The Democratic Grotesque

Distortion, Liminality, and Dissensus in Post-Revolutionary Tunisia

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Abstract

How do we understand the presence of the grotesque in negotiations of democratic life after a revolution? At the peak of procedural democratic consolidation, carnivalesque revelries in Tunisia became the object of public aporia and repugnance. The dissimilar interpretations of these revelries across generations evince an agonistic process of prizing open both the parameters of nationhood and democratic ideals within existing social relations. The concept of the 'democratic grotesque' captures the sensorial and affective ways Tunisian citizens negotiate the affordances and limitations of democracy in the post-revolutionary nation. The democratic grotesque has the double potential to revise intellectual and public understandings of democratic dispositions that emanate from liberal democracy and to blur the boundaries between revolution and democracy.

Keywords: democracy, dissensus, grotesque, liberalism, liminality, revolution, Tunisia, youth

In late springtime every year, Tunisian high school seniors celebrate the onset of their Baccalaureate exam (final-year state-sanctioned examination) with a student-organised event called *dakhla*. The *dakhla*, which means 'entry', succeeds the first stage of the Bac that tests physical skills through a combination of gymnastics and competitive sports: for this reason, it is often referred to as '*dakhlat Bac sport*'. A hybrid event, the *dakhla* toys with a diversity of references, among which are carnival revelries with their distorted parodist characters and pre-match spectacles in football stadiums with their banners and slogans. Preparations for the *dakhla* begin as early as September of the senior year with a student fundraising campaign (*collecte*) for the purchase of the material that will produce the distinct one to two-stories-high cloth banner (*lafita*) of each high school. This banner subsequently enters a competition with other high schools across the country. In anticipation of

the *dakhla*, the educational administration expects the disruption of school routine, loud music, dancing, fireworks, smoke canisters, and air-horns that make up the visual and sensory landscape of the school for the day. Staff prepares for a student takeover of space—from schoolyard to rooftop and the school's PA system—and headmasters give permission to students to enter the building at dawn to unfurl their banner and set things up for the event.

On the evening of 20 April 2015, however, Mohamed Hajjem, a middle-aged high school civics instructor I worked closely with, posted a photo on Facebook with the comment: '*Win ousalna?* (What have we come to?)'. The photo was of a banner unfurled over the walls of a high school in the town of Kairouan during a *dakhla*. The banner (see Figure 1) spotlights the gigantic figure of a fighter with a covered face and a sword in hand towering over his victims dressed in orange uniforms. One of the slain victims is bleeding profusely while another male figure is burning alive. The backdrop to the banner features an urban landscape with a hint of Islamic architecture set against a sandy-coloured canvas evocative of the desert. The phrasing of Mr. Hajjem's status update '*Win ousalna*', indicating his aporia, assumed that his Facebook contacts shared a specific perception of the banner: an ISIS-like military attire and weaponry and the now iconic images of the Jordanian pilot Muath el-Kassasba burned alive in a cage and of men in orange jumpsuits about to be executed seemed to point to one interpretive direction. His contacts complemented his aporia with statements of abhorrence: '*Khit! Ma taswira, tkhawaf!* (Ew! What a photo, it's horrifying!)'.

Merely four years after the popular revolution that overthrew the twenty-three-year-old dictatorship headed by the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) party and a few months after two internationally applauded rounds of parliamentary and presidential elections, both legal and school authorities rushed to discipline the instigators of what became known as the '*dakhla* scandals'. Municipal magistrates called a number of students for questioning and threatened them with legal prosecution. School principals deliberated on their expulsion. Both authorities construed the irreverence of the revelries as a criminal offence in two ways: a symbolic affront to the process of democratisation and an actual security threat to the Tunisian nation. Newspapers picked up the story and made the photos and videos viral. New images from other *dakhla* revelries in different parts of the country followed shortly; a much circulated and discussed banner depicted Adolf Hitler saluting the German flag (see Figure 2).¹ These banners, which the camera captured along with large crowds of students in jubilant poses, dancing or waving smoke canisters in the schoolyard or school rooftops, appeared to Mr. Hajjem and other social media consumers to declare student allegiance to the radical ideologies of ISIS and the Third Reich. All those who chided the *dakhla* banners condemned the anti-democratic, unpatriotic, and extremist leanings of state school students (Marzouk 2015). Sympathisers were more divided: some scaled down the scandal by comparing the relatively few controversial banners with the majority of *dakhla* imagery, which exhibited student allegiance to their nation through depictions of the Tunisian flag. Others shifted the focus away from symptom, which they designated as religious

nawaat.org/2015/04/26/de-cette-entree-de-la-jeunesse-signant-la-sortie-de-la-politique-de-nos-elites/

De cette « entrée » de la jeunesse signant la sortie de la politique de nos élites

Figure 1: Dakhlat Bac Sport, City of Kairouan. Illustration for article by Farhat Othman. *Nawaat* website, 26 April. Accessed May 12, 2021. <http://nawaat.org/portail/2015/04/26/de-cette-entree-de-la-jeunesse-signant-la-sortie-de-la-politique-de-nos-elites>.

webdo.tn/2018/04/14/bac-sport-11-blesses-a-jendouba-apres-dakhla/#.YJvI0mZKju0/

webdo

NATIONAL

SPORT

CULTURE

CHRONIQUES

Figure 2: Dakhlat Bac Sport, City of Jendouba. Illustration for article by Maher Chaabane. *Webdo* website, April 14. Accessed May 12, 2021. <https://www.webdo.tn/2018/04/14/bac-sport-11-blesses-a-jendouba-apres-dakhla/#.YJvI0mZKju0/>.

and political extremism, to root cause, namely the anger young Tunisians felt about their continuing exclusion from avenues of socio-economic integration after the revolution (Ben Amor 2015). Across the spectrum, commentators took the symbols of the banners as semiotically obvious—an ISIS soldier stands for Islamic fundamentalism and Hitler stands for Nazism—and saw them as transgressions of political or moral nature. Significantly, their explanations were the voices of an audience older than the student body. In their paternalistic abhorrence and vexation, these explanations classified the *dakhla* as evidence of derailment of democratic consolidation and of irreparable fissures in previously shared commitments to the Tunisian nation. One anonymous commentator wrote on a Tunisian website: ‘What happened in the high schools of Jendouba and Kairouan is a strong omen announcing the end of the Tunisia we had hoped for, modern, liberal, and equal’ (Othman 2015).

Those embedded in the secondary school system—civics instructors, students, and recent graduates—engaged in equally tense but different conversations around the *dakhla* revelries. Their negotiation around the meaning of such banners can be productively understood through a concept I name the ‘democratic grotesque’. Neither a precise style nor exclusive to the Western visual tradition that coined its name, the grotesque is best understood as a mode of aesthetic communication that startles the senses and evokes a range of affects from aporia to repugnance and horror (Connelly 2012). The grotesque is far from new to anthropology, decipherable in a range of social phenomena that span the domains of ritual, carnival, state performances, and popular dissent (Bakhtin 1984; Turner 1974; van Gennep 1960). In ritual and during carnival, the grotesque inheres in zones of liminality—a state of suspended in-between-ness—becoming a visual depiction of the temporary upending of social order. In this article, I will present the grotesque of the *dakhla* revelries in what I suggest are its three constitutive elements: the optics of distortion, the sensorium of liminality, and a stance of permanent dissensus, namely a profound disagreement over the profile of authority within the national democratic polity. I will claim that the sensorial and affective elements of the grotesque operate in the following ways: First, the aesthetic communication of the grotesque signposts some of the distorted and ludicrous dimensions of citizenship that underpin both the revolution and the period of democratisation. Its disruptive effect actually enables Tunisian citizens to test the affordances of democracy within the realm of post-revolutionary nationhood, the experience of which differs substantially across generations. Second, this testing has the double potential to revise scholarly and public imaginaries of democratic dispositions that emanate from deliberative models of liberal democracy. If we align democratic life with a sensorial and affective excess, we can recalibrate the grotesque as not external to democracy but, in fact, as its vital mechanism for ensuring the continuous interruption of hegemonic articulations of authority. This way, democracy becomes a theory of politics rather than a system of governance, the latter being more often than not a means to manage and contain the excess of democratic life. Third, in anthropological analyses of the state, the grotesque is constitutive of state performances aimed at

establishing a sensory and affective communication with the national body through excess, absurdity, and even vulgarity (Armbrust 2017; Fassin 2017; Mbembe 1992). When addressing the grotesque from below, the grotesque is usually confined to what scholars have designated as the revolutionary period (Thomassen 2012, 2017). Yet the democratic grotesque in contemporary Tunisia unsettles a presumption in the previously mentioned studies that there is something sensible and contained about democracy to which the grotesque represents a dangerous supplement. Arguing that the grotesque in fact partakes in the unfolding of democratic life in the post-revolutionary nation (Das 2017; Rancière 2010), this article demonstrates that the boundaries between revolution and democracy are unstable.

My analysis draws on fieldwork conducted regularly in Tunisia between 2013 and 2016 with the goal to map out the diverse and often contradictory enactments of democracy on the ground. The aspect of fieldwork most relevant to this article was a systematic engagement with state school civics instructors in one of the Tunis governorates during their weekly assembly to discuss the mandatory course of civic education (*tarbiya madaniya*). It is important to note that neither my interlocutors nor myself witnessed the specific *dakhla* revelries that provoked public consternation and state crackdown. For one, some of these revelries took place in high schools located in the interior provinces of Tunisia—a fact that is far from coincidental. Yet by virtue of summoning a temporary autonomous zone of youthful indiscretion, even those *dakhla* revelries that took place in the capital were closed off to the school administration, teaching personnel, and the general public. Their insularity was not complete as students uploaded photos of the *dakhla* banners and videos on social media for the sake of intra-school competition. Hence it is fair to assume that these revelries invited a public gaze, serving as a mode of aesthetic communication not only with a national but also with a global audience. I interrogate this mode of communication through my embedded-ness in the same networks that the revelries interpellated most directly: teachers, students, and graduates. My aim is not to unearth the precise actions and true intentions of the students who produced the imagery that prompted moral outrage. Instead, I take this imagery to be inescapably inter-textual through its multiple layers of citation and in its sensorial and affective co-constitution by their producers and their viewers (Lazar 2015). This co-constitution allows us to see how localised, and in this case, generational articulations of post-revolutionary nationhood and democratic life emerge against the backdrop of the prescriptive vocabulary and infrastructure of liberal representative democracy (Paley 2002).

Tunisian liberal democracy with a twist

Is it paradoxical that elements of the grotesque should feature so strongly in a national polity internationally hailed as the most successful example of democratic transition in the Middle East and North Africa region? Institutionalised liberalism, the hyphenated partner of modern Western democracy, has been a tortuous experience in Tunisia. This is both due to the fact that the ideology's commitment

to the naturalised values of individualism, rule of law, and secularism has rubbed against local understandings of the political (Spencer 1997) and because its elision with the prerogatives of the global market has created contradictory and injurious experiences on the ground (Greenhouse 2010). Perhaps more salient, however, is the fact that the glossary of liberalism and its associated concepts of civility and consensus have allowed political elites to muddle the distinction between modernising authoritarianism and democracy.

Tunisia boasts the first Arab Constitution in 1860, but it was the post-French Protectorate government of Habib Bourguiba that in 1959 merged an explicit rhetoric and de jure adoption of liberal elements, the ‘norms of civility, freedom, equality, and tolerance of pluralism’ (Murphy 2013: 237), with the de facto dominance of executive over legislative mechanisms and the inclusion of oppositional voices through presidential selection. The form of consensus (*tawafuq* or *itifaq* emanating from the same verbal root w-f-q) that President-for-life Bourguiba and his coerced cabinet repeatedly forged in a plethora of public addresses hinged on the singular French term *Tunisianité* (Tunisian-ness). The concept condensed liberal elements, such as institutional secularism, and exhausted ideas and emotions of national belonging. Since *Tunisianité* became synonymous with civil behaviour and moderation, any form of dissent was cast as extremism and a threat to national security (Mullin and Rouabah 2016). When Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali took over in a coup d’état in 1987, consensus persisted as mechanism of governance under the revamped name *National Pact* (*Mithaq 7 Novembre*): a compromising deal between the new president and selected opposition parties committed to pursue ‘consensus-based politics under his tutelage’ (Murphy 2013: 237). The National Pact translated into RCD patronage over an economic agenda of fiscal deregulation and a merciless police state that crushed non-consensual political opposition for over two decades. The much-touted Tunisian ‘exceptionalism’, a state-emanating and internationally sanctioned discourse that presents the country in stark contradistinction with the rest of the region, is in fact the product of the authoritarian state’s long history of operationalising the discursive and structural elements of liberalism and democracy (Mullin and Rouabah 2016). This technique of power has produced an inventory of political experience that filtered people’s perception of the nation and of politics both before and after the revolution.

In the post-revolution period, Tunisia underwent seemingly sweeping institutional transformation through the set-up of an interim government through general election in October 2011, the drafting of a constitution ratified in January 2014, and two rounds of parliamentary and presidential elections in 2014 and 2015. What followed, however, was a ‘conservative revolution and a transition to a democracy that is partly governed by forces of restoration’ (Marzouki and Meddeb 2016: 121). What first appeared as a moment of unprecedented political possibility turned into an exercise in taming. In the name of democracy, and with the eyes of Tunisia’s patrons and world media on them, the newly elected Constituent Assembly members—some of whom assumed a political voice after decades of imprisonment, exile, and marginalisation—were repeatedly coached into toning down

their vocabularies and passions as they debated the contours of Tunisian national identity and the shape of Tunisian society. Following the political assassinations of Tunisian left-wing politicians Chokri Belaid and Mohammed Brahmi and the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood-headed government in Egypt, the Constituent Assembly headed by the formerly persecuted Movement of Islamic Tendency, renamed *al-Nahdha* (Renaissance), faced intense national and international pressure. Through a new pact, tantalizingly labelled the National Dialogue Pact (*Thiqat Carthage*), the first democratically elected government gave way to a technocratic government that ratified the new constitution in January 2014 and prepared the second round of democratic elections for November 2014. The civil society actors that brokered the National Dialogue Pact were awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 2015. After all this arm twisting, Tunisians established a new coalition government that brought together the two main political rivals: the moderate Islamic party *al-Nahdha* and the secular party coalition *Nida' Tounes*. This outcome was internationally lauded for swiftly ensuring consensus, by which we should understand an act of power-sharing among elites to protect national integrity and safeguard the ability to repay structural adjustment debt while inviting foreign investment. Such consensus would also solidify the recalibration of institutions to the standards of liberal representative democracy. The hitch was that these moves silenced urgent conversations on the experience and handling of difference within Tunisian society and suppressed deeply rooted antagonisms among people whose visions of the post-revolutionary nation were not in alignment.

All of the preceding events greatly affected generational relations in both intimate and public spheres. During its phase as popular uprising, the revolution had counted many young people among the ranks of demonstrators, activists, and victims of state violence. In the transition period, national elites hailed 'revolutionary youth' as the icons and pillars of democratisation. The same elites recruited students, unemployed youth, and young professionals in the political campaigns of various parties and in civil society training programmes funded by the European Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States. By spring 2015, however, the distinct impression of young campaigners and student-activists was that they had been exploited by high politics as unpaid labour and as tokens in political gaming among the elder generation. It was as if youthful faces and bodies had been put forward as masks that, instead of signalling a far-reaching reversal of the social order, in essence concealed the continuation of elite patriarchal politics. Articulations of this deception and the concomitant loss of purchase of the category 'revolutionary youth' coincided with a growing rumour that a large number of young Tunisian men and women 'jihadis' had left the country to join the armies of *Jubhat al-Nusra* and ISIS on the Syrian border. In March, two rifle attacks against foreign tourists in the historical Bardo museum in Tunis and in a beach resort in Sousse shook public morale and shifted political rhetoric. National and international media associated the young men who perpetrated the crimes with armed extremist groups with assumed allegiances to extranational spaces such as Libya and ISIS. These two attacks, with a weighty victim toll of sixty tourists and

a handful of Tunisians, became the justification for the ratification of a draconian anti-terrorist law and the declaration of a state of emergency curtailing civil rights just inscribed in the new constitution.

The label-masks of 'revolutionary' and 'jihadist', both distortions of youth political convictions and praxis, played out well in the wider coalition between regional political elites and a global US-led policy of economic integration and militaristic paternalism (Sukarieh 2012). Therefore, Tunisian students, even before staging the *dakhla* 2015, had walked a fine fictive line between national tokens and anti-national boogeymen. This background helps us see in the *dakhla* banners a student affinity with what Achille Mbembe names the grotesque 'aesthetics and stylistics of power, the way it operates and the modalities of its expansion' (1992: 13). This broader contextualisation turns the *dakhla* and its grotesqueness away from an orientalist hysteria around Islamic imperialism and towards the strains of the national post-revolutionary condition. The following section delves into how this complex sensorium of democratic transition played out in both sensorial and affective inter-generational communications inside educational institutions.

Distortion

A day after his initial posting, Mr. Hajjem, the civics instructor mentioned earlier, updated his Facebook status after having discussed the *dakhla* incidents with his two adolescent daughters, aged thirteen and sixteen. His daughters had mocked their father for his unimaginative interpretation and laughed off the representations of ISIS and Hitler as acts of 'teasing'. It appeared that the two age groups, a father and his teenage daughters who are simultaneously a teacher and two students, disagreed over the citational meaning of the banners; the daughters endorsed a metaphorical interpretation. As media later revealed, the students who appeared before the district attorney categorically denied the accusation that they had drawn an ISIS fighter. They claimed instead that the banner portrayed a 'Japanese ninja warrior'.

Wishing to probe this divergence, I called two high school students I knew well through our shared engagement with the civic training sphere to gauge their opinion. One of them, seventeen-year-old Sara, commented 'it was a provocation' without sounding alarmed by the incident. 'Is it ironic then?' I asked. '*Ynajem ikoun zeda* (Yeah, it could be)' she responded in the same sanguine tone. The second student, eighteen-year-old Hédi, invited me to a café to talk. He had just passed his Bac sport exam and had attended a *dakhla* in his own school. Hédi laughed off my concern over the incidents saying:

Look, ever since the *dakhlat* Bac sport began in 2008, its purpose was to shock. My brother, who organised his high school *dakhla* in 2009, prepared a banner inspired by the American horror film *Saw*. The banner featured various teachers at his school as the dismembered victims of a serial killer.

Neither Sara nor Hédi appeared especially anxious to defend their fellow students. Their interpretation, tone, and body language evinced their comfort with such aesthetics, which they viewed as provocative and defiant but not indicative of religious or political extremism. Remarkably, while both students actively engaged with the unfolding of institutional democratic transition in Tunisia through laborious and time-consuming activities, none of the two considered the *dakhla* revelries an assault to either Tunisian nationhood or, for that matter, to democracy.

The lack of agreement between Mr. Hajjem and his daughters, their dismissive laughter towards him, and the unstrained metaphorical interpretation of the banners by the two students I conversed with invite us to recognise the 'heterogeneity, illocality, impurity, and instability' (Gruber and Haugbolle 2013: xxiv) of these images. Contradicting the literalist reading of the banners by the older state representatives and mainstream media as national or democratic denunciation, young students understood the images as parodical. Their effectiveness lay precisely in the ambiguity around who exactly they were targeting: did the figure of an ISIS soldier represent a religious fanatic, a high school principal, former president Ben Ali, or, even, post-revolutionary president Essebsi? The ambiguity of the image misfired here, but this misfire can also destabilise hegemonic understandings of social reality (Bernal 2013).

Drawing on John Ruskin's reading of the grotesque as productive of a gap, Frances Connelly locates its effect 'in the interstitial moments when the familiar turns strange or shifts unexpectedly into something else' (2012: 3). Indeed, there is an uncanny quality in the way these banners shocked commentators into recognising a concern among the student body. ISIS and Hitler are powerful taboo images in Tunisia as elsewhere, but it is what these taboo images recall in relation to educational and political life that seems to have prompted such intense unease. Hédi's comparison with the 2009 *dakhla* banner, which poignantly dated before the revolution, is further evidence of this uncanny-ness. Given the deeply censored press of the pre-revolutionary period, it is hard to know whether the 2009 banner he references caused similar public outrage. But my guess is that such outrage did not extend beyond the school walls; as gory as it was, the grotesque optics of the *Saw* theme did not represent the same challenge to the government's liberal modernist ideology, synonymous as we saw with Tunisian nationhood, as did ISIS or Hitler. Such optics do, however, point to residual tensions between students and teachers, tensions that embed the 2015 *dakhla* scandals in a long and embittered rapport between youth and an older generation that remained complicit with social and political patriarchal authoritarianism. This rapport developed in tandem with the specific instrumentalisations of liberalism and consensus, to which the 2015 banners responded with force.

Since the official interpretation of the controversial *dakhla* revelries considered them the epitome of anti-national incivility, civics instructors felt they were both the primary targets of student critique and the nation-state representatives sanctioned to address and potentially contain the sensibilities students exhibited at the *dakhla*. During their regular Monday assembly, Saif Hermassi, the chair, announced

that new Ministry of Educational guidelines dictated teacher supervision of the *dakhla* preparations and the censorship of a range of themes deemed contrary to what he described as the ‘tolerant democratic values of Tunisian society and education.’ His analysis of the *dakhla* reverlies indicated his certainty that the aesthetics of the banners addressed the educational institutions and its representatives. He said: ‘The students want to provoke us, and they want to provoke the state. Nowadays the language of ISIS has become the trading currency (*monnaie courante*) for all kinds of contestation.’ Tellingly, Mr. Hermassi and his interlocutors did not linger on the question of religious extremism, indicating their collective judgement that the visual citations of ISIS and Hitler were metaphorical, namely distortions of something or someone else. When discussion broke off into smaller groups, one of the teachers sitting next to me, Boutheina Mzid, confided that what she personally found aberrant about the *dakhla* revelries was their social and sexual transgressions: ‘I attend the *dakhla* every year and I can tell you for sure that most of them, especially the boys, are drunk for the duration of the day. The *dakhla* is an opportunity for letting out sexual energy too. I did not allow my own daughters to go!’

jawharamf.net/fr/article/dakhla-bac-sport-apres-daech-et-hitler-des-bacheliers-brandissent-des-images-o

Figure 3: Dakhlat Bac Sport, City of Sfax. April 15. Illustration for article in *Jawharamfm* website, 24 April. Accessed May 12, 2021. <https://www.jawharamf.net/fr/article/dakhla-bac-sport-apres-daech-et-hitler-des-bacheliers-brandissent-des-images-obscenes/90/23579>.

Shifting to the morally transgressive practices of public drinking and overt sexuality, Mrs Mzid exposed other key symbols of inversion and play that the *dakhla* deployed. Indeed, some *dakhla* banners broke frame from Tunisian boundaries of propriety through eroticism and risqué modes of sociality. One such banner became the cause of much consternation among teachers (see Figure 3). The banner featured the image of the Joker, the deformed, trickster villain of the Batman comic books, surrounded by scantily dressed girls who served him beer. School disciplines appear as labels on the empty beer cans that the Joker consumes. This leisurely activity may connote the end of the year relaxation when studying has come to an end and school disciplines are emptied of their importance. More sinisterly, however, an academic discipline that is worth as much as a can of beer is not of a high value, and cramming subjects like one chugs cans of beer hints at the absurdity of preparing for exams like the Bac. The grotesque underground figure of the Joker, which in this banner points to Heath Ledger's impersonation in the film *The Dark Knight* (2008), along with his exploitation of the female servants, invites this more cynical heuristics whereby the consumption of knowledge provided by a national state-controlled institution becomes the object of contempt. One may even see in this poster a renunciation of the desire for productivity, something abhorrent to the older elite that imposed the neoliberal democratic paradigm of entrepreneurship as the pillar of citizenship.

The most insightful analyses of the Egyptian revolution underline how central gender, class, and generation were in the fragmented and contradictory interpretations of dissent among Egyptian citizens (Ghannam 2012; Winegar 2016). In lower class Egyptian suburbs, perceptions of righteous versus dishonourable violence were inseparable from locally embedded perceptions of masculinity, perceptions that connected the residents of these neighbourhoods with national events. The Egyptian football ultras who lent the revolution some of its key repertoires of dissent and who also physically fought the police, indexed not only a social class but also the masculinist sociality of youth who blurred the lines between sport and political struggle (Rommel 2016). Concurrently, bourgeois activist understandings of civility proceeded to order the physical mess of Tahrir Square so as to contain the excess produced by revolutionary action (Winegar 2016). This type of productivity consciously opposed the 'laziness, vulgarity, corruption' (Winegar 2016: 611) of other revolutionaries that it construed as uncivilised delinquents. In their timing as pre-Bac sport events and in their probing of social norms, the *dakhla* reverlies bear a remarkable resemblance to practices inside Tunisian football stadiums. In stadium culture, the event of the *dakhla* signals the entrance of the opposing team onto the pitch. The visual and auditory repertoire of this entrance is as explicitly sexual as the word *dakhla* itself, which alludes to penetration. Some of this repertoire seems to evolve out of teasing songs and practices during North African wedding ceremonies whose main focus is the 'de-flowering' of the bride (also called *dakhla* or *dukhla*).² Drawing on the preceding, the school *dakhla* constitutes a 'citation between different practices' (Lazar 2015: 243). It may well be the case that it was this multi-referential aspect of the *dakhla* that made such a strong impression on the teacher body and older citizens.

While the sexism of all forms of *dakhla* is a serious stumbling block to understandings of democracy as an assault to established authority, there was enough youth irreverence by both genders to stir feelings of aversion and fear in teachers. For several months, Mrs Mzid, previously mentioned, became a frequent interlocutor both inside and outside the school. One day, while having a tea, she narrated her most vivid class scene after the revolution. A thirteen-year-old female student stood up in class, hands on hips in a defiant pose, and announced to her that she would not do her homework, saying 'I am not afraid of you anymore!'. The way Mrs Mzid conveyed the scene by enacting the young female student's posture, facial expression, and tone revealed how stunned and vulnerable she had felt in front of the student. Mrs Mzid's anxiety over youth defying her authority indicates the many ways lived democracy unearthed and intensified strains in inter-generational encounters.

Indeed, at that time there appeared to be an all-out affront against teachers as a professional body complicit with the state's patriarchal authoritarianism. Teachers reported that their students physically threatened them to quit under the accusation that they were corrupt or unfair. In turn, students and former students spoke unforgivingly about their experiences of corporal punishment at school and publicly shared their memories of being spied on by their teachers and headmasters for their political convictions and activities. My visualisation of student or graduate narratives of pre-revolutionary schooling brought me closer to the modernist articulation of the grotesque as nightmarish, monstrous fantasy (Connelly 2012), a fantasy that blurred the image of the classroom with that of the interrogation room. As was the case in Syria, where the irreverent anti-regime graffiti of fifteen school children in the town of Dar'a and their brutal repression jumpstarted the collective protests that eventually morphed into large-scale conflict (Wedeen 2013: 855), the Tunisian *dakhla* imagery during the 2015 displayed youth resentment towards the older generation and the state they had established. In stark contradistinction to the Syrian case, however, Tunisian students enacted their resentment during democratic consolidation and the reshaping of the Tunisian nation, thus shifting the terrain of critique away from the revolution and towards democracy. In this case, the revolution endures on different levels within a generationally fragmented post-revolutionary polity, begetting new repertoires of nationhood. A related point, and the focus of the following section, is how the inter-generational communication of the *dakhla* banners, infused with the grotesque, injects democracy with dissension and with affective states that are most often considered to be either its deviations or its adversaries.

Liminality and Dissensus

What has hopefully become evident from the preceding is how different generations, who index the diversity of the social fabric itself and its multiple perceptions of social reality, see in the grotesque a space for disagreement and the upending of social order. The grotesque elements of the *dakhla* align it with other manifestations

of youth provocation in North Africa (Silverstein 2011; Westermarck 1926;). In his study of the education of religious students at the prestigious Moroccan Qarawiyyin and Yusufiyya mosques at the turn of the twentieth century, Dale Eickelman (1992) refers to the Feast of Students, a yearly masquerade that features the selection of a mock sultan among the students, the performance of a burlesque *khuṭba* (Friday sermon) replete with obscenities in front of the actual sultan, and the opportunity to request favours from him. A more intense version of the Feast of Students is presented by Abdellah Hammoudi's (1987) study of a popular local festival in rural south Morocco that succeeds the sacred celebration of the prophet Ibrahim's sacrifice, the *Eid al-Adha* or *Eid al-Kabir*. Hammoudi brings the two events, sacrifice and carnival, together in an ambivalent relationship of inversion and convergence. A young unmarried village man dresses up as the grotesque figure of Bilmawn, also known by other names, covered in the skin of sheep sacrificed on Eid. In the company of other masked symbols of cultural alterity, such as a slave and a group of Jews, this figure proceeds to parade in the village teasing and harassing everyone in sight. While all married and respectable male elders, representatives of patriarchy, leave the village in fear of witnessing this transgression and being polluted by its excess, the women and children of the village remain put and often pulled into the grotesque performances of youth dissent. In this reversal, the festival becomes the contrast of the Eid sacrifice in which a loyal son submits to the point of annihilation to the will of a father in communion with God.

Along similar temporal, generational, and aesthetic lines, the *dakhla* is the inversion of the Bac examination that constitutes the culmination of student submission to the demands set by previous generations. This day-long carnival approximates the liminality of the generational takeover described by Hammoudi, enacting a temporary breakdown of generational power relations and the usurping of power by social actors who do not traditionally control any of the life-generating and economy-generating activities of their society. This usurping provisionally acts out an upending of existing social classifications that carries considerable frame-breaking force.

Reminiscent of a stage in Arnold van Gennep's ritual structure (1960) or a Turnerian social drama, where a certain individual or group opt out of normative expectations and occupy a sphere of 'betwixt and between' (Turner 1974: 13), the *dakhla* is steeped in liminality: depending on where you stand, the *dakhla* seems to either promise or threaten radical social renewal. Contrary to readings of Turner's liminality as part of a formulaic social order, there is plenty in his corpus to suggest that his reworking of van Gennep's tripartite structure of ritual involved substantial shifts in the articulation of social order as always nascent and as relentlessly regenerating (1974:14). Carnivals have offered a plethora of evidence for the elaboration of the visually and sensorially communicative aspect of liminality. Through Rabelais' grotesque ridiculing of high Renaissance culture, Mikhail Bakhtin unpacks the process by which the carnival made use of all that is frightening in everyday life and turned it into 'amusing or ludicrous monstrosities' (1984: 38). In its overlap with carnival reverlies, the *dakhla* imagery also thrashed and abused the figures of teachers or political leaders. Its banners knowingly entered

the dissemination of images across the national polity and beyond it. As with other revolutionary instances during that time, globalised trickster-icons such as Guy Fawkes and dance routines such as the appropriated Harlem shake forged an act of sensorial interlocation between international audiences (Hawkins 2014). Aimed at shocking national and other audiences into the recognition of dissatisfaction with the trajectory of post-revolutionary society, this interlocation made ample use of the grotesque. But how does the grotesque reposition revolution and democracy via the route of liminality?

In his theorisation of the macro-political and social energies of large-scale revolutions drawing on Turner's fecund treatment of liminality, Bjørn Thomassen construes revolutions as 'moments at which high and low are relativized, made irrelevant, or subverted and micro and macro levels fuse in critical conjunction' (2012: 683). Thomassen detects laughter, violence, and sexuality as 'three most imitative types of human behaviour' that imbue revolutionary manifestations of liminality, but he perceptively adjusts Turner's understanding of laughter as going beyond civil and joyful creativity: 'a demonic, mobbing laughter that is ritually aimed at denigrating or ridiculing others in public' (2012: 694). This reading of liminal laughter provides an apt description of the sensorium of the *dakhla* banners. During the 2011 revolutions throughout the region, the preceding insights have proven very productive in explaining a range of political phenomena that develop during a prolonged period of liminality with a highly uncertain finale. Walter Armbrust (2017), Igor Cherstich (2014), and Thomassen (2012) have offered us elaborations of trickster figures, whether revolutionary leaders or post-revolutionary politicians, insightfully attributing to such figures a 'play with words and images' (2012: 696). Its important insights notwithstanding, this line of inquiry rests on two assumptions that do not apply to the Tunisian *dakhla*. First, such inquiry aligns liminality with revolution to the point that it has to come to an end, preferably by the time the revolution itself comes to an end: 'Political revolutions will somehow end as the extraordinary moment is channelled back into an ordered and structured social situation where power can no longer be fundamentally questioned' (Thomassen 2012: 693). Second, it argues that institutional redress will be mirrored in the social sphere: 'a cooling down of emotions, and a taming of violence at the social level' (Thomassen 2017: 300).

Yet, the experience of the *dakhla* banners illustrate the opposite of such hypothesis. Do the banners not suggest that liminality, with its de-structuring features, is immanent to democracy in the form of a permanent breach of procedural normativity? And if some form of liminality is constitutive of democracy, as it is of revolution, why should democratic transition look like ritual re-aggregation through the taming of social affects and antagonisms? The problem here is partly ethnographic; having sidelined the Tunisian experience, this scholarship has seen the ends of the revolutions in the region exclusively through the prisms of rekindled state terror and civil war (Thomassen 2017). Beyond the ethnographic, there may also be a conceptual issue in the epistemological separation between revolution and democracy. This separation forces democracy into a space of normativity that may

apply solely, if at all, to the institutional realms of liberal representative democratic regimes: namely, democracy means the taming of revolutionary passion and the move from suspension and disorder to unquestioned power—even if the power is that of ‘the people’. Hence, some tricksters may effectively shift normative perceptions of who ‘the people’ are, such that social reality is productively pluralised.

Recently, both scholarship and media have given substantial attention to the ways in which the grotesque underpins sovereign power in the contemporary moment, epitomised in the highly ambivalent political personas of leaders such as Jimmy Morales of Guatemala, to Abdelfattah al-Sisi in Egypt and to Donald Trump in the United States (Armbrust 2017; Fassin 2017). Veena Das has pushed these analyses back to the domain of the governed, where horror and humour become prisms and mediums through which people claim livelihoods and futures in the everyday (Das 2017). Along similar lines with Das, research on carnivalesque electoral campaigns in Iceland and Lithuania (Boyer 2013; Klumbyte 2014) and direct democratic politics in the United States (Graeber 2011; Tancons 2014) has firmly situated disguise, masking, and boogeymen within claims to horizontal democratisation. The *dakhla* reverlies unsettle the preceding literatures in at least two ways: for one, they point to generational lines of fissure across the national body politic that move us beyond the binaries of governing and governed and institutional parties versus voters. Second, they illuminate some of this literature’s residual liberal bias, namely that these liminal, topsy-turvy public manifestations are underpinned by democratic desires that are essentially peaceful and civil. The *dakhla*’s mediation of affects, ranging from mockery and provocation to resentment, suggests that a priori endorsements of consensual and egalitarian interactions informed by notions of civility and respect risk conflating various hegemonic projects of democracy promotion with democracy per se, and thus lead us to misunderstand the multiplicities of the democratic sensorium. I argue that this democratic sensorium needs to be sought in the agonistic confrontations between generations as between classes, genders, localities, and so on.

Critics of liberal democratic politics have compellingly argued against a utopic vision of the democratic public as that which neutrally guides itself into consensus in an ostensibly equal and open arena of participation (Mouffe 2010). This form of inquiry promotes an inherently conflictual nature of politics where solutions come only in provisory and vulnerable agreements between adversaries who domesticate their hostility through electoral campaigns and institutional procedures. Through the concept of dissensus, Jacques Rancière (2010) put his finger onto this adversarial dynamic as not the volatile solution to the preservation of liberal democracy but, rather, as the very condition of democracy. A more intense and permanent form of disagreement, dissensus does not simply indicate dissent from a dominant position but, rather, a rejection of governance through consensus when the latter means either preserving existing social entitlements to governance or accepting the principle that the governing are actually entitled to govern. Deviating from the Platonian philosophical tradition that has expressed fear, disapproval, and repugnance towards the chaos of democratic life, Rancière construes democracy

as an enduring state of dissensus from attempts to solidify principles of political authority (*arkhe*) based on the existing hierarchies of rank, wealth, age, and gender (2010: 53). What the *dakhla* revelries show is that this state of dissensus is not only intellectual but also sensory. Democracy, then, is not a form of governance as it is a theory of politics, with the anarchic suggestion that political representation rests on no social grounding at all. Interestingly, this theory connects rather smoothly with anthropological understandings of liminality, although it turns liminality from a temporal stage into a permanent condition. In short, it posits dissensus as the permanently liminal property of democracy.

Rancière's theory articulates with anthropological promotions of a social understanding of democracy. Dissensus can appear in types of sociality and the ethical imaginations that render visible the palimpsest of intellectual, deliberational, affective, and phantasmatic dimensions of people's engagement with democracy (Cook et al. 2016). Instead of attributing national experiences of democratic malaise to the betrayal or mutation of normative democratic ideals, this focus can unpack precisely how the 'relational forms that a democracy necessitates place particular pressures and demands upon the subject' (2016: 7). In this article, I have placed particular emphasis on generational relations so as to highlight how such relations expand our understandings of both revolution and democracy. Hence the value of thinking through the energy and force of the grotesque as a way to map out the depth and range of unsettling feelings and attitudes that democracy may evoke in people, even in those who have long pined and actively struggled for it.

The democratic grotesque

The democratic grotesque reveals the terrain on which not only revolutions but also democratic transitions are lived, nurtured, doubted, and regretted, altering prevailing ideas of nationhood along the way. This is a ground of interaction that merits its own analysis instead of being pushed towards the binary categories of docile democratic consensus or violent anti-democratic extremism. An overture to politics by those with no entitlement to govern, in this case young Tunisians, the democratic grotesque connects with numerous other modes of communication within the Tunisian nation as with carnivalesque electoral campaigns and direct democratic politics in the MENA region and the Global North. Similar to these studies, the grotesque in the Tunisian context appears as an outlandish and sometimes monstrous way of speaking truth to power. The tense inter-generational communication around the grotesque *dakhla* revelries of 2015 contradicts the straightjacketing of the analysis of contemporary Tunisia through the time compression of the revolutionary period and a specific formulation of democratic disposition and praxis that goes as follows: Revolution is short-lived chaos to be contained by (hopefully) democratic transition, visualised socially as embodied liberalism. A forceful sensorial and affective response to such formulation, the democratic grotesque is not the harbinger of comfortable, civil pluralism but, rather, an embattled space for imagining and shaping the post-revolutionary condition of the nation.

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Notes

1. Throughout the article I have used pseudonyms for people and some identifying details have been changed. The names of the schools where the *dakhla* banners appeared were public knowledge in Tunisia.
2. This is not the complete story of the sexual politics of post-Arab spring Tunisia (see Sunday Grove 2015).

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