A Case Study in Civic Fiction: *A Gay Girl in Damascus* and the Structuring of Cosmopolitan Sympathy

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Abstract (250 words):

This article introduces the concept of "civic fiction" via an analysis of the 2011 *Gay Girl in Damascus* hoax blog. "Civic fiction" is here defined as the creation of sustained, complex counterfactuals enabling individuals to partake in civic dialogue. This is separate from more quotidian examples of lying in public life, and is also distinct from misinformation and "fake news." Via an examination of the *Gay Girl* blog and the ways the Amina persona was featured by the international press corps, this article considers the implications of civic fiction for journalism and empathetic engagement. I propose that Amina's role as a "mirror figure" within Western media, ostensibly providing insights into the Syrian uprising from an insider's perspective but in fact reflecting the concerns and values of a Western audience from within that audience, raises questions about modern journalistic practices and attempts to foster communitarian sympathy across cultural lines. Drawing on postcolonial and feminist theory, Lilie Chouliaraki's concepts of ecstatic news events, and John Beverly's analysis of testimonio, this article illuminates the intricate interplay between constructed identities, media representation, and audience reception. This article presents civic fiction as an alternate framework for understanding certain types of fabrication in public life that makes space for the uncomfortable reality that these types of narratives are often successful, are frequently used to achieve political ends by multiple actors, and implicate both journalists and audiences in their maintenance over time.

Introduction: Civic Fiction: Lies, Storytelling, and PR

Liars abound in public life. However, different types of untruths in the public sphere are put to different purposes, and have different impacts, both while they are unspooling and when they are revealed. It is worthwhile to consider these impacts, particularly for what they reveal about their audiences and promoters, if not their originators.

This article examines one of these categories of public untruths, which I term *civic fiction*. By civic fiction I mean sustained, complex counterfactuals that make participation in civic dialogue possible for figures or individuals who otherwise could not, or believe they could not, participate. Civic fiction is distinct from adjacent categories of untruths such as misinformation, disinformation, lies, and bullshit. *Misinformation* designates inaccurate claims potentially created without the intent to deceive (Altay et al, 2023), while *disinformation* refers to deliberate falsehoods created to

mislead, usually for strategic or manipulative purposes (Fallis, 2015). *Lies* implies a conscious departure from known truth for instrumental gain (Bok, 1978). *Bullshit*, in the sense described by Frankfurt, is speech indifferent to truth altogether, caring only for impression (Frankfurt, 1986 (2005)). Civic fiction, as I describe it, is a sustained and complex fabrication whose very counterfactuality provides the condition of its civic participation: the fiction must be believed as real for it to support or enact political work. Its power lies not in carelessness, manipulation, or indifference but in careful construction designed to enable sympathy, recognition, and inclusion in civic discourse.

Civic fictions are often presented via what I call *mirror figures*—fabricated personas that reflect the values and assumptions of their target audience back to them. These personas are related to and tend to function as "bridge figures," a term drawn from Kwame Anthony Appiah and extended by Ethan Zuckerman in the digital media context to describe individuals who straddle cultural divides and translate across them. Bridge figures facilitate dialogue between disparate publics. Mirror figures, by contrast, simulate that role while in fact only reflecting their audience's own sensibilities back at them.

This triplet—civic fiction, mirror figure, bridge figure—provides the conceptual vocabulary of this paper. Together, they help illustrate how these fabricated voices are not simply mistakes or thin hoaxes but instead perform political and epistemic work, especially when they become engaged in journalistic processes or products. I locate this intervention primarily in critical journalism and media theory, extending work on mediated sympathy, cosmopolitanism, and mediated performances of vulnerability. Civic fiction as an analytical concept contributes to these debates by considering the relationship between certain fabrications and the mechanisms of news genre and form,

mapping how publics and media co-produce legibility, belief, and cosmopolitan obligation.

This article focuses on the *Gay Girl in Damascus* blog, authored by American graduate student Tom MacMaster but publicly presented and received initially by the international community and media as the testimony of a queer Syrian woman. The construction and maintenance of this civic fiction, and the fallout of its collapse, productively crystallize anxieties about international journalism in the early 2010s: the hunger for relatable, first-person accounts; the inability to access conflict zones; and the repeated reproduction of familiar tropes of gender, sexuality, and Orientalism.

McMaster was a white, American graduate student in the UK who impersonated a queer Middle Eastern woman for months, blogging publicly, talking with the media, and even maintaining intimate personal relationships. His acts are, needless to say, problematic and distasteful on a number of levels. In this article, however, I am uninterested in calling out MacMaster's personal moral failings. This is not an article about whether it is wrong for 40-year-old American white guys to pretend to be thirty-something Syrian lesbians on the internet.

Rather, my goal is to use this case study to sort through civic fiction's implications for the current practice of journalism and the human capacity to extend sympathy at a distance. Amina was quickly embraced by the an international press corps held at a distance from events on the ground by a press ban. The *Gay Girl in Damascus* blog provided what it claimed was a first-person account of life in Syria, and Amina was quoted and interviewed by multiple outlets, which created a recursive stack of legitimating material.

While the Amina case exposes the vulnerabilities of digital cosmopolitanism and journalism's reliance on mediated "faces," it also points to a deeper dynamic: fabrications that are not incidental but constitutive of political discourse. The problem is not just journalistic gullibility or technological mediation, but the way untruths can crystallize into shared worlds that shape action and sympathy.

This broader concern was articulated by Arendt (1972), when she argued that political fabrications create entire imaginary realities with real consequences for publics and institutions. In Arendt's formulation, fabrications in political life do more than mislead—publics may come to inhabit these parallel realities. These fictive worlds can displace factual truth as the shared ground of common life. Civic fiction as an analytic operates in a similar register. These fictions may be *internally* or *externally* constructed vis a vis the societies they impact and implicate. This distinction that should be made based on the relationship between the fiction's creator and the intended audience. The Amina case is an example of an *internally-constructed* civic fiction, as it emerged from within its own audience --cosmopolitan media-literate Westerners.

Like Arendt's "imaginary worlds," civic fictions must be believed to do work, but their function is less to conceal policy failure than to generate sympathy, recognition, and credibility across distance. The Amina case highlights how publics organize around structures of attention and solidarity, presented as mediated performances. In a media landscape where technological advances have made the construction of convincing fabrications trivial, it is important to develop analytical and conceptual tools that allow us to understand why untruths are successful, and why in some cases the revelation that something is "fake" may have little or unexpected impact. Tools like civic fiction help us

see that the significance of these fabrications lies not in their mere falsity, but in the social and epistemic work they perform when they are taken as true.

Amina reflected and integrated the idea that Western coverage of a Middle East in revolutionary crisis should act as a conduit for liberal empathy and cosmopolitan identification between Western audiences and Middle Eastern subjects. Further, she metonymically embodied the Orientalist fantasy of knowable, progressive East awaiting rescue from the West. Civic fiction, as an analytical tool, is well-suited to identifying these instances of ideology in motion. The concept opens space to discuss the representational performance of the counter-factual, that performance's interactions with particular genre conventions, the ways that performance is moved forward by other actors, and the sociopolitical impacts of that performance. The Amina case demonstrates both the discourse and genre mechanics through which a civic fiction can be constructed and distributed, as well as the ways civic fictions are scaffolded by and reinforce already existing ideologies and media habits.

This article proceeds in four parts. First, I recount the rise and unmasking of the *Gay Girl in Damascus* blog, situating it as an instance of civic fiction rather than a simple hoax. Second, I introduce a set of scholarly literatures that are particularly illuminating in this case, concerning Orientalism and media depictions of women in the Middle East, in order to contextualized McMaster's performance as a specific type of culturally situated impersonation. I pair this analysis with Lilie Chouliaraki's concept of the ecstatic news event, Ethan Zuckerman's bridge bloggers, and John Beverley's testimonio, laying the theoretical groundwork for how civic fiction inhabits the gap between fragmentary witnessing and testimonial solidarity. Third, I elaborate the conceptual distinctions

among civic fiction, mirror figures, and bridge figures, and establish how they sharpen our understanding of fabricated voices in journalism. I analyze Amina's performance and uptake in international media, tracing how Orientalist, gendered, and queer tropes structured her appeal. Finally, I conclude by reflecting on what civic fiction reveals about journalism's epistemology of sympathy and the infrastructures of credibility that shape contemporary publics.

I. Painful Doubts: Amina Rises and Falls and Rises

In May of 2011, *The Guardian* published an article by Katherine Marsh called, "A Gay Girl in Damascus becomes a heroine of the Syrian revolt: Blog by half-American 'ultimate outsider' describes dangers of political and sexual dissent." The article profiled Amina Abdallah Arraf al Omari, a young, half-Syrian, half-American lesbian living with her family in Syria. Her blog, *A Gay Girl in Damascus*, had been active since February of 2011. In April of that year, a post called "My Father the Hero" went viral, attracting the attention of *The Guardian*, activists, and others eager for a relatable voice to describe the Syrian uprisings. Foreign journalists had been expelled from Syria in March 2011 after the violence began, making it difficult to acquire on-the-ground reports. This made Amira's apparent combination of access, English-language writing skills, and relatability to a Western audience very attractive. Shortly after the *Guardian* profile, *CNN* published an article on LGBT issues in the midst of the Syrian revolution, "Will gays be the 'sacrificial lambs' in Arab Spring," (Davies, 2011) which featured a lengthy email interview with Amina.

On June 6, a month to the day after the *Guardian* profile was published, a post appeared on the *Gay Girl* blog, purporting to be from a cousin of Amina, stating that she had been kidnapped by unknown, but presumably state-related security forces. This entry prompted coverage by the Associated Press, the *New York Times*, *Al Jazeera*, the BBC, and other outlets, including another article in the *Guardian*. A Facebook group was started, which attracted over 10,000 members in a day, and the *Guardian* reported that the US State Department was investigating Amina's disappearance. However, shortly after this blitz of publicity and interest, questions about Amina's identity began to surface.

The first person to publicly air these concerns was NPR's Andy Carvin (2012), an online communities product manager who had mastered the art of aggregating, curating, and selectively amplifying the dizzying stream of tweets, video, and audio produced by non-journalists during the Arab Spring. After receiving a tip from a Syrian source questioning Amina's existence, Carvin began searching for people who would say they had met Amina in person. He couldn't find anyone. By June 8th, reports surfaced that the photos from the *Gay Girl* blog thought to depict Amina were actually taken from the Facebook account of a Croatian expat living in London, who disavowed any knowledge of Amina and had no idea how her photo came to be associated with the blogger. Other activists started to openly engage with the idea that Amina may be either a deeply veiled pseudonym or a fictive construct, but most maintained a basic faith that the author of the *Gay Girl* blog shared significant biographical facts with the character. As Carvin put it in post published on the NPR blog, "Despite all the questions I have, I am deeply worried that this discussion about her identity could distract people from the possibility that she might be being brutalized in detention, and in dire need of support from friends and

strangers alike." (Carvin quoted in Memmott, 2011) Blogger Liz Henry was quoted in the Guardian as saying, "I would hate to have my existence doubted and am finding it painful to continue doubting Amina's. If she is real, I am very sorry and will apologize and continue to work for her release and support." (Henry quoted in "Syria, Yemen, Bahrain and Middle East unrest," 2011)

This confusion continued until June 12th, when the online publication *The Electronic Intifada* published an article claiming that Amina was the creation of an American couple residing in Scotland, Tom MacMaster and Britta Froelicher. The article presented evidence gleaned from a private Yahoo message board on which the Amina persona had been active, as well as identifying photos which appeared on both the *Gay Girl* blog and Froelicher's online Picasa account, and IP addresses in Scotland from which the Amina persona accessed the servers of the *Lez Get Real* blog. (Abunimah, 2011)

Though he originally denied it, Tom MacMaster eventually admitted that he had created the Amina persona. He further admitted he had been writing under that name for several years in different venues, including online message boards, and several different blogs including *Lez Get Real* and *A Gay Girl In Damascus*. A few hours after the *Electronic Intifada* post went live, MacMaster posted the following "Apology to Readers" on the *Gay Girl* blog:

> I never expected this level of attention. While the narrative voice may have been fictional, the facts on this blog are true and not misleading as to the situation on the ground. I do not believe that I have harmed anyone – I feel that I have created an important voice for issues that I feel strongly about. I only hope that people pay as much attention to the people of the Middle East and their struggles in this year of revolutions. The events there are

> being shaped by the people living them on a daily basis. I have only tried to illuminate them for a western audience. (MacMaster, 2011)

The outrage was immediate and substantial. The Amina persona had been in contact with several activists and bloggers in LGBT community for half a year or more, and many felt personally betrayed and violated. Journalists and others who had issued calls for assistance when Amina had been "kidnapped" felt exploited. MacMaster was accused of endangering actual LGBT activists in Syria and distracting from actual issues on the ground. For his part, MacMaster explained his actions this way, in an interview with the Washington Post:

> The biggest reason was that I found that when I argued, debated and made points that I knew to be factually sound on issues relating to Middle East by myself, I got pushback. I was prevented from [saying] what I was trying to say. I created a relatively simple character, so when I commented on blogs or in a discussion online, it [was] not going to be about me. Then when I created a character, they needed an identity other than a name, and this character sprang into play with a clear voice. I would think about if Amina were walking down the street here, what would she say? It started as a casual thing, but it steadily grew....I do think there is a certain orientalism, where we in the West tend to pay more attention to people that are like us, people we can relate to, someone marginalized is more interesting. I also think I wanted to show that in Syria, too, there are people who are all different, gay, straight, people of every possible permutation. (MacMaster quoted in Flock, 2013)

II. Orientalism, Gender, and Media Representation

The Amina case cannot be understood apart from the longer history of how Arab women have been represented in and considered by Western media. Said's *Orientalism* (1978) remains foundational for tracing how the Middle East has been produced as textual object through tropes of danger, sexuality, and vulnerability. These tropes structure recognition:

what counts as an authentic voice, and whose suffering becomes legible. Building on Said, Abu-Lughod (2014) has shown how the recurring call to "save Muslim women" underwrites Western feminist and journalistic projects, and this dramatic theme also made up the core (and finale) of MacMaster's Amina performance. Abu-Lughod has stated that this preoccupation obscurs political complexity while reinforcing the familiar figure of the imperiled woman in need of rescue. Underscoring Said's point that Orientalism is primarily a textual production, Abu-Lughod has additionally observed that the "anthropological" Middle East is a production of writing and self-referential professional texts (1989). I argue this analysis can be extended to blogs and social media, with the "Middle East" of the English-oriented online space a separate and distinct production, primarily for the Western gaze. MacMaster's performance took place in the space created and held by these prior textual productions.

Salamandra (2004) has traced how questions of authenticity and gender are negotiated in Syrian media itself, and highlights the central role of exported memoirs in the construction of Damascus as a mediated locale. This textual structuring of Damascus specifically presents an additional perspective on the role of the blog itself in the success of the Amina hoax. The personal blog form places *Gay Girl* in company with textual traditions of memoir, such as those identified by Salamandra, that were implicated in the exported image of Damascus. Considering these formal and generic analyses of the textuality of Damascus, Damascenes in general, and Arab women in particular, we can see how Amina didn't just fit into existing Orientalist tropes about Muslim women. The blog itself mirrored expectations of genre and form relating specifically to the locale and subject matter.

Other scholars have drawn attention to the narrow repertoire through which Arab and Muslim identities are made consumable in Western contexts. Alsultany (2022) shows how U.S. media deploys simplified representations that oscillate between sympathetic and demonizing portrayals, but always within tightly constrained categories. Sara Mourad (2013) extends this critique to the aesthetic politicization of the queer femme Arab body, arguing that Western audiences fetishize Arab queer bodies as at once progressive and exotic, legible only when they align with liberal fantasies that require and enable heroic Western interventions. Syrian and Arab feminist media scholars have emphasized how this regime of visibility produces erasures alongside spectacles. Khamis and her co-authors (2012, 2013) highlight Arab women's use of digital media for activism, while showing how their contributions are often re-mediated or erased in transnational circuits. Similarly, Alhayek (2014) documents the double marginalization of Syrian refugee women, whose perspectives and voices were sidelined in both Arab and Western media, in favor of campaigns run by others greater access to capital and social privilege, a dynamic MacMaster reproduced, if not wholly exploited, in Amina's repeated media appearances.

This scholarship traces a pattern: Arab women's voices, to the extent they are legible, are often marginalized, while those figures who fit existing Orientalist and gendered templates are amplified. The Amina persona exemplifies this dynamic. Her success as a civic fiction and mirror figure was not incidental, but structured by long-standing representational norms and information economies in which the Arab woman—especially when cast as endangered, beautiful, or queer—has been made to stand in for entire political struggles that flatter the ideologies of Western democracies.

When contextualized in this literature, it is clear that the reception of Amina cannot be read simply as a case of journalistic gullibility. Her uptake depended on these longer representational economies, which rendered her and the blog itself recognizable, congruent with genre expectations, and desirable as a subject. Next, I examine how the *Gay Girl* blog functioned within this terrain, not as a bridge across cultural difference but as a mirror reflecting back the values and expectations already embedded in Western journalism's structurings of sympathy.

II.ii. Ecstatic Events, Witnessing, and the Bridge Blogger

Media theorist Lilie Chouliaraki (2013) describes the Arab Spring as a particular type of news media event: the convergent, ecstatic event. Ecstatic events push beyond the limits of the normal news cycle, requiring a constantly updated stream of content over the course of days. This "live stream" style of coverage "bring[s] global audiences together around a 24/7 mode of reporting." (Chouliaraki, 2013: 272) Due to the high information demands of this form, coverage of ecstatic events are often reliant on content produced outside the traditional media production channels. Chouliaraki describes this incorporation of the voices of non-journalists as occurring through *re-mediation*, *inter-mediation*, and *trans-mediation*. Re-mediation brings the "ordinary voice" of the people into the publishing context of a major news organization. Inter-mediation organizes and digests these voices into "distinct types of interventions," classifying, tagging, and re-presenting these voices to an audience. Trans-mediation is the subsequent potential for these voices to move from "the symbolic realm on to the realm of physical action." (Choulairaki, 2013: 268)

Chouliaraki argues that convergent ecstatic journalistic events make particular claims on the sense of cosmopolitan solidarity of Western audiences with these distant subjects, particularly in the case of protest coverage. Protest coverage specifically amplifies Western democratically-aligned political voices, "rendering 'their' and 'our' protests a common terrain of activism against authoritative structures that limit democracy." (Chouliaraki, 2013: 279) In this analysis, the ecstatic, convergent news coverage that typified the journalistic treatment the Arab Spring, including the events in Syria, was structured *by its nature* to encourage the development of cosmopolitan solidarity between its Western audience and Middle Eastern subject. It attempted to do this by casting the voices and struggles of these activists in the familiar terms and narratives of Western democracy.

Chouliaraki identifies specific voices in convergent, ecstatic journalistic events as primarily occupying a space of "I have a voice" witnessing. These "ordinary voices" are picked up from social media and other non-professional outlets, and re-mediated by journalistic outlets to satisfy the information churn of the ecstatic media event. Entrepreneur and media theorist Ethan Zuckerman also identified these voices as serving a particular journalistic role. In 2004, Zuckerman and Rebecca MacKinnon co-founded Global Voices, an international community of bloggers to promote the international translation, flow, and exchange of information and culture at the grassroots level. Dubbing the networked individuals who make up the Global Voices community "bridge bloggers," Zuckerman adapts Kwame Anthony Appiah's concept of the "bridge figure," individuals who can "straddle the borders between cultures," acting as "interpreter[s] between cultures...individual[s] both groups could trust and identify with...", to the online

journalistic space (Zuckerman, 2013: 171). He argues that they occupy a special role in the coverage of international news events, translating, contextualizing, and making accessible events in faraway places. (Zuckerman, 2013: 189)

Though Zuckerman had originally envisioned these figures directly attracting a global audience of readers to their own content. However, more frequently these bridge bloggers were used as sources of readily available, engaging local content that could be quickly adapted for or embedded in a Western audience at the moment of interest. This specific use of the bridge blogger was particularly at play in coverage of Syria.

Though the "voices" Chouliaraki talks about and the bridge bloggers mentioned by Zuckerman seem similar, and in some instances may be the same individuals, they are slightly different. Specifically, bridge bloggers are noted for their ability to serve as translators between two cultures. While Chouliaraki's "voices" of the Arab Spring are cast as parallel to Western political narratives in an attempt to domestricate them for Western audiences, the role of translation is not left on their shoulders. That job is left to the re-mediation and packaging of the journalistic product. Bridge bloggers, in Zuckerman's conception, require much less processing to be sympathetic.

To join together Chouliaraki and Zuckerman: There exist some individuals whose lives span several cultural spaces. These individuals are uniquely positioned to serve as translation points or bridges to cosmopolitan understanding between these cultures. If they are present in the online space, these "bridge bloggers" represent a valuable content asset to journalistic organizations who, for reasons of politics or economics, cannot place their own professionals on the ground in crisis zones. The same structural constraints which make bridge bloggers valuable assets to news organizations also push those

organizations to rely on civilian voices for the production of journalistic products that privilege the affective task of "witnessing" over the journalistic task of informing. These products, particularly when they follow an ecstatic model of protest coverage, are oriented to create a channel of cosmopolitan sympathy between their Western audiences and their distant subject. This is achieved through narrative-construction and the mediation of civilian voices. This cosmopolitan sympathy often runs in one direction, from the Western audience to the distant subject, as the Western audience is encouraged through the media coverage to expand the scope of their communitarian recognition to these distant others.

While Chouliaraki shows how ecstatic news events demand a constant flow of voices remediated into consumable fragments, her framework leaves open the question of what kind of narrative form those voices take when they claim solidarity across distance. Here John Beverley's theorization of testimonio becomes useful. If ecstatic coverage organizes fragments into a stream that organizes and renews fleeting cosmopolitan sympathy, testimonio represents a more durable, stable narrative structure: a first-person account that speaks both as individual witness and as representative of a collective struggle. The genre of the testimonio further augments the previous analysis of the mediated and textual nature of the Middle East, Damascus, and Arab women. Moving from Chouliaraki to Beverley allows us to see how Amina's blog was received not just as raw content in an ecstatic event, but as a testimonial voice that, again as a matter of *genre*, seemed to ground the audience's projected solidarity in lived experience—even as that voice was fabricated.

Beverley defines testimonio as a first-person narrative in which the narrator is both protagonist and witness, speaking not only for themselves but as representative of a collective experience. The form derives its power from its capacity to generate solidarity by engaging the reader's sense of ethics and justice across cultural distance. (Beverly, 2004: 31) Beverley assigns testimonio a powerful role in the generation of solidarity between disparate populations, saying, "The complicity a testimonio establishes with its readers involves their identification - by engaging their sense of ethics and justice - with a popular cause normally distant, not to say alien, from their immediate experience." (Beverly, 2004: 37)

Testimonio involves the audience in a moral structure of witnessing, creating an ethical imperative to listen, to believe, and to respond. As a formal matter it constructs a compact between speaker and reader that civic fiction, ontologically, can only simulate. The *Gay Girl* blog mimicked testimonio's generic structure: a first-person voice, framed as authentic witness, inviting identification with a broader struggle. But while testimonio presupposes a real subject whose life grounds the narrative, Amina was a fabrication. Her words did not bridge difference; they reflected Western audiences back to themselves. This is where civic fiction diverges from testimonio: it mobilizes solidarity not through authentic witnessing, but through the *mirror figure*, a construct tailored to existing expectations of voice, vulnerability, and sympathy.

III. Analysis: Amina the Mirror

If Amina had been a real person, she would have been an ideal bridge figure. She was in her mid thirties, born in America of both Syrian and American parentage. Though the

blog described her as the "ultimate outsider," her status as bi-national lesbian with a lefty political bent living in a repressive state meant that she was sympathetic to the progressive, net-savvy, politically informed Westerners who were following the Arab Spring closely, often via social media as well as news coverage. The blog was written in an engaging style, which the *Washington Post* described as "emotionally resonant" and "really a lovely blog." (Hesse, 2011) Her most popular posts, like "My Father the Hero," were told dramatically, casting Amina and her supportive family as heroic figures in the Syrian struggle against an oppressive, intolerant dictatorship. The photograph presented as the face of Amina was that of a conventionally attractive olive-skinned brunette with a trendy haircut, eyes cast down in a compelling, modest, slightly sad fashion that readily invoked visual Orientalist tropes of femininity waiting to be rescued. (Nakamura, 2011) Amina was presented as sympathetic, compelling, brave, and on the pro-democratic side of the Syrian revolution in a way that made her story immediately available to the convergent, ecstatic witnessing-driven journalism Chouliaraki describes.

As an instance of civic fiction, Amina demonstrates the mediated slippage between between "bridge figures," individuals who translate across cultural spaces (Zuckerman), and *mirror figures*, fabricated personas that reflect an audience's own sensibilities back to them while appearing as culture-spanning bridges. *Mirror figures* are an aspect of *civic fiction*: they succeed precisely because they animate the expectations of the publics that receive them. *Amina the mirror* is an example of an internally-constructed civic fiction, in so much as the counter-factual was crafted from within its own audience. That audience was both journalists and those journalists' readers and viewers, not Syrians. This will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

Amina's resonance with Western audiences was not only the product of narrative craft or journalistic necessity. Her legibility was shaped by long-established Orientalist habits of rendering the Middle East to Western audiences through tropes of vulnerability, sexuality, and danger in order to secure its sympathetic legibility. Arab women have historically been cast as imperiled figures whose suffering can anchor Western narratives of democracy and liberation. These lenses organize both Western feminist politics and journalistic attention. Amina fit seamlessly into this role, modern, queer, politically progressive, yet endangered. She was a figure Western audiences could imagine saving, and therefore one they could hear. This point was even articulated by MacMaster after the hoax was exposed, saying "I do think there is a certain orientalism, where we in the West tend to pay more attention to people that are like us, people we can relate to, someone marginalized is more interesting." (MacMaster quoted in Flock, 2013) As postcolonial scholars have repeatedly shown, the Western fascination with the liberated or queer Arab women functions, like Amina, as a mirror of its own liberal self-regard.

This displacement marks the mirror figure at work: it reflects the audience's desires back to them while obscuring those who might speak otherwise, as a mirror blocks the wall it rests on. Alhayek has demonstrated that particularly in the context of Syria, media and aid organizations preferred more "camera-ready" figures, primarily outsiders, to actual refugee women on the ground. Amina replicated this pattern, or more precisely, this pattern was replicated through her: she achieved global prominence as a witnessing agent while actual Syrian women living through the conflict were rendered inaudible. The Western audience collaborates in an internal performance of its own civic virtues with a constructed textual partner. In this way, civic fiction emerges not as a

simple narrative genre or category of untruth, but as a nearly participatory media form—one that organizes audience desire, paratextual genre markers, and representational codes into a structure of public engagement.

III.ii. Circling the Audience: The Performance of Expected Sympathies

The mirror figure emerges from within its own target audience, and is thus well positioned to fulfill the intellectual, emotional, and political needs of that audience in order to facilitate that audience's extension of sympathy to a "distant" or othered figure. This mirroring function is central to the success of this species of civic fiction.

A comment made by Liz Henry, a blogger who was instrumental in revealing the Amina figure hoax, summarizes rather well who that target audience was:

"[MacMaster's] way of describing what it's like to be gay in the Middle East goes down smooth with people who have a progressive bent....Why did I jump to this blog — just because it was a person who shares some of my values?" (Henry quoted in Hesse, 2011)

Liz Henry is a queer-identified woman living on the West Coast. She was active in the tech industry, working at the time as a developer for Mozilla. Henry is part of Amina's target audience: well educated, feminist, progressive, pro-LGBT rights, pro-democracy, tech-savvy, white, and Western. The Arab Spring was heavily mediated via social media, with some commentators calling them "Twitter revolutions" or "Facebook revolutions." The accuracy of that branding notwithstanding, the mediation of these events made them appealing and available to publics with dual interests in digital technology and progressive social and political causes. Amina was a character *of* the online space, whose cadences suited the rhythms of networked discourse, first deployed on online message

boards. MacMaster created her to get other well-educated netizens with an interest in Middle Eastern politics to listen to him. It is not surprising that tech-savvy, feminist, progressive online publics would find her a sympathetic character who already appeared to fit within their community. Nor is it surprising that digital content editors, searching for content to fill out ecstatic coverage of Syria, would consider her to be an attractive bridge figure who might make their coverage more interesting to Western, English-speaking audiences. Editorial judgments about what constitutes a compelling narrative helped consolidate Amina's position as a symbolic figure by both (re)producing the frame and then placing her within it.

Shortly after the Amina hoax was revealed, Hala Gorani, the Syrian-American anchor of CNN International tweeted "The most infuriating aspect of Tom MacMaster's 'hoax' is [his] claim [that the] media's interest in #Amina reveals superficial coverage of Mideast. Please. Media were interested [because] MacMaster's lie put a human face on a story we cannot cover in person. That is why there was interest." (Gorani, quoted in Zuckerman, 2011) Gorani's tweet highlights the difficulties journalists encountered in trying to cover the Syrian uprisings from the ground. But is also gestures to the importance of the singular "face" in this type of news coverage. Amina herself was a cosmopolitan, romantic figure. The literal face that MacMaster chose for her was attractive. MacMaster's hoax animated an inaccessible story, but the news media *chose* to focus on it, to use Amina as a metonym for Syrian LGBT activists.

Not just anyone can be an effective bridge figure and not just any bridge figure can be an effective media figure. Certain narratives, characters, and themes more effectively attract and hold attention, or are expected to. One such pattern from Western

evening news has been termed "Missing White Woman Syndrome," where stories about attractive white women gone missing are more likely to garner significant press coverage than individuals of other races or genders who are also missing. I suggest here that in the case of mirror figures it is not necessary that the creator be particularly cynical, media savvy, or even a talented writer. Rather, as a *consumer* of news media, MacMaster, perhaps naively, reproduced those tropes that appealed to the audience demographic he was a part of. Journalists are trained to recognize what is "newsworthy," and in reproducing it, they pass that training on to their audience. When MacMaster took it upon himself to participate in the ecstatic media coverage of the Syrian uprisings, the figure he created and the stories he told did not so much deceive news media as align with their existing templates for visibility and sympathy.

In addition to fitting politically and socially with a certain influential audience demographic, Amina's appeal was also reinforced by a familiar visual trope: the imperiled woman as metonym for revolution. Activist-artist Molly Crabapple (2014) has argued that the Arab Spring uprisings were marked by "martyr pin-ups," images of attractive women whose suffering stands in for state brutality. The most iconic was Neda Agha-Soltan, whose death during Iran's 2009 protests was recorded on video and circulated globally. Her image became shorthand for the cruelty of the regime, even as her individuality was eclipsed. Amina's staged abduction positioned her to join this tradition. She was transformed from a blog author into a symbol—an imagined violated body on which Western media could project outrage and sympathy.

These tropes of sexuality and queerness have long structured Western consumption of Arab figures. Mourad's documentation (2014) of Western audiences

fetishization of Arab queer bodies as simultaneously progressive and exotic, legible only through tropes of danger, desire, and modernity-in-peril, underscores and extends Crabapple's "martyr pin-up" concept. Amina, presented as a queer Arab woman articulating liberal politics in English, was the ideal synthesis: endangered but modern, vulnerable but fierce, both victim and emblem of cosmopolitan progress. She collapsed difference into familiarity, offering Western audiences a face they already knew how to desire, to save, and to mourn. This resonance illustrates the mechanics of the mirror figure. MacMaster did not need to invent a new repertoire; he reproduced tropes that journalists and audiences already recognized as newsworthy. Amina's success was not in spite of her fabrication but because her fiction fit seamlessly into the aesthetic and affective expectations of global news coverage.

III.iii. Chewing Up the Source: Re-Mediation and Activist Networks

In being received into the role of the bridge blogger, the Amina persona created a permissive space for a progressive Western audience to redefine the complex politics of a far-away conflict in familiar terms while operating under the idea that they were engaging in cosmopolitan solidarity across cultural lines. This is often an effect of civic fictions: to "pull focus" to a flattering or simplified and emotionally resonant performance of a complex or ambiguous or otherwise fraught issue.

Zuckerman originally envisioned the international bloggers of his Global Voices network building trans-national connections that would allow cosmopolitan readers to access the stories and voices of distant cultures. This exposure to the concerns of foreign individuals and cultures would in turn break down boundaries to communitarianism,

manifesting the promise of global cosmopolitan sympathy that the early internet utopianism had promised. However, Zuckerman soon discovered that, rather than collecting international audiences of their own, the Global Voices blogging network "has become a go-to source for information on the infrequent occasion that countries rarely in the news suddenly burst into the headlines." (Zuckerman, 2013: 128) This occasionally raiding of Global Voices blogs for quotes changes the context of these texts, just as the context of the Amina character was changed when the *Gay Girl* blog was harvested for quotes, and again when the character herself was turned into a journalistic source. Quotes and interviews replace the narrative context of the original bloggers with the context of the journalistic enterprise. This shift—from activist voice to instrumentalized quote, and from fictional blog to journalistic authority—demonstrates how civic fictions do not just solicit sympathy; they restructure informational authority.

Chouliaraki defines this stage, where the words of non-journalists are enlisted and categorized into the journalistic product, as "inter-mediation." In the context of ecstatic protest reporting, inter-mediation heightens the witnessing and deliberative power of these words, transforming the journalistic product itself from one concerned primarily with "informing" into one whose ultimate goal is the instigation of physical and political action through the provocative nature of the witnessing voices. It should be noted that this is not merely an epistemological shift but a representational one. As observed by Puar and other critics of mediated global solidarity, such translations often flatten prickly political demands into smooth affective tokens, particularly when queer Arab bodies and struggles are being rendered aesthetic, legible, and politically acceptable to the West. (Puar, 2007)

The re- and inter-mediation of activist speech puts it to work towards the goals of the journalistic enterprise. Though those goals may be parallel to those of activists on the ground, they never directly intersect. It was in this parallel movement space that the Amina persona was transplanted, from her blog, to a position of metonymic importance and authority. In a reversal of Chouliaraki's process, it was the re-mediation of Amina by journalists that established her presence as an "activist." This disjuncture, which separates the on-the-street movement from that which is produced and dramatized during the process of reporting, provided the space for the Amina mirror-figure to take a stronger public hold.

IV. Conclusion: How Reflections Orient the Gaze

The attraction Amina held for the public at large and for the Western news media raises questions about how sympathy at a distance can be extended, particularly when that sympathy is necessarily mediated through news coverage and social media. Her roundabout, reflective nature could reflect assumptions and tropes back journalists and their audiences, but an exchange of knowledge, understanding and sympathy could not be achieved. What she reflected was not knowledge of Syria, but a familiar figure of liberal identification: a secular, queer, English-fluent Arab woman structured and framed through the Orientalist lens of Western narrative desire. Amina's affective power lay in her legibility. She offered a politically palatable subject whose queerness and Arabness were not threatening but rather reassured liberal Western audiences.

A troubling conclusion from the Amina incident is that this constructed reflection seems to have been enough. No one questioned Amina's existence before McMaster

staged her disappearance, and it wasn't a flaw in the performance that led Andy Carvin, Liz Henry, and others to question her existence after. The reflection seems to have satisfied the needs of its audience, and perhaps it is that realization which, in the end, induces a crisis of sympathy within that audience.

We are left with a sense that those structures and organizations which Western audiences have come to rely on to direct our attention and cosmopolitan sympathies outwards, namely the internet and international news organizations, have failed, or were never capable of serving that purpose to begin with. While the internet and various news organization did ultimately reveal the Amina hoax, they didn't remedy the gap it left.

What is perhaps most uncomfortable about civic fiction, and the Amina case study in particular, is that while the hoax remains undiscovered, it does political work. It is affectively impactful. People engaged with the Amina story as part of the story of the Syrian uprising and continued to engage when she was perceived to be under threat. While civic fictions are not inherently illegitimate—indeed, Syrian activists and other marginalized groups have themselves used strategic pseudonymity under threat—this case is marked by asymmetrical power. The Amina fiction did not emerge from within a marginalized public but was projected onto it, shaped by an outsider's imaginaries and absorbed uncritically by sympathetic institutions. That distinction does not negate the political work the hoax did, but it does shape how that work should be understood.

If we accept that a significant part of ecstatic protest reporting is the effort to manifest parallel movements within distant audiences and publics, as Chouliaraki claims, then it is the journalistic use of Amina's words that gave her the power of a real political actor. Moreover, that power was bestowed by the journalistic gatekeeper structures that

were trusted to protect their audience from just this type of hoax. So not only did these structures not protect their audience, but they also empowered the fraud, placing it at the dramatic center of a political struggle. Can the work the Amina performance did be extricated from the larger story, from the work of other, real individuals? Can the sympathy that the audience extended to Amina be taken back without impacting the sympathy that audience extends to others *like* Amina purported to be? The effect of these types of civic fiction is to implicate the audience too closely in their performance, thus making it impossible for the audience to successfully extricate themselves. Acts of civic fiction like Amina transform the audience from audience to collaborators.

The problem of convincing fakes is, thanks to generative AI, accelerating and accumulating. It is necessary to develop a critical vocabulary to grapple with a news and social media environment increasingly awash in artifacts and performances that, to many, *feel true* but *aren't real*. I offer civic fiction as a part of that critical vocabulary. As an analytic, civic fiction reveals how cosmopolitan sympathy is not simply evoked but infrastructurally scaffolded—through platforms, publication practices, and affective scripts calibrated to audience desires. Journalism has always been a hall of mirrors, after a fashion. Stories refract against each other and locating the originating flash can be difficult, especially in fast moving, complex situations like the Arab Spring or the Syrian uprising. *The Gay Girl in Damascus*, perhaps, wasn't as much of an aberration in that sense as we might prefer to believe. She was an especially well-placed mirror, tilted to catch a certain kind of familiar light. Civic fictions, as phenomena, serve a type of organizing function. They reveal the narrative architectures of mediated care—how publics are organized not just around facts, but around emotionally resonant imaginaries

that feel politically virtuous to believe in. While they might fool us, they also show us the shape of what we are looking for.

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