“Egypt.. isn’t that in Switzerland?”:
American Cartoons and the Egyptian Revolution

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The quotation in the title is a first-hand reaction I got once upon introducing myself to an American citizen. Inasmuch as her question can be interpreted at face value as a cultural faux pas that may occur anywhere: innocent geographic ignorance, it has deeper ramifications in that it is symptomatic of the reluctance to approach cultural “otherness” and contentment with border thinking that besot many Western cultures. Notions related to dealing with Eastern cultures in archetypal terms as unanimous entities have become a crucial part of literary studies since the publication of Edward Said’s Orientalism. More recently, criticism of a priori (mis)conceptions and ideologically hegemonic (in Gramsci’s sense) representations have come to pervade such other disciplines as popular culture and area studies. In this paper, I examine two typologies of popular reaction to Egypt’s 2011 revolution (January 25-February 11): North/Central American cartoons (by Marshall Ramsey, Bill Day, Clay Bennett, and others) vis-à-vis Brazilian cartoonist Carlos Latuff’s work. Published during and after the Egyptian revolution, the samples I tackle show the existence of two undercurrents that I examine within a transnational context. I show how the former group’s representations of the Egyptian revolution do not exceed the boundaries of essentialist Orientalist cultural symbology, replete as they are with such signifiers as pyramids, sphinxes, mummies, and camels. Carlos Latuff’s work, on the other hand, is dealt with as an example that bypasses the limitations of stereotypical representation and presents a more precise view of Egypt and Egyptians, through the artist’s engagement with Arabic text and culture-specific figures, among other factors. I demonstrate the success of such examples of South-South dialogue through showcasing the widespread circulation Latuff’s work gained among Egyptians on social media and study the consequences of Orientalist representations on the reception studies in the Arab world.