic and nonacademic spaces for intellectual exchange. While historians are not the only ones who have an interest in the past, it is primarily historians who have an interest and responsibility in connecting the past with the present. Academics are often criticized for being disconnected from the general public while living safely in their “ivory towers”; but public historians provide a link between academic researcher and the general public through museums, websites, and historic sites. This was the aim of my graffiti mapping project. I am fortunate that my experiences with digital history have allowed me to develop a variety of skills, including project creation and management, technical pedagogy, digital communication, GIS mapping, and audiovisual editing. I plan to carry these newfound skills, in addition to my traditional historical skills, to my graduate degree program in Middle East Studies and future workplace, which I hope combines research, policy, and media.

In conclusion, the Virginia Tech Digital History Prize has allowed me to reflect on the effectiveness and accessibility of traditional forms of research. Without discounting the importance of the traditional scholarly monograph, I believe that alternative publishing paths allowed me to share my insight with the broadest possible audience. Nonetheless, many obstacles complicated the transition from traditional academic paper to digital public history artifact, especially the attempt to detach oneself from formal language. However, there is no one better equipped to tailor research to a broad range of audiences than the historians who are experts in their areas of research.
About the Author:

Nala Chehade is a recent graduate from Virginia Tech in international studies and history, with minors in Middle East studies, war and society, and Spanish. Her research explores questions of identity, displacement, cultural politics, and alternative media in the Middle East. During summer 2017, she researched the history of refugee civic engagement in southwest Virginia. Nala hopes to pursue a graduate degree in Middle East studies.