LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Contingent Futures and the Time of Crisis: Ganzeer's Transmedial Narrative Art

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Abstract:

This article explores the work of the Egyptian street artist and graphic novelist, Ganzeer, who describes himself as a 'contingency artist'. Developing this idea of contingency, the article shows how Ganzeer's work responds to the time of crisis as something that is narrated and performed, especially in the era of image capitalism. It begins with a discussion of Ganzeer's use of street art during the Egyptian Revolution, showing how graffiti strategically emphasised the time of crisis as a momentary rupture in order to connect local political movements with a global media and international viewership. The article then turns to a close reading of Ganzeer's more recent graphic novel, *The Solar Grid* (2016-present), to show how the medium of comics allows him to construct more elongated narratives in which the time of crisis is modernity itself. In conclusion, the article reads Ganzeer's street art and graphic novel together, highlighting their transmedial connections to argue that it is through the revelation of 'crisis' as a productive category, rather than an observable condition, that Ganzeer builds contingent and sometimes revolutionary futures.

Keywords: Ganzeer; *The Solar Grid*; the Egyptian Revolution; graffiti and street art; graphic novels; comics; transmediality; contingency.

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Introduction: A Link in the Chain

Ganzeer is an Egyptian graffiti and performance artist, social and business entrepreneur, zine printer and sticker publisher, graphic novelist, community organiser, exhibition curator, and social scientist—among other things. He has been listed in the top fifty most influential cultural figures in the Arab world (Syeed 2012) and in the top twenty-five most influential public artists globally (Brooks 2014). Though well-known since the early 2000s as a graphic designer in Cairo's cultural industry, his coordination of social and political activism, his hosting of public art exhibitions and gallery events, and—perhaps most influentially—his iconic graffiti stencils, together rocketed him to global notoriety during the Egyptian Revolution in 2011. Making political use of his public profile, on 8 May 2014 Ganzeer called for an international condemnation of then military leader, later Egyptian president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, in an interview with the UK's *Guardian* newspaper (Kingsley 2014). That same month, Ganzeer's visit to the US on a tourist visa turned into a longer stay, as Sisi's incoming military government began aggressively clamping down on public statements of opposition. Though Ganzeer refuses the term 'exile' and has not claimed political asylum in the US, he remains there, now married and resident in Houston, Texas, at the time of my writing.

Ganzeer describes himself, first and foremost, as a collaborator: 'I don't come up with anything on my own as much as I attempt to connect different ideas together that hopefully enable things to move forward, move it past the certain point that it's stuck in' (Evans 2017). This statement captures Ganzeer's pragmatic, entrepreneurial approach to art and culture, which for him is embedded within—and can help to catalyse—social and political change. His pseudonym translates from Arabic as 'bicycle chain' and conveys something of this 'fixer' ethos. As he explains: 'We [artists] are not the people pedalling, but we can connect ideas and by doing this we allow the thing to move' (Pollack 2014). In this article, I will explore how Ganzeer's work functions as a gelling agent, or chain link, effectively binding together with different structural forces and political actors to create something larger than the sum of its parts. To do so, I pick up on Ganzeer's revealing self-identification as a 'contingency artist' (Mirzoeff 2016: 206; Knudde 2019). The word 'contingency' has crossover histories in art and critical urban studies, but it also describes the experience of time-as-crisis that marks the lives of those 'caught in the vortex of colonialism and what comes after' (Mbembe 2016: 222). As a contingency artist, Ganzeer turns these disorienting conditions into new social, political, and narrative assemblages that allow him to rethink the time of crisis at multiple scales simultaneously. It is in this sense that, as I'll conclude here, Ganzeer's transmedial narrative art builds contingent futures.

The paper falls into two halves: I begin with a discussion of Ganzeer's use of street art during the Egyptian Revolution before turning to a sustained close reading of his graphic novel, *The Solar Grid* (2016-present). Ganzeer's graffiti is well-known, but the significance of the ultimately private reading experience of the graphic novel cannot be fully grasped without a preceding discussion of his more public urban practice first. Most simply, Ganzeer's graffiti operates in the crevices between physical infrastructures and local spaces, on the one hand, and the global and globalising flow of digital images, on the other,

inviting its readers to locate and activate the joins between the two. Similarly, in his graphic novel, Ganzeer invites his reader-participants to make connections between the physical infrastructure of built environments (walls, streets, roads) and the formal infrastructure of graphic narrative (gutters, grids, panels) (see Davies 2019). Finally, and in addition to these spatial dynamics, Ganzeer's work exposes the *temporal* constraints, biases, and inflections that are folded into the narratives—theoretical and anthropological, as well as historical—often used to construct and make sense of local and global spheres, especially as they pertain to Africa and its future. As I will show in the second half of this article, *The Solar Grid* shakes these chronological timeframes and continental geographies so radically that the utopian spirit of both mid-twentieth-century African decolonisation and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution is reactivated some one thousand years into a speculative future. To borrow Janet Roitman's conceptual inversions in her call to read 'Africa Otherwise', Ganzeer's transmedial art turns 'crisis' from merely 'a condition to be observed' into a category that itself 'produces meaning' (2016: 36).

Ganzeer's Graffiti and the Revolution-as-Crisis

When hundreds of thousands of Egyptians flooded into Cairo's streets in January 2011, it was widely regarded as a 'rupture' in the otherwise smooth time of postcolonial authoritarianism. The Revolution was characterised—and characterised itself—as a 'crisis', which as Brian Larkin reminds us, is also 'a speech act, a performative event issued by those seeking to interrupt the raw flow of reality to impose distinctions' (Larkin 2016: 39). Numerous commentators have pointed out that the events of the 18 Day Revolution, which centred on *Midan al-Tahrir*, or 'Freedom' Square, were marked not only by political gatherings, but also by myriad cultural and artistic activities that *performed* the Revolution *as a crisis* for the status quo. From pop-up theatres and impromptu exhibition spaces to collaborative meals, dances, and speeches, art and culture brought about the Revolution—indeed, they *were* the Revolution—in Tahrir Square (Souief 2014; Smith 2015; Kraidy 2016). As Judith Butler remarked at the time, 'no one mobilises a claim to move and assemble freely without moving and assembling together with others' (Butler 2011; see also Butler 2015).

The striking spectacles of thousands of 'bodies in alliance' assembled together in Tahrir Square drew the interest of western theorists, particularly those pursuing the apparent synergies between local 'street' and global 'media' (Butler 2015: 9-10; see also Sassen 2011; Castells 2012). Cognisant of the 'Yalta-like division of the world between the West, where theory is done, and the "Rest", which is the kingdom of ethnography' (Mbembe 2016: 213-4), Derek Gregory warned against a western domestication of the 'political actions' of those in Tahrir, emphasising the need to listen and learn instead. For Gregory, the Revolution revealed in particular how 'the contemporary public sphere depends not on a digital repertoire alone (important though that is) but also on brave bodies-in-alliance' (2013: 244).[1] This emphasis on the imbrication of the local within the global, and the vital accompaniment of the digital by the physical, was central to Butler's theoretical reflections too, as they sought to read Cairo's infrastructures themselves as actors operating simultaneously in material and theoretical planes: 'the square and the street

are not only the material supports for action', she argued, but are themselves a 'part of any theory of public and corporeal action that we might propose' (2011: n.pag.). The events in Tahrir seemed to bridge the boundaries between action and its representation, and between praxis and theory, but also between the global space of digitised media and the physical situations of local protest, reaffirming the latter as 'a relationship' that is 'situational, positional, and processual' (de Boeck 2016: 152).

This 'Tahrir effect', as it has since been described, 'was built on a script drawn by collective representations that created symbols, art, and a language aspiring to dignity, equality and, above all, permission to dream of change' (Abaza 2016a: 118). As many critics have shown, a repertoire of 'semiotics' and 'dramaturgies' were crucial to the Revolution's utopian dimensions, transforming it into a profoundly visual phenomenon (Mehrez 2012; Dal 2013; Khatib 2013). Little wonder, then, that graffiti and street art became the dominant codes through which both local and international observers tracked its twists and turns (though in different ways), something several critics have documented in detail (Abaza 2013; Levine 2015; Trapp 2019). Graffiti captured perfectly the performance of the Revolution as a time of crisis: 'unsanctioned and unregulated', graffiti is an illegal act that, whether pre-planned or otherwise, carries 'a spontaneous, rupturing quality' (Lennon 2014: 241). Transforming the visible infrastructure of the city into instantly 'readable' streams of political messages, graffiti mediated the Revolution's temporality of crisis within the city and among its local participants, while also transmitting something of its energy and atmosphere to an international viewership via digital and social media. As Mona Abaza writes, Tahrir in effect 'triggered a new visual culture' that blended online with offline worlds, thereby reconstructing the city's physical places as 'a space to see others and to be seen', both locally and globally at the same time (2014: 171-2).

From the very beginning, Ganzeer not only played a pivotal role in this movement, but recognised and seized its contingencies. On 25 January 2011, in front of a crowd chanting 'down with Mubarak', he scaled a billboard advertising the then-president's ruling National Democratic Party and scrawled the crowd's words across it in white paint (Evans 2017). The act was simultaneously one of graffiti and performance, Ganzeer suggesting himself as a superhero who, much like Spider-Man, could navigate the city with ease, using his vigilante powers to fight for the disenfranchised against corrupt urban governance and state violence. However, this performance of graffiti in front of large public audiences inverted the medium's customary rules: as a distinctive subculture in Northern cities like New York and London, graffiti is practised out of sight, under cover of darkness, and is often consciously intended to be *unreadable* to the uninitiated eye (Macdonald 2002: 152-8). For Ganzeer, however, the common graffiti practice of 'tagging', in which artists scrawl their pseudonyms across walls, is a waste of time: 'if you're going to go out and take a risk and put yourself in danger, and then you end up writing your name, seriously, that's what you had to tell the world?' (Animal New York 2015). Instead, Ganzeer created images that were instantly iconic, conveying revolutionary sentiment while avoiding factional political narratives in the time it takes to glance at a wall. The apparent simplicity of his street art, which soon evolved from Arabic text into stencilled images, made it particularly legible to international readers, and it began linking together different viewers at multiple scales. Less

like a bike chain and more like a gear cog, Ganzeer's graffiti itself became something to mobilise around, supporting sometimes quite divergent local, national, and international narratives of the Revolution all at once.

The history of Ganzeer's most famous work of revolutionary street art, *Tank vs. Bread-Biker* (Ganzeer 2011), aptly illustrates this point.[2] The first four hits of a Google image search for 'Ganzeer graffiti' turn up this iconic stencil, and the piece appears in various anthologies of Egypt's Revolution graffiti produced specifically for the international market (see Gröndahl 2013: 25-9; Hamdy and Karl 2014: 127-9). Ganzeer made *Tank vs. Bread-Biker* in May 2011 during 'Mad Graffiti Weekend', a three-day event that he himself had organised in order to flood the city with revolutionary images. He prepared the large stencil in advance and, as with his previous work, created the image with the help of a large group of volunteers in a highly public performance that was recorded in both photographs and on video. The image shows a large tank rumbling towards a young boy who is armed with nothing more than his bike and a large tray of bread. Its simple narrative of a heavily militarised state bearing down on a humble, impoverished citizen sent photographs of the graffiti viral across the internet: *Tank vs. Bread-Biker* nods to the iconic image of a single citizen facing off oncoming tanks in Tiananmen Square in 1989, while also referencing a slogan commonly used during the Egyptian Revolution: 'Bread, Freedom, and Social Justice' (the Arabic word for 'bread', *aish*, meaning 'life', as well). As Jennifer Pruitt observes of this and other artworks, Ganzeer redraws 'ordinary workers who kept the city running [...] in the style of comic book superheroes' (2018: 140).

Figure 1. Ganzeer's stencil graffiti, *Tanks vs. Bread-Biker*, as it first appeared in May 2011 (Ganzeer 2011).

In her comprehensive overview of Ganzeer's revolutionary art, Pruitt highlights the important spatial and temporal dimensions of *Tank vs. Bread-Biker*. As she notes, the location for the image—below the arterial 6th October Bridge that connects the wealthy neighbourhood of Zamalek to the rest of the city, and visible to drivers and pedestrians on the bustling road that runs through the underpass—was carefully chosen to amplify its visual reach. Digital photographs and videos of the graffiti then extended its simple message to a national and international audience. Recent scholarship has shown how social media sites such as Instagram, which have been widely used by graffiti writers and street artists to transmit their work to an audience beyond the immediate vicinity in which it is located, have actively shaped – rather than transparently mediated – the artwork they document (see Honig and MacDowall 2016; MacDowall and Souza 2018). Much Instagram-oriented street art whitewashes and de-contextualises its urban backgrounds, dis-embedding itself from its specific location in order to widen its online appeal. Always driven by a strategic opportunism to amplify the political impact of his work, the simplicity and accessibility of *Tank vs. Bread-Biker*, not to mention the thorough documentation of its creation in digital media, no doubt derived from the international viewership that Ganzeer had in mind. Indeed, while I myself undertook research in Cairo in late 2010, just two months before the Revolution broke out, I have never personally seen *Tank vs. Bread-Biker* 'in the flesh' – or rather, in the concrete – and work here from its digital documentation alone. But in his commitment to the polyphonic spirit of the Revolution as a time of rupture and change, Ganzeer did not white-wash the wall before attaching his stencilled artwork to it. Laid over existing scrawls of graffiti, not to mention the underpass's dirt-stained cement, *Tank vs. Bread-Biker*'s initial incarnation was legible to international viewers while remaining firmly situated in the spontaneous time of the Egyptian Revolution.

The resulting palimpsest effect did not just precede but continued after *Tank vs. Bread-Biker*'s creation, when the visibility of the work attracted both censors and activists whose graffitied additions sought variously to erase or redirect its narrative in response to the Revolution's developments. The well-known Egyptian artist, Sad Panda, added his iconic image of a slumped, pot-bellied panda to the wall just hours after Ganzeer completed *Tank vs. Bread-Biker*, as though imitating the process of collective assembly that had marked the momentum of the Revolution itself; months later, supporters of the Egyptian military tried to scrub the image out, daubing pro-government messages across the same wall; and then, shortly after twenty-five people were killed during a demonstration in October 2011, protestors daubed additional bodies and a river of blood directly beneath the tank's treads. Photographed after each adjustment, the graffiti came to exist as a series of panels juxtaposed not spatially on a page, as in a graphic novel, but recorded chronologically in digital time. Legible online as a longer story of visual antagonism and spatial competition, the graffiti was eventually whitewashed in June 2013, though of course the whole drama continues to exist – albeit now invisibly – as sedimented layers of paint on the concrete wall beneath the bridge (see Pruitt 2018: 145-52; Shehab 2016: 165-6).

This example, which has much in common with Ganzeer's work in other parts of the city, helps us to better understand Ganzeer's self-identification as a 'contingency artist': his work is nimble, responding to the specifics of a crisis situation and moving forward by connecting previously non-aligned parties, be they different media, competing political

factions, or divergent subcultural movements. Like graffiti practices in comparably contested sites such as Berlin or the West Bank, Ganzeer's street art troubles 'the traditional categorisations of what is "literary" and what is "geographic" [to show] how a multi-authored text written directly onto the surfaces of the city can adaptively articulate social identity […] and allow citizens to recognise the power – and responsibility – that comes with co-creating public space' (Carver 2018: 188). But just as *Tank vs. Bread-Biker* refused complete abstraction from its site-specific locale, so too must our reading of Ganzeer's work of that time bear the remarkable context of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution in mind. As part of that moment of self-generating crisis and rupture, Ganzeer's work became a way not to brand commodities, but to build coalitions between readers who due to their geographic locations might interpret it differently while also finding points of solidarity and connection: in effect, he folds people – readers and viewers – together through a transmedial blend of digital platforms and physical places.

This is Ganzeer's 'contingent urbanism', one in which groups of people engage 'in actions that are subject to chance and/or dependent on certain circumstances that operate outside of power structures and/or official modes of operation', often with a view to reclaiming forms of 'publicness from [a] corporate/government sanctioned morass' (Wortham-Galvin 2015: 146). Ganzeer's work throws a complex cultural geography of viewing into relief, one that shifts between 'macro-scale cartographies of textual reception as well as micro-scale cultural geographies of reading' to bind new publics together – though not always in companionable or reconciliatory ways (Dittmer and Dodds 2008: 449). We might say that his graffiti functions a little like the gutter on a comics page, the empty space between panels and frames that readers must 'fill in' in order to piece together a coherent narrative. *Tank vs. Bread-Biker* did not include gutters within its 'frames', but it did become 'a panel' in a larger context—or 'assemblage'—of competing 'panels' that connected with it and, through those connections, manufactured new urban narratives (see Dittmer 2014). Ganzeer may not have been *drawing* graphic narratives *per se*, but his extensive 'knowledge of marketing and love of comic books' is reflected in the contingent dynamics of his practice (see Pruitt 2018: 140).

The word 'contingency' evokes a system of urban social networking that is familiar enough. It captures the galvanising effects of mass protest and widespread cultural production as they played out in Revolutionary Egypt, as well as the more day-to-day negotiations that shape urban life in African cities. But the conceptual value of the word 'contingency' resides also in its links with the art world, where it is used to emphasise the importance of the 'circumstances of [an artwork's] presentation' (Buskirk 2003: 22). It is not only that the 'meaning' of artworks shift and change as they move through different cultural and geographic contexts, but that 'the degree to which the surrounding environment frames [a] work establishes a form of contingency that can have a profound impact on how the work is understood' (22-3). Whether a concrete underpass, a social media feed, or a 'coffee table' anthology of Revolution graffiti, *where* we see Ganzeer's artwork alters the *way* it is interpreted, altering it to different degrees. Ganzeer is alert to these contingencies, and he consciously exploits their *transmedial* joins—the intersections and crossovers between different mediums—in order to progress the Revolution's agenda incrementally forwards.

Of course, once the immediate historicity of the Revolution falls away, such coalitions can quickly be subsumed into rounds of commodification. As early as 2014, Mona Abaza expressed tentative concerns about the emergence of a 'culture industry' within Egypt's newly rich cultural sphere. As she notes, drawing on the work of Sharon Zukin (2010), the seemingly inevitable alignment of revolutionary art with 'neoliberal capitalist agendas', such as 'gentrifying and upgrading real estate for future speculation', had risked its 'autonomy and power' (Abaza 2014: 178). Some critiqued Ganzeer in particular for bringing Revolution graffiti into formal artistic spaces, as he did during his 2012 exhibition 'The Virus is Spreading', hosted in Cairo's Safar Khan gallery. Even as the highly collaborative exhibition was celebrated for its unsettling of established convention—'If the chaos of the streets can move into a gallery, what then differentiates the two spaces?'—commentators also conceded that bringing the art 'inside' inevitably excluded 'a large portion of the urban population who may feel unwelcome within the spaces of a gallery in an upscale section of Cairo' (Smith 2015: 34-5).

More recently, Abaza has offered further reflections on the popularity of Egypt's revolutionary street art, particularly among foreign journalists, documentary film makers, western academics, and television pundits. As she wonders, did Revolution graffiti attract such massive international interest because, quite simply, 'it is easier to research' (2016b: 329)? After all, in its ostensible immediacy and its purposefully simplified symbolism, graffiti allowed international readers—and we might also add theorists—to 'interpret' the Revolution, all the while bypassing details of its much longer historical and structural origins, not to mention the myriad political factions and counter-counter-revolutionary movements competing within the city itself. As Abaza observes, many such 'interpretations' relied too heavily on the visual, while 'neglecting the paramount significance of text messages, insults, the play with words, satire, poems, puns, which appeared on all the walls of the city from the first days of the revolution [and] that accompanied graffiti' (329). We might characterise such trends as a kind of interpretive dis-embedding, one that was made possible – though by no means inevitable – by the striking visuality of Ganzeer's artwork and his other performative modes of protests.

Coded into Abaza's critique of the belated commodification of Egypt's revolutionary cultures, and the superficial popularity of the single, photographable graffiti-image, there is also a subtextual commentary on the problem of presenting the *time* of crisis as a momentary rupture or singularly newsworthy event. Indeed, this goes some way to explaining, albeit inadvertently, Ganzeer's international popularity, which he himself has cultivated: Ganzeer's work is not opposed to its own commodification. Instead, he knowingly works in the context of what Achille Mbembe has called 'image capitalism', in which the digitisation of media and the ubiquity of photo-making technologies have turned the image into a '*techno-phenomenological institution*. The circuits from affect to emotions and from emotions to passions and convictions are, more than ever before, attached to the circulation of images' (2016: 218). The 2011 Egyptian Revolution in many ways exemplifies this analysis, especially when we focus on street art as a visual hinge mediating between different temporal and geographic scales. With his training in marketing and graphic design, and his long held love of comics—which have their own complicated relationship with advertising, marketisation, and commodification (see Hatfield 2005; Gardner 2006;

Kılınç 2017)—it is no wonder that Ganzeer was able to *make* something out of this paradigm. His work does not succumb to image capitalism exactly, but instead searches out and exploits its contingencies, continually wrestling with shifting circumstances—literary, artistic, geographic—to discern what kinds of futures might be possible. Ganzeer is a hustler, in the most positive sense of that word: his narrative art searches out systemic footholds in order to move that system beyond itself.

The Solar Grid: Ganzeer's Transmedial Futures

Ganzeer's graffiti and street art strategically performed the Revolution as a momentary 'time' of crisis, a narrative readily repeated by an international media drawn to stories of spontaneity and rupture. However, as Larkin would argue, this 'time of crisis' supposes 'the existence of other, noncrisis ridden, temporal states' (2016: 39), with the effect not only of presuming a noncrisis future (which clearly does not exist), but also of erasing the Revolution's many deep historical and cultural roots. In western analyses of graffiti and mainstream reports on the Revolution, it is rarely acknowledged that drastic neoliberal restructuring had for decades both impoverished Cairo's precarious urban workers and sparked 'a growing, critical spatial consciousness' in Egyptian culture, including in novels and graphic novels (Adham 2016: 183, 203; see also Shenker 2016: 355–3). For example, in the same month that Cairene artist Magdy El Shafee published Egypt's first graphic novel, *Metro, A Story of Cairo* (2008), a group of textile workers led a general strike that fomented into a national day of protest. The 6 April Movement, as it became known, used online platforms to mobilise protesters throughout the city, pre-empting dynamics that would later catalyse the Revolution in 2011 (Bayat 2012: 82). Meanwhile, as I have argued elsewhere, El Shafee's graphic novel anticipated 'a much wider constellation of competing hegemonic and revolutionary visual cultures' (Davies 2019: 63), and Ganzeer himself has cited *Metro* as an influence on his own work (Guyer 2014).

Since 2014, the Revolution's 'time of crisis' has dissipated and Sisi has consolidated his power. Now distant both temporally and geographically from revolutionary Cairo, though ever the 'contingency artist', Ganzeer has turned in his more recent graphic novel, *The Solar Grid*, to crises of different—though still interconnected—scales. Strictly speaking, *The Solar Grid* is a *serialised* graphic novel: the first three of nine parts were published in 2016, a fourth in 2018, and Ganzeer is currently at work on the fifth instalment.[3] These issues have been published on a dedicated website where they are available to purchase as digital PDFs for just $1.99 each (the first issue is free) (Ganzeer n.d.). In 2017, Ganzeer set up a campaign to fund the graphic novel's print production using the online platform Kickstarter, and he has now raised almost $50,000 USD (Ganzeer 2017). Publishing the vast majority of the graphic novel cheaply online does not appear to have impacted the saleability of hard copies of *The Solar Grid*, demonstrating Ganzeer's keen sensitivity to the marketability of his work. Moreover, his use of online platforms is not wholly profit-oriented, but responsive to the current landscape of cultural consumption. As he writes in the introduction to his similarly free-to-read online collection of sci-fi short stories, *Times New Human*:

A lot of the time, the fiction we write is very much connected to the time and place it is written. Immediate publication allows such connections to come to light. It's a little odd that we live in an age where one can broadcast a live video with the tap of a button, yet the publication of prose still tends to be bogged down by submission processes, overt editorial input, and thematic considerations. (Ganzeer 2018a)

Ganzeer's digital release of *The Solar Grid* in short instalments—many years ahead of the graphic novel's completion as a whole—aims to dispense with the editorial trappings of a glacial publishing industry, and to establish a more direct and immediate line of communication between artist and readers that resembles the speedy transmission of mediums like graffiti. Of course, and as Ganzeer himself concedes, no distribution platform or technology can bypass the time-consuming labour of drawing page after page of graphic art, just as the graphic novel will never draw in unwilling or antagonistic participants in the way that graffiti might. On the one hand, the graphic novel takes much longer *both* to make *and* to read than graffiti, while on the other, only followers of Ganzeer's work are likely to spend the $1.99 and hang around for years until the next issue comes out. If Abaza is correct in her assessment of the overwhelming western attraction to Revolution graffiti is predicated on its relatively effortless consumption, this might also explain why *The Solar Grid* has yet to receive any sustained academic interest. Nevertheless, it is equally revealing that Ganzeer, now an expat in the US, writes his graphic novel in English, marking not a complete turn away from his Egyptian readership—*The Solar Grid* is still set there—but certainly registering his business-minded awareness of the potential of reaching a global rather than local readership.

Both limited and enabled by these formal and geographic shifts, *The Solar Grid* turns its attention from the rapid crisis-time of a revolution to the *longue durée* of modernity itself. As a medium, the graphic novel allows Ganzeer to put the 'local' city of Cairo into crisis spatio-temporalities of inter-planetary and geologic scales: as Filippo Menga and I have observed, 'the infrastructural forms and rhizomatic assemblages of comics' are able to give narrative shape to the 'temporalities of the Anthropocene', revealing how the multiple scales and segmentations of modernity are conjoined into a stratified whole (2020: 671; see also Larkin 2016). Reflecting this, the plot of *The Solar Grid* is narrated from three different points in a speculative future history: 9 AF, 474 AF, and 949 AF. On the first page of the first issue, a small footnote informs us that AF stands for 'after the flood' (2016a).[4] Thus, everything in this speculative world is defined by its temporal relationship to (an admittedly fictional) crisis. What is more, the events that take place at these three moments in Ganzeer's speculative future are not narrated chronologically, moving forward from 9 to 474 to 949 AF. Rather, the comic jumps backwards and forwards, sometimes half or indeed a whole millennium in time, often with little warning. Readers must therefore search for continuities between the three time-worlds, which are connected less by any overarching structure or voice than they are by visual ephemera (background adverts, posters, and graffiti, characters aged beyond recognition), in order to string events together into a meaningful narrative.

The Solar Grid begins at the end, so to speak, in 949 AF, and in an Egypt—and an Africa—that has been reduced to a giant scrapheap. Though the following details are only acquired incrementally by readers, it is necessary for me to describe in brief the geopolitical and geophysical conditions of Ganzeer's speculative world, bearing in mind that only four of the nine issues have so far been published. As of yet, we know very little about the flood referenced in 'AF', but we do know that, a few hundred years afterwards, a huge satellite was built and put into orbit around the earth—this is the eponymous 'solar grid'. This satellite is comprised of numerous sun-like orbs that project an aggressive, human-made sunlight onto those portions of the earth that would otherwise be in the dark. The solar grid's light is so bright, and its heat so strong, that it is able to evaporate the excess sea water leftover from the flood—it is in effect, a vast project of land reclamation.

Figure 2. In 949 A.F., Mehret and Kameen fall out while searching junk heaps for scraps in the Egyptian desert. Meanwhile, the 'real' sun sets behind them and blurs into the comic's grid. Moments later, the solar grid bursts through the clouds. (Ganzeer 2016a)

The title of the graphic novel, *The Solar Grid*, as well as the satellite technology it describes, is clearly a reference to the 'grid' of the comics page—the framework of borders and gutters that give graphic novels their narrative shape. On occasions, the two are even blended visually together, as in an early sequence when the 'real' sun sets vertically down a horizontal panel, bleeding into the grid, only moments before the artificial suns of the solar grid burst through the nighttime clouds (Figure 2). Importantly, just as the grid of the comic is the visual inverse of its panels, Ganzeer's speculative solar grid inverts the purpose

of a 'real' technology—solar panels. These two technologies are opposites: where solar panels make energy from the sun, the solar grid makes energy that is sun-like. The significance of this can be understood when we take account of the fact that comics critics have tended to credit the gutter and grid—that is, the spaces between panels—as generative of a comic's narrative (McCloud 1993; Groensteen 2007). The lines of the grid are, after all, the points at which the reader must participate in assembling a coherent narrative from the fragments of visual information included in the panels. Ganzeer thus draws evocative parallels between readerly participation, narrative generation, and solar energy: his human reader, Ganzeer implies, is not a passive witness, but an active participant in the engineering of the environment of his speculative world. Implicit in these connections is an allegory of the Anthropocene, the epochal time in which human beings operate as geological and geophysical actors (Chakrabarty 2009).

The alignment between the formal apparatus of the medium—grids, panels, frames—and the newly enlarged scale of the crisis narrative—geologic time*frames*—creates a contingent scaffolding that Ganzeer uses to build his speculative future. Here, the anthropogenic engineering of environments and climates is placed centre-stage. In 474 AF, the solar grid's manufactured sun rays are used sparingly, only two hours per night, for fear of the damage they might cause both to humans and the environment. However, one of the graphic novel's central characters, the techno-entrepreneur Sharif Algebri (loosely modelled on Elon Musk), has plans to run the solar grid constantly, with the effect of eradicating nighttime altogether. This extra sunlight will create vast rain clouds from which potable water can be siphoned off and then sold to new settler colonies on Mars, where there is a limited water supply. By the time we arrive in 949 AF, Algebri's schemes have been realised and the solar grid runs around the clock, reducing the earth—and Africa in particular—to little more than a trash heap and water reservoir for extraterrestrial settlements.

In 474 AF, Algebri thus encapsulates the speculative extremity of a mode of capitalist extraction that exploits an 'environment' in which humans are already entangled. His is a posthuman extraction: with anthropogenically engineered suns, he plans to turn sea water—the levels of which are already dangerously high because of a human-created climate crisis—into potable water. What is more, this water is extracted not for the commons, but as a commodity then saleable to extraterrestrial colonial settlements. Provocatively, Ganzeer narrates this inter-planetary and geophysical system of exploitation through visual and textual references to mid-twentieth-century African decolonisation. The first issue of *The Solar Grid* is entitled 'The Wretched of the Earth' in homage to Frantz Fanon's iconic anti-colonial treatise, and Ganzeer has spoken of Egypt's Aswan Dam—a vast infrastructure project built as a symbol of Egyptian modernity, yet which is now in part responsible for the country's current water crisis—as an inspiration for his own speculative infrastructure (Batty 2016). Furthermore, Mehret, one of Ganzeer's protagonists, along with her Auntie Rahma and several other characters who still remain on 'earth' in 949 AF, are identifiably black: Mehret has dreadlocks, and Rahma wears Sudanese dress, and in issue four they have a revealing discussion about the n-word as an 'archaic' pejorative for black people. The inhabitants of the colonies on Mars, meanwhile, are majority white.

By reproducing the racial politics of the era of decolonisation flung forward into a crisis-time that lasts not decades, but a full millennium, Ganzeer stretches out Fanon's decolonial agenda across vastly extended times and spaces. In Ganzeer's speculative world, the wretched of the earth are, quite literally, 'of the earth': now that the most wealthy humans are extraterrestrial beings, to be on earth is to be on the 'lowest' rung of a social hierarchy that is vertically organised in inter-planetary space. These vertical metaphors are very much an extension of Fanon's own analysis, which pivots from the local, physical infrastructure of the colonial city into a conceptual scale that allows him to theorise the violence of colonialism. The only difference is that Fanon's 'colonised world [...] divided in two' has become *colonised worlds*, with racial division now marked out *between* rather than *on* planets (Fanon 2004: 3). Meanwhile, Algebri's monopoly capitalism is typically imperialist, opening up resources in one world—where there is a manufactured abundance of resources (at the expense of people living there)—and selling them in another—where there is a market for their consumption.

If graffiti encapsulates the time of crisis as a 'moment of emergency' or 'point of extremity' (Larkin 2016: 59), Ganzeer's graphic novel unfolds that singular rupture into a systemic narrative that turns *modernity itself* into a time of crisis. As Thierry Groensteen has influentially shown, comics are narrative *systems*: graphic narrative relies, 'on the one hand, [on] the *simultaneous* mobilisation of the entirety of codes (visual and discursive) that constitute it, and, at the same time, [on] the fact that none of these codes probably belongs purely to it' (2007: 6). Graphic narrative is, in this sense, a contingent medium, one that builds meaning through networked assemblages that connect both *intramedially* and *transmedially*—the first, occurring *between* the different images contained *within* a graphic novel, the second between internal images and those in other mediums.

One of the most striking visual features of *The Solar Grid* is the prevalence of urban textual ephemera—posters, graffiti, flyers, adverts, text messages, and so on. These background images, some of which take up whole pages, work as world-making cues, thickening the texture of Ganzeer's speculative universe. In addition, however, it quickly becomes apparent that these background images also contain narrative meaning. The reader must *read* these extra-textual materials, discerning their importance before using them to make sense of the plot. Ganzeer does not walk his readers through his story, but leaves them to decode the full narrative meaning of the graphic novel by assembling the intramedial connections between newspaper articles, posters, adverts, and of course, the actual comics panels themselves. The reader thus experiences *The Solar Grid* much as they might experience a city, the graphic narrative analogously imitating the architectural shapes and sequential images—billboards, advertisements, graffiti—of the modern metropolis (see Suhr 2010; Davies 2019). The effect is to emulate the constelled interpretive geography that attached to his earlier graffiti *within* the graphic novel itself, pushing Jason Dittmer's observation that comics enable 'a variety of image-sequences to be produced from the same images by the reader' to its narrative limit (2010 : 226). In Ganzeer's vision of an image-capitalist world, readers must search out contingent connections for themselves, experimenting 'with the forward-and-back temporality of plurivectoral reading practices' before using those joins and alliances to move the plot forward (Dittmer 2010: 235).

In addition to this intramedial network, *The Solar Grid*'s narrative system is also transmedial, its speculative world spilling out into our own—none of its codes 'belongs purely to it' (Groensteen 2007: 6). This works at the graphic novel's most basic infrastructural level, which combines image and text in mediums other than comics' conventional frames. For example, one sequence is comprised of nothing more than the screen of a WhatsApp chat, the text of the messages combining with the profile images of their senders (Ganzeer 2016a). On another occasion, Algebri is interviewed on a chat show: not only is the whole sequence featured on multiple panels drawn to look like a blurred TV screen, but each panel also includes text scrolls, or banners, that cycle beneath the visual action and communicate twenty-four hour news headlines. Though we are reading Ganzeer's graphic novel, we also feel like we are checking our phone or watching daytime television—we feel like we are *in* an image-capitalist world.
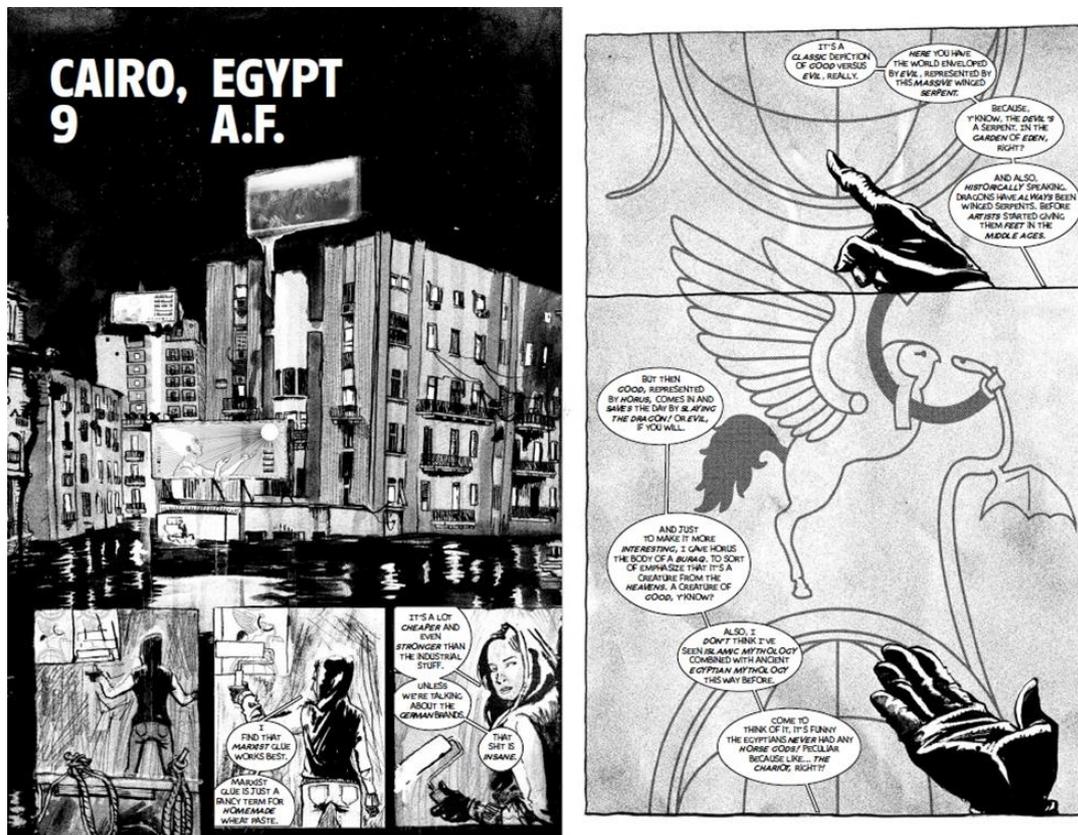

Figure3. In a flooded Cairo in 9 A.F., an as-of-yet unnamed character pastes revolutionary posters to a wall before mockingly interpreting them for her reader (Ganzeer 2016b).

To conclude this reading, I want to point to one final moment from *The Solar Grid* in which Ganzeer references his earlier career as a revolutionary graffiti artist, with the effect of assembling the rupturing crisis time of the Revolution into a longer narrative of modernity-as-crisis. We do not cycle back to 9 AF—back before the solar grid has been built—until the graphic novel's third issue (Ganzeer 2016b). When we do, we arrive in a Cairo that is vaguely recognisable, though its streets and pavements are submerged beneath stagnant flood water (see Figure 3). Here, an anonymous character (she remains unnamed) is shown

pasting a poster to a wall. In the three-panel sequence that runs across the bottom of the page, she turns to look out at the reader, breaking the fourth wall—the first and, so far, the only time this happens in *The Solar Grid*. Speaking to us directly, she shares tactics for making revolutionary art (explaining how to make poster glue from flour and water), much as Ganzeer himself had done in 2011.

As she works, a group of thugs arrive and accuse of her fomenting dissent. She quickly begins to interpret the image for them, emphasising its mythological references in attempt to divert attention from the poster's political content (we later learn that it encodes the message: 'resist the solar grid'). When she is later caught by the police, she uses a similar defence. In response to initial questioning, she claims in her defence that the poster is 'like a... uh, conceptual piece... y'know, the world... and... uh' (Ganzeer 2018b). It is only after extended interrogation that she flips, pointing out the hypocrisies of *her* contemporary Egypt:

> Excuse me for expressing my opinion about a project that will clearly ruin the life of every human being on the planet! Excuse me for saying it's not fair! That it's not fair that you've got billboards and multimedia commercials all around the world telling people to buy solar bonds! To invest in this monstrosity that will be the death of them! That it's not fair that if one lousy girl in Cairo suggests otherwise, she gets beat to a pulp and labeled a criminal! (Ganzeer 2018b)

This whole narrative sequence can be read as a transmedial reference to Ganzeer's earlier career as a graffiti artist of the Egyptian Revolution. The mythological emblems of this poster refer us back to his revolutionary street art, which often used simple shapes and symbols—rather than text—to communicate an explicitly political message. This female character situates these images in and against a larger image-capitalist economy of 'billboards and multimedia commercials' that, selling investment bonds for the solar grid, are directly implicated in the future destruction of the earth. Finally, in an additional layer of self-reflexivity, the concluding pages of this issue end with a fictional article written in 949 AF by a journalist who makes a visit to '*The Struggle Bank*; part museum, part research centre', which is located on the moon. In this lunar archive, she finds two documents that are described as '*Resistance posters discovered in Wastecountry's Nile Canyon*', and they are, of course, aged versions of the poster that Ganzeer's female protagonist was pasting onto the wall in 9 AF (Ganzeer 2018b).

With this final collapsing of millennial timescales, Ganzeer connects two very different historical moments of crisis through a work of protest art that has survived the transformation of Cairo into nothing more than a 'wastecountry', even when many of its inhabitants have not. In so doing, he playfully suggests the longevity of his own work, and of revolutionary street art more generally, implying that in one thousand year's time bits of graffiti will be archived in memory of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. But he also makes another, more suggestive historic comparison. The interpretation of his own street art is likened to the interpretation of Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, the key to which—the Rosetta Stone—is located not in Cairo, but in another post-imperial institution: the British Museum. Through these several, contingent, transmedial connections, Ganzeer collapses

the time of crisis into one of trans-historic proportions: the crisis of the British plunder and colonisation of Egypt is coupled with the crisis of the Egyptian Revolution, which is in turn linked to another, future crisis, in which Cairo has been decimated by environmental imperialism. As Ganzeer helps us to look at 'Africa otherwise', he shows how crises are not conditions 'to be observed', but observations that produce narratives instead (Roitman 2016: 36).

Conclusion: Contingent Culture and Covid-19

In this article, I have tried to emphasise the way in which Ganzeer's artistic practice uses contingency to operate on multiple scales simultaneously. It can be local (graffiti on a wall in Tahrir Square), regional (reproduced in the region's blogs and zines), and global (circulated via viral images on the internet), all at the same *time*: indeed, these multi-scalar narratives are not only spatial, but temporal, too. Meanwhile, in *The Solar Grid*, Ganzeer troubles the narrative temporality of crisis as a singular emergency by ricocheting through local and epochal timescales all at once: the politics of imperialist resource extraction become entangled with the catastrophic geophysics of anthropogenic climate crisis, which impinge in turn on 'local' human life, revealing the three scales to be deeply entwined with one another (de Boeck 2016). Though working according to the very different limitations and affordances of their respective narrative forms and cultural geographies of consumption, both graffiti and graphic novel are comparable insofar as they turn their viewers or readers into participants, demanding that they themselves assemble a larger narrative. In his graffiti, Ganzeer exploits the time of crisis-as-rupture, a temporal interruption that dislodges an authoritarian status quo, in the interests of building new revolutionary futures. In his graphic novel, he urges an understanding of the time of crisis as the time of modernity itself, operating systemically and at multiple, interconnected scales. Together, these transmedial narratives combine to build contingent and perhaps even revolutionary futures.

In conclusion, it is worth highlighting that the speculative world of Ganzeer's *The Solar Grid* is itself contingent, open to revision, rewriting, and replanning. After all, only five of the graphic novel's nine planned issues have been drawn at the time of my writing: its narrative future is thus open-ended. In March 2020, Ganzeer posted a long and detailed blogpost on his website entitled 'The New Normal For Life Under a New Plague', which speculated on the consequences of Covid-19 for a number of aspects of contemporary life including the workplace, the labour force, public gatherings, travel, fashion, tech, food supply, and art and culture. As he observes there:

> Aside from the importance of healthcare funding, Coronavirus has also reaffirmed the importance of culture. With the majority of us forced to stay home, we're quickly realising the importance of film, television, music, and books as psychologically necessary comforts. This decade should see an uptick in affordable and easily accessible cultural output. Much of it may be virtual/streamable (even museum exhibitions), but too much of the untouchable may see a renewed appreciation for tactile things; subscription-based publications and other printed matter that utilise

textured papers and a mixture of printing techniques may be on the upswing. (Ganzeer 2020)

In this analysis, Ganzeer again reveals the continually shifting contingencies of his practice. With both his graffiti and *The Solar Grid*, he has preempted the need both for 'affordable and easily accessible cultural output' *and* for 'tactile things', coupling and assembling the two together transmedially, and always with one eye on his readership. With almost half of his speculative graphic novel still to be drawn, it remains for us to wait and see whether Ganzeer might integrate the time of the Covid-19 crisis into his narrative art.

Notes

[1] Gregory's observation appears to have held. On numerous occasions in the decade since, and most recently in May and June 2020, #BlackLivesMatter protestors have combined their hashtag with physical occupations and marches across the US, UK, and elsewhere. Now resident in the US, Ganzeer has been involved in the production of protest art against police brutality on behalf of #BlackLivesMatter, and he claims interesting parallels with police violence in Egypt (Animal New York 2017). During the protests in May and June 2020, Ganzeer expressed vocal support for #BlackLivesMatter via social media and even inserted the hashtag at the top of *The Solar Grid*'s Kickstarter page (Ganzeer 2017).

[2] *Tanks vs. Bread-Biker* is often referred to as *Tank vs. Bicycle* in both journalistic and academic discussions of Ganzeer's work. However, the former is how Ganzeer names it in English on his website, so I will follow his translation here.

[3] On 16th May 2020, Ganzeer posted a 'progress/process report' on Chapter 5 of *The Solar Grid* to the blog on the graphic novel's Kickstarter page, informing donors and readers that he had just complete the chapter's primary line art (see Ganzeer 2017).

[4] *The Solar Grid* is unpaginated, so I am unable to refer readers to exact page numbers within issues. I do however refer to specific issues, which are dated in the list of works cited.

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