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The American University in Cairo
School of Humanities and Social Sciences

**THE MODERN SCHOOL IN THE GARBAGE SETTLEMENT: DIFFERENT SOCIAL
IMAGINARIES OF THE FUTURE OF THE ZABBALEEN RECYCLING SCHOOL FOR BOYS**

A Thesis Submitted to
The Department of Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology, and Egyptology

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

In Sociology – Anthropology

By **Marwa Abdel Fattah**

Under the supervision of **Dr. Sylvain Perdigon**

October/ 2013

To Farida and Adel

For their unconditional love and understanding

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INTRODUCTION

At 9 am, when 11-year old Ezz starts his day at the Mukattam Recycling School, he is already quite exhausted. Like most *Zabballeen* or juvenile garbage-collectors, he was up until well into the night the day before, gathering trash with his father in the more affluent neighborhoods of Cairo. In its communication material, the NGO-based school he attends in the morning promises to turn Ezz and others like him into “waste-management entrepreneurs.” Fuelled by this goal along with illiteracy and basic mathematics classes, Ezz is expected to hand in a monthly quota of used shampoo bottles and miscellaneous beauty product containers manufactured by Procter and Gamble (P&G), the multinational funding this innovative school. As part of his school day, Ezz spends a couple of hours preparing P&G beauty product plastic containers for recycling¹. This recycling process – dubbed the “Shampoo Program” by the school - is optional but also crucial for the children: the token pay they receive from the school depends on their participation in this activity. When he leaves school in the early afternoon, the second and longer part of Ezz’s day begins. First, at home, he has to sort out the previous day’s garbage collected with his father. The evening involves going back to the streets for a new round of trash hoarding. When I met him a year ago, Ezz was still a newcomer to the Recycling School and had hopes of becoming a doctor when he grew up. One year later (2013), he had a change of mind, informing me that he wants to keep on working with his father as a zabbal because it is such a “good job” like he said.

¹ This process consists of removing the paper labels from the containers to enable recycling of plastic only using a recycling machine provided by P&G. The recycling itself, however, takes place only once per month after the boys have collected and prepared for recycling an adequate amount of P&G plastic containers.

This thesis focuses on the Recycling School, the first of its kind in Egypt to target the young garbage collectors of Zabbaleen² also known as *Zarayeb*³ in Mansheyet Nasser⁴. The RS matches the criteria of what is called in the field of education Learn and Earn based education. In this model, students work and go to school at the same time. This approach was never adopted in Egypt before. Commenting on this fact, the RS founder Dr. Laila Iskandar, an educationalist⁵, social entrepreneur⁶ and currently Egypt's Minister of State for Environment Affairs, told me in an interview in Fall 2011 at her place in Zamalek: “this school is a new crazy idea that has nothing to do with the Egyptian government education.” Most of the RS male-only students are governmental school dropouts; the others never even went to school. When they first enrolled, most of the boys could neither write their own names nor read street names – a handicap neatly summed up by one of the school boys in the documentary, *Garbage*

² The name of the place where the RS is. The word Zabbaleen is also the Arabic translation of the word “garbage collectors”. In the following the word Zabbaleen is used with a capital “Z” to refer to the place and “z” to refer to the plural of the word zabbal (garabge collector).

³ Pigsties

⁴ Mansheyet Nasser is in Mukattam

⁵ She acquired a Master of Arts in Teaching with a specialization in Near Eastern Studies from the University of California, Berkeley and later acquired a Doctorate of Education from the Teacher's College at Columbia University in New York. In my interview with her, Dr. Iskandar told me that she wrote several educational curriculums and created several models of learning.

⁶ Dr. Iskandar is the owner of CID; a consulting company that provides “strategic solutions in marketing communications, management, and community development since 1995.” Website:

<http://www.cid.com.eg/?gclid=CMGn56T-nrkCFUIV3godbBwAVQ>

Dreams⁷, as follows: “I was blind before joining the Recycling School”. The boys take literacy classes *a hissa*⁸ and basic mathematical skills as part of the school curriculum. Once they become literate, they have the option to enroll in Third Preparatory Distance Learning. This option enables them to obtain a *shahada*⁹, which, according to them “might enhance their life chances”. The students also take map reading skills to navigate the Cairo streets more easily.

The RS currently has 185 registered students. Not all of them attend regularly, with roughly 20 students attending only once every one or two months. Since its establishment, 100 Zabbaleen boys have graduated from the RS. A graduate of the RS is the student who has obtained a Literacy Certificate from it, reaching a level that enables him to enroll in Third prep. The RS director, Abl¹⁰ Samia, and the rest of the teachers are all females except for the drama teacher and the Recycling teacher, Ramy and Rady, who are also the school graduates. The school director has known the school’s founder, Dr Laila Iskandar, since she was a child. In our first interview in 2011, she told me: “I never went to school... Dr Laila treated me like a daughter, taught me, and took me with her on her world tours to talk about education... she raised me.” In fact, all of the eight teachers

⁷ Garbage Dreams is a multiple awards winner documentary directed by Mai Iskandar. It features the life of three garbage collectors from Zabbaleen who are also the RS graduates.

⁸ *Hissa* is the tutoring session that the school offers to its students. There is no conventional class arrangement where all the enrolled students attend one teacher’s class at a time. The school is composed of round tables, each of which seats around 3 students and one or two teachers to handle one or two students each at a time.

⁹ Certificate

¹⁰ Misses or Miss

I met in the RS are the “daughters of the neighborhood” (*welad el Zabbaleen*); they were born and married in the settlement, and have continued to live in it. Dr. Iskandar informed me that she trained all of the teachers herself and that she has known many of them since they were young. She also told me that she wanted to empower the Zabbaleen community through the Zabbaleen themselves, which is why she picked Zabbaleen residents to educate the Zabbaleen children.

This school is funded by the Procter & Gamble group. According to information given to me by Dr. Laila Iskandar in our interview at her home, this arrangement came about in an unorthodox fashion: P&G had apparently fallen victim to commercial fraud as certain individuals from the Dweea'a area were buying P&G plastic beauty containers (shampoo and cream bottles) from the Zabbaleen¹¹ which they then proceeded to refill with soap and water before reselling them as the original product. According to Ezzat Naim, director of the Spirit of Youth NGO¹², in an interview at his office in September 2012, P&G contacted Dr. Laila Iskandar's consulting office, CID, to help them find solutions for this commercial fraud. “Dr. Iskandar took advantage of this opportunity to arrange for the RS students— most of whom are already garbage collectors - to collect and bring to the school P&G containers by either finding them in garbage heaps or by buying them from residents in Zabbaleen for recycling. In fact, in Zabbaleen everybody seems to be engaged in some aspect of the garbage industry. The male garbage collectors bring the garbage

¹¹ Who find those containers in the garbage they collect and sell them as recyclables.

¹² The Spirit of Youth NGO was founded by a Zabbaleen resident Mr. Ezzat Guindi. It can be said that this NGO is the most popular now in the settlement. Dr. Iskandar is on the board of directors of SOY- that with Dr. Iskandar's help created the RS.

home for their wives and daughters to sort. The women then sort the garbage by type of material: plastic, can, or paper, to be sold for recycling. The recycling schoolboys buy P&G plastic containers from residents in the Zabbaleen neighborhood. According to the RS founder, director and teachers, this arrangement protects P&G from commercial fraud while also providing an opportunity to publicize its community-building role.

In August 2013 in a phone interview with Mr. Ramz Farag, P&G Company Communications Manager, Middle-East and Pakistan, who is in charge of the RS project, he pointed out that the counterfeit problem started in 2000 and constituted a huge problem for P&G. He added that when the company traced the origin of the P&G bottles that are not filled with P&G genuine product, it found out that one of the main sites from where counterfeiters buy P&G containers was the Zabbaleen settlement. Consequently, he added, the company contacted CID that designed the RS concept. When I asked Mr. Farag about what the RS project represents to P&G, he said: “ it is a win-win situation for the business, the community and the environment.” “The RS boys are learning through what they can do and earn an income which helps reduce poverty. As for the environment, the Recycling School boys recycled around 2 million shampoo containers since 2000... and for the business, this project contributes to the volume loss recovery.” In this respect, Mr. Farag added that the counterfeit phenomena is enormous and that the RS is obviously not what will put end to it in Egypt. However, he said that its students’ contribution is notable. His last statement in our interview was the following:

“P&G would not have supported this project for 11 consecutive years if it was for the business alone... the beauty of this project is that it has a genuine contribution to the community as well as the business.”

We see in Mr. Farag's discourse that the importance of this project for P&G is more related to its Corporate Social Responsibility activities than any other forms of direct financial profits. Through my conversation with Mr. Farag, I understood also that the RS is considered one of P&G most successful projects and that year after year it became very famous and important also for the image of the multinational.

In an attempt to explain how this deal with P&G came about, Dr. Iskandar revealed, in our Zamalek interview, that she created this school to “ensure the certainty of income for those young garbage collectors.” She further explained that her intention is “to respond to reality; that those boys are working anyway and will continue being garbage collectors when they grow up, but with the school's help, they will do it with dignity.”¹³ This statement sums up how the school imagines the future of these boys on the basis of an understanding of how the Egyptian society operates. This social imaginary of the future shapes in turn the kind of education dispensed at the school. In her discourse, Iskandar strives to deliver a certain understanding of the work of garbage collectors that she came across. In a document presented by Dr. Iskander at a conference on TVET education¹⁴ in Shanghai¹⁵, she argues that the work experience of the Zarayeb boys should neither go to

¹³ Interview in 2011 at DrIskandar's place in Zamalek.

¹⁴ Technical and Vocational Education and Training.

¹⁵ The Third International Congress on TVET which was organized by the UNESCO in Shanghai on May 16, 2012. “More than 500 representatives from 107 countries attended the Congress.” This conference aims at developing TVET education also known as “skill-development systems”. This congress is guided by a principle that TVET education should be a top priority to fight unemployment and “create greener

waste nor be overlooked. Rather, it should be improved and modernized through education— a goal she is attempting to achieve. One could also understand from this Shanghai document –that I discuss in detail in the following chapter- that Iskandar aims at helping the Zabbaleen community to become the leading force in the garbage industry in Egypt. For her, this is the appropriate way to make the Zabbaleen acquire professionalism in the industry justice.

This approach is reflected in the discourse of the school teachers and some of the older students who often use the term “*ntawar men nafsna*” to face the recycling multinationals. I understood the word “*ntawar*” as “*modernize and develop*” rather than just “*improve*” because my informants usually use it in a context of comparison with the management waste multinationals “that society accepts more than the traditional Zabbaleen who ‘use old fashion ways’” in doing their business such as using “donkey carts” to carry the waste and “raise pigs” to sort their garbage¹⁶. Within this context, I argue in this thesis that modernization does not only have technological overtones; it also has aesthetic and sensory resonances. To explain why the government hired foreign companies to manage Cairo waste, Iskandar highlights in a foreign television report and also in her book that “ the Zabbaleen are perceived to be dirty. They don't wear a clean

societies”. Retrieved from: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/education-building-blocks/technical-vocational-education-and-training-tvet/third-international-congress-on-tvet/>

¹⁶ Iskandar, L. (1994) Mokattam garbage village. AUC Press

uniform. They don't really wash their trucks. They used to raise pigs, and that's not a very clean enterprise.”¹⁷

To be modernized in this context also entails having modern managerial skills. The Zabbaleen, though “independent entrepreneurs”, are not represented by companies. My interview with Iskandar in Fall 2011 and Ezzat Naiem¹⁸ (the head of the Spirit of Youth NGO) in Fall 2012 reveal that the fact that the Zabbaleen do not have officially registered waste management enterprises is one of the main reasons why the Egyptian government underrated their work and sold annual contracts reaching US\$ 50 million in 2003 to modern European and Egyptian firms instead with “superior know-how”. Those firms are Enser (Spanish), FCC (Spanish), AMA (Italian) as well as the Egyptian Company for Garbage Collection (ECGC).¹⁹ As for the Zabbaleen, they refuse to be just salaried employees in those firms because –as Iskandar states, “they [the zabbalen] say ‘we are entrepreneurs and we are recyclers. Do you really think we enjoy going out and handling this dirt just because we love garbage?’ ” Accordingly, the Zabbaleen mobilized and created “their own workshops and recycling companies that are officially registered, many of which have a capital of

¹⁷ Those are Iskandar words in a video report done by FRED DE SAM LAZARO in 2005. Source:

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/business/jan-june10/egypt_02-16.html

¹⁸ I interviewed Mr. Ezzat Guindi four times. The first time was in 2011, the second time was in September 2012, the third and the fourth times were over a telephone call in late May 2013 and early October 2013.

¹⁹ Salah Fahmi, W., & Suttons, K. (2010). Cairo’s Zabaleen garbage recyclers: Multi-nationals’ takeover and state relocation plans. *Habitat International*. P.822

over LE 10 million.” It was in this context of collective mobilization that Iskandar created the RS to educate the young Zabaleen – the RS students - who “by 2015 or 2017, when the other contracts (The European companies contracts with the Egyptian government) are up for negotiation or ... we hope end, these guys here will be ready to renegotiate. How to negotiate contracts is part of the curriculum.”²⁰ In a recent interview in Fall 2013 with Mr. Ezzat Guindi, he pointed out that the recent Egypt's Minister of State for Environment Affairs, Dr. Iskandar, decided to contract with 5 out of 48 newly formed domestic Zabbaleen solid waste companies. Guindi added that the government can't simply end the old contracts with the international companies to avoid paying them high fines.

I argue that this process of achieving modernization being experimented by the RS is actually an attempt to convert the Zabbaleen boys' cultural capital, that is, their know-how, into another form of cultural capital, “dignity,” by turning them into “waste and recycling entrepreneurs” through education. This is the RS social imaginary of its students future. However, because of the stigma attached to waste in Egypt, this conversion would seem to be a hard-to-reach goal, hence the conflict in the entire school project. The odds against this conversion struck me through the boys' narratives as well as that of their teachers. They, as participants in this project, seem to speak in different voices; they value the school's role in their lives, stating that they “are proud of being garbage collectors and the sons and daughters of Zabbaleen” but at the same time they look at their work and environment as an imposed option and many of the students express in their discourse a desire to travel abroad and quit this job. This ambivalence raises the following questions driving the thesis:

²⁰ Iskandar says this in the same televised report right after she found the RS before the most of the multinationals ended their contracts in Egypt.

- a) *How is the RS presenting this process of modernization/capital conversion to the non-Zabbaleen world (media, development workers, the international community)? And what does this presentation entail?*
- b) *Why, despite the RS efforts, is the conversion of Zabbaleen expertise into another form of cultural capital – dignity - so difficult to materialize?*
- c) *In which ways do the RS Zabbaleen students live with the stigma of waste inside and outside their neighbourhood?*
- d) *If gaining a cultural capital through the education offered by the RS to its students is a hard-to-reach goal, then what are the reasons that drive them to participate in this project?*
- e) *Given the constraints, what are the RS students' social imaginaries of their future?*

BACKGROUND

The Zabbaleen settlement is located to the east of Cairo on the lower part of the Mukkattam Hills in the district of Manshiyet Nasser. It is not visible from the city below. The Zabbaleen have been subject to a series of several evictions, most recently in September 1970, when the government moved them from Imbaba²¹. The Mukattam settlement – where the RS is located - is the largest of seven other settlements of garbage

²¹ Assaad, M., & Garas, N. (1994). *Experiments in Community Development in a Zabbaleen Settlement*.

collectors in Cairo. According to my interlocutors in Zabbaleen, the majority of the residents originate from Upper Egypt's poorest regions. They migrated to Cairo more than 50 years ago upon hearing from their neighbours of good business opportunities in Cairo based on raising pigs. When these predominantly Christian migrants first came to Cairo, they started working with the *Wahis* who migrated to Cairo from the Dakhla Oasis around a hundred years ago. The *Wahis* are known as the traditional service providers; they took charge of the collection, transport, and disposal of Cairo household waste. In Mukkattam, the Zabbaleen settled, built tin houses and started raising pigs - forming *Zeribas*²² (pigsties) on the garbage they bought from the *Wahis* who, according to Mary Assaad were "bidding for the right to service buildings and collect monthly fees from building residents."²³ In the ensuing years, the newcomers from Upper Egypt started collecting garbage themselves under the supervision of the *Wahis*. Until the 1970's, the Zabbaleen had to pay the *Wahis* for this right²⁴. The *Wahis* were the only ones in charge of contracting with the building residents. Once they service these buildings, they assign to one or more of the Zabbaleen the collection of their garbage. They may or may not help the Zabbaleen in the household garbage collection. The Zabbaleen relied on the help of their sons and their monkey carts for the collection of garbage. They used to – and up until now - leave their settlement at dawn to start their work. The younger children used to guard the donkey carts while the fathers or the elder brothers make the rounds of the buildings to collect the garbage. In 1990, the Cairo governorate initiated a program to modernize household garbage collection. Thus, the use of donkey carts was no longer

²² That is why the Zabbaleen settlement now is called *Zarayeb* which the plural of the word *Zeriba*

²³ A Assaad, M., & Garas, N. (1994). *Experiments in Community Development in a Zabbaleen Settlement*. AUC Press. 2. P.2

²⁴ Assaad, M., & Garas, N. (1994). *Experiments in Community Development in a Zabbaleen Settlement*. AUC Press. 2. P.2

allowed and the Zabbaleen had to replace them with trucks. Many of my interlocutors told me stories about the so-called “confiscation” of their donkey carts, belied by their existence up until 2012. Up to the 1980’s the Zabbaleen lived in their tin houses, dispensing with infrastructure. They made a living out of raising pigs and selling recyclables from the garbage collected. Waste that could not be disposed of as well as *Zeriba* was thrown out in the streets or taken to the furn (dumping site in the lower part of the settlement)²⁵ This waste caused many fire hazards as a reaction to heat exposure. Tragic stories of such fires abound; the fires themselves destroyed the settlement on two occasions in 1976: one in June and the other in December. This was a landmark year in the Zabbaleen settlement’s history that is divided into two eras: the pre-fire era and the post-fire era.²⁶ After this massive fire, people in the settlement started using new fire-resistant building material and changed the layout of the houses. The year 1980 saw heightened concerns to upgrade the settlement, a project that was funded by the World Bank. In an interview at the American University in Cairo with Dr Marlene Anawati²⁷ I was told that when she first visited the settlement, it was in really poor condition. According to Anawati, Oxfam collaborated with the World Bank to obtain funding of those projects in the settlement. She added that the settlement was totally transformed by recently added infrastructure. “We were working day and night in Zabbaleen, with

²⁵ Assaad, M., & Garas, N. (1994). *Experiments in Community Development in a Zabbaleen Settlement*. AUC Press. 2. P.4

²⁶ Assaad, M., & Garas, N. (1994). *Experiments in Community Development in a Zabbaleen Settlement*. AUC Press. 2. P.4

²⁷ who was involved in the upgrading projects in Zabbaleen in the early 1980’s through her position as Oxfam Deputy Field Director for Egypt

occasional overnight stints by some of us. Before our arrival the settlement was in a totally different state. What you see now when you go to Zabbaleen is much better than how it was back then.”

By focusing on the Mukatam Recycling School, my research will contribute an ethnography on the Mukattam Garbage Village, a subject which has captured the attention of many researchers. Some of the studies conducted on this marginalized area of Cairo focus on “the Multinationals takeover and the State relocation of the Zabbaleen”²⁸. Other studies focus on gender and women’s empowerment²⁹ or on “Purity and Pollution”³⁰, two concepts that play a considerable role in defining the relationship between the researchers and the researched. Further studies shed light on the role of NGO’s such as the Association for Protection of the Environment (APE)³¹ in improving the environment of the Zabbaleen whose health is at stake because they live with

²⁸ Salah Fahmi, W., & Suttons, K. (2010). Cairo’s Zabaleen garbage recyclers: Multi-nationals’ takeover and state relocation plans. *Habitat International*.

²⁹ Assaad, M. (1999). *Empowering young girls of Mokattam Zabbaleen settlement*.

³⁰ Furniss, J. (2008). Purity and Pollution between Researcher and Researched: Barriers to ethnography among a community of Egyptian garbage collectors. Retrieved from:
<http://www.nomorelandfill.com/images/wp2.pdf>

³¹ APE has been working with the Zabbaleen for the past 25 years. Its aim is to help the Zabbaleen “find innovate ways to support the environment and aid themselves” through many programs that include: child protection, income generation, health support services and recycling. Website:
<http://www.ape.org.eg/ThePrograms.html>

unrecyclable waste³². Prior to establishing the school, Dr. Iskandar had written a book about the settlement entitled the Mukattam Garbage Village in which she traces the history of the development of the settlement. Elena Volpi gives a critical analysis on community organization and the World Bank ten-year development program in the Zabbaleen. More literature stresses the assessment of development projects in Zabbaleen from the Zabbaleen women's perspective³³. Most of these studies were conducted by individuals involved in development projects and organization in Zabbaleen. They mostly focus on the relationship between the Zabbaleen and the government or state's achievements of community projects in Zabbaleen. Volpi, however, focuses on the hierarchical relationship between community leaders and the rest of the Zabbaleen.³⁴

THE MODERNIZING ZABBALEEN: BEING SUBJECT TO A PROCESS OF SOCIAL REIFICATION

As mentioned above, the Zabbaleen community has attracted a lot of researchers from various disciplines- anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, environmentalists and social entrepreneurs - who have produced a wide spectrum of

³² Myllyla, Susanna (2001). STREET ENVIRONMENTALISM: Civic Associations and Environmental Practices in the Urban Governance of Third World Megacities. Retrieved from: <http://tampub.uta.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/67064/951-44-5048-5.pdf?sequence=1>

³³ Abdel Motaal, D. (1996). *The Zabbaleen community of Muqattam: Women at the Muqattam settlement*. Cairo Papers in Social Science. Vol. 19, No. 4

³⁴ Volpi, E. (1996). *The Zabbaleen community of Muqattam: Community organization and development*. Cairo Papers in Social Science. Vol. 19, No. 4

literature on this particular settlement. The popularity of the Zabbaleen in Social Sciences, however, did not discourage me from conducting this research.

In this project, I focus solely on a specific category of the Zabbaleen taking part in a program that aims to redefine the meaning, in the eyes of Egyptian society, of the word “zabbal” – an insult in the Egyptian vernacular to describe someone who is physically or morally unclean – by means of innovative instructional methods. I decided to call my interlocutors the “modernizing Zabbaleen”. In this case The modernizing Zabbaleen, refers to the Recycling School (RS) male students whose ages range from 11 to 22 years. What inspired me to call these specific students the “modernizing Zabbaleen” is the fact that they are participants in the RS project which – as variously mentioned by my informants - targets to “modernize the young Zabbaleen and create a new empowered generation of Zabbaleen, somehow, different from their less fortunate parents”³⁵

The stories behind the reasons why the school was established are various. The RS founder told me that it was her intention to make education accessible to the hard-to-reach³⁶ children whose life constraints prevent them from exercising their right to education. Iskandar added that she intended to create an income generating type of schooling, to encourage the families of Zabbaleen to appreciate education. Some of the teachers and students inside the school adopt the same kind of discourse as Iskandar, pointing out that the school was established just for the children of the impoverished Zabbaleen unable to afford state schools fees. However, considering the time I spent in

³⁵The RS director.

³⁶ A term used in the field of education to talk about children who cannot have access to formal governmental education like for example working children, street children and dropouts.

the RS, the documents that its founder shared with me, televised reports and the critically acclaimed documentary, *Garbage Dreams*, in which several of the RS graduates and the RS director appear, I suggest that the RS mission is to create a new generation of the Zabbaleen:— ones capable of tackling the garbage business more smoothly than the older generation of Zabbaleen with the potential to become waste entrepreneurs, ready to compete with or hopefully replace the multinationals companies³⁷. This strikes me as the most plausible *raison d'être* for the school, transcending the empowerment model of young men who happened to be impoverished garbage collectors when they joined the RS, through an income generating model of education inspired by their environment.

HE AND SHE: THE DYNAMICS OF GENDER RELATIONS WITHIN THE ZABBALEEN AND THE RS

In this thesis, I talk about the “zabbal” which is the masculine word for “garbage collector”. When I interviewed the RS Founder Dr. Iskandar, she clarified that due to the fact that all the Zabbaleen residents come from Upper Egypt, having a mixed school is not their preference. For that precise reason, she created two models of Learn and Earn schools in the settlement: one for girls (the Rug Weaving Center) and the other for boys, which is the RS. “I wouldn’t let the parents’ principles get in the way of their children’s education so I created two schools; this way everybody is happy,” she added. It is obvious that Iskandar chose the rug weaving for girls and the recycling for the boys based on gender roles inside the settlement. Usually in Zabbaleen, the boys are the ones who go out of the Zarayeb with their father for trash hoarding while the girls stay home to sort the recyclables with their mothers from the cache collected by their menfolk. As the boys are my main interlocutors, the bulk of the thesis refers to the male zabbal. In some parts of

³⁷ When they were still in Egypt.

the thesis, the local females will be mentioned since they helped me decode several situations such as the degree to which the Zabbaleen are stigmatized throughout their life. Finally, I believe that the use of the word “zabbal” emerges also from the role of each gender in this business. The Zabbaleen men go out to the streets and bring the garbage home to their wives and daughters who my male interlocutors usually refer to as “the ones who help us”³⁸. In short, both men and women in the Zabbaleen work in the garbage business; however, there was never any mention in my hearing of the word “zabbala” (the female noun of garbage collector) in the neighborhood.

AGE: “THE YOUNGER BOYS, THE OLDER BOYS AND THE GRADUATES”

In my research, I deal with different age groups. My informants are between the ages of 11 to 23 years old. This is a significant point in my project because each age group has a certain perception of their life and their future. The decisions made by the young boys I spoke with are in many cases very similar to the ones the older boys told me they made when they were young. From this perspective, the age range seems to be a way of witnessing different stages of my interlocutors’ life. Moreover, in the RS all the students of the same level in literacy and mathematics take the same classes (*hissa*) regardless of age. For those reasons, I decided to focus on the youth and the children in the school, described as “the older” or “the younger” boys. The RS graduates are older than “the

³⁸ I see this reference that the boys make to their mothers and sisters as conferring of dignity.

They always speak of as them as their protectors and therefore they would not let them go do “the tough part of the job outside the neighborhood”. One of my informants once told me: “I’d never let my mother or sisters go to the sisters and get humiliated...they can just sort the work I bring because by the time I get home, I’m already quiet exhausted, sometimes I take a nap after I return and when I wake up, I help them with the sorting.”

older boys”. They are usually in their early 20’s while most of the “older ones” are between 15 to 20 year old.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

FORMS OF CAPITAL: TRANSITIONING FROM ONE FORM OF CULTURAL CAPITAL TO ANOTHER ONE

Regardless of age or gender, each individual I met in the Zabbaleen settlement is a hard worker or at least a person who attaches considerable importance and/or appreciation to the category of work per se. With each visit to the neighborhood, I came across seemingly tireless men and women, young and old, accomplishing work-related tasks in their yards or right in front of their buildings. When I entered the school premises, I often heard students sharing stories about the number of *gawani* (garbage batches) they sorted the day before or the weight of plastic or bones sold to a factory or a middleman. With only a few exceptions, each RS student I talked with, even if unemployed at the time of our conversation, had some type of work experience in the garbage business. They usually start by “helping” their fathers by going out to the streets with them to collect trash at an early age (as far as I know, around the age of 9 or 10).

Despite their diligence and experience in the field of waste management as well as the profits yielded by this business, many of the Zabbaleen’s physical, moral, and financial hardships are job-related. I believe that this dissonance could be understood through Pierre Bourdieu’s *Forms of Capital*³⁹. I see those boys labor as a form of “cultural capital” that could be transformed into economic capital rather than another form of cultural capital that is in this context “dignity”. In this respect, I argue that the RS

³⁹ Bourdieu, Pierre (1986). The Forms of Capital. Retrieved from:

<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/bourdieu-forms-capital.htm> P.1-7

intervention in its students' life cannot be reduced to a mere attempt to increase the boys' income/economic capital; rather, it attempts to convert their knowhow - that is, unfortunately for the Zabbaleen, tainted with the stigma of waste - into another form of cultural capital which is dignity and recognition. By teaching the Zabbaleen boys how to write and read, the RS is giving them the chance to enroll in the preparatory exam and obtain a "shahada" (certificate), *an institutionalized cultural capital*.

However, as Bourdieu argues, "the material and symbolic profits guaranteed by an academic qualification also depend on its scarcity."⁴⁰ In Egypt a Third Prep degree" is of little value, or in Bourdieu's words, it is not what could *impose recognition*. Most of the RS boys are either governmental schools dropouts or have never had a formal education. By the time they graduate from the RS, many of them argue that they are "too old to go to college" or that "it's better to enroll in a vocational degree" –which is a technical certificate that is not as advanced as a college degree. I believe that the ubiquity of the Third Prep or a Vocational degree is hardly a revelation to the RS. The main aim of the RS, after all, is to create "waste management entrepreneurs" who could form their own recycling or waste-related companies to become *officially recognized*, as argued by Bourdieu, in the definition of institutionalized cultural capital. However, because of the compounded stigma of waste and the *habitus* of the Zabbaleen, their status in society is unlikely to shift.

⁴⁰ Bourdieu, Pierre (1986). The Forms of Capital. Retrieved from:

<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/bourdieu-forms-capital.htm> P.7

THE LOGICS OF STIGMA: ERVING *GOFFMAN*'S THEORY OF SOCIAL *STIGMA*⁴¹

Through the narratives of the RS boys and teachers, I noticed that they identify themselves as people with a stigma that limits their life chances. In fact, it could be said that the RS came into being by virtue of acknowledging the stigma that marginalizes the Zabbaleen community and threatens their business. I argue in this thesis that the stigma to which the Zabbaleen are subjected has a social and a physical dimension that is very apparent in their discourse and their interactions with me as an outsider to the settlement. In order to decipher their narratives and many of the situations taking place during my fieldwork in the neighborhood, I mobilize Goffman's account on the logics of stigma and the mechanisms used by stigmatized individuals to cope with their situation.

THE FIELDSITE: ENTERING THE MUKATTAM GARBAGE VILLAGE

The site of this project is the Recycling School in the Mukattam Garbage Village. At the school, there is no set schedule for class hours and breaks because the school is based on self-paced education; this means that each student manages his own time and learning schedule in the school. They come whenever they want from 9 am to 2 pm and from 4 pm to 9 pm. When the student enters the school, he picks up his file and goes to one of the teachers to give him a *hissa* at one of the school small round tables. Sometimes, a teacher handles 3 students at a time around one table. Due to the similarity of this structure to private tutoring rather than a traditional classroom context, neither teacher nor student adheres to any one schedule. For this reason, it was impossible for me to employ focus groups. In order to analyze the various discourses in the school to answer

⁴¹ Goffman, Erving (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. P. 1- 124

my thesis questions, I relied on participant observation and conducted individual person-centered interviews.

METHODOLOGY : ENTERING THE FIELD AND ENGAGING THE SUBJECTS.

To start my fieldwork, I thought that the best way for me to enter the field and build relationships with my interlocutors - the students and teachers - was to volunteer in the school through a teaching position. The school founder, Dr Iskandar, agreed to this plan. However, once I started my fieldwork, I realized that it would not be wise to commit myself to a task for which I am not qualified. One of the school boys, Ramez, even asked me to teach him English. As I responded to his request and started some sessions with him, I realized how hard it would be to perform the task of the teacher as well as that of the ethnographer, especially given my lack of teaching experience. I then contacted the school founder once again and explained to her that my thesis advisor and I thought that it would be better for me to observe the teachers, learn from their expertise, and then see if I could venture into a teaching role at a later phase of my research. The school founder agreed. Accordingly, I explained to everybody in the school, starting with the school director of course, that I was an MA student at the American University in Cairo and that I would be conducting my research on the school and its students as a new educational model. Thus, all parties concerned accepted my presence at the school as a researcher rather than a teacher. This alleviated any tensions arising from the wide socioeconomic gap between my interlocutors and I. After all, it was an inescapable fact that at the end of the day, I was conducting a study on the stigma and social marginalization within the Egyptian society experienced by my interlocutors, who were well aware that I come from the very space that stigmatizes them. However, being perceived as a researcher or as someone interested in this place and the people in it, made them welcome my presence.

They even went so far as to enquire after me by telephone if I did not go to the field for a couple of days. I believe that everybody in the school was comfortable with my position in it, especially the boys who had so much to share whether it be a story, a song, a dance, a drawing, a play, or simply a talk expressing their innermost concerns with someone outside their group.

WORKING IN THE FIELD: PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

I had hopes of spending my participant observation both inside and outside the RS. I wanted to acquire a sense of the boys' day to day life as they work and perhaps interact with their families. However, the school director, who works under the supervision of the school founder, informed me that this would not be feasible on the grounds that "the parents like to protect the privacy of their children's work". I did not understand at the time what this meant exactly; it was my first day at the RS and I was doing my best to keep a low profile. Accordingly, I bowed to the superior knowledge of the school director's comments. Eager to have the chance to talk with the students' parents during my fieldwork, I asked the director if I could join the school teachers during scheduled visits to homes in the neighbourhood to check on students with sketchy attendance records and also canvass potential recruits to the school. Once again, Abla Samia expressed her doubts about such a scheme without the express approval of the school founder.

Over the telephone, Dr Iskandar said she would not accept any visits to the boys' homes because, as she put it, "that would be invading their privacy". I tried to explain to her that the school's role in the boys' lives goes beyond the space where the classes take place. Unfortunately, I was unable to convince her that getting close to the subjects' sphere was an integral part of an anthropologist's work. Eventually, I realized that Dr Iskander's reluctance may have been due to sensitivities over the child labor implications attached to the boys' work. This effectively put an end to any further arguments which were not only futile but also possibly disruptive to my fieldwork inside the school.

I did not expect to encounter similar limitations in the field, especially because there are numerous documentaries on Zabbaleen covering most aspects of Zabbaleen life in the settlement. One example is the documentary film *Garbage Dreams* directed by a relative of the RS founder, which depicts the school boys inside their homes.

I respected the school's wish, never repeating my desire to go in person to the boys' houses. In short, I understood that my presence in the school was by no means unconditional and that I might be asked not to come in if I overstepped the permitted boundaries. Interestingly, by the end of the fieldwork, one of the students told me that an American volunteer visiting the school as a part of a program organized by her church in the US, visited his place to see his family's pigsty. I took advantage of this story and promptly asked him to take me for exactly the same purpose. Since the boys issuing this invitation were from 18 to 22 years of age, I did not have to take permission from the school founder or director to visit with them. From then on, with my fieldwork centering around the RS, I would get an occasional chance to walk around the settlement with one of the school boys or the teachers or just alone. This was only a modest step forward; however, there was already so much going on inside the school that I was not really disappointed.

THE WORK IN THE FIELD: OBSERVING, NOTE TAKING AND NON-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

My visits to the school started in September 2012. Three times a week, I would enter the school in the morning, greet the school director and have a brief chat with her, then join one of the tables around which a teacher would be working with some students. I observed the learning process, the teachers' patience and the students' struggles' to perhaps write their name or solve a mathematical problem. I used to have non-structured conversations with teachers and their students. I would spend around 30 minutes at each table. Some days I would just talk with the school director and the students would come and go, sometimes joining us to share a story or a joke. There was always something interesting and significant to my research that I would pick up and try to get people to develop. Other times, I would just sit with the cleaning lady for the whole day listening to her stories, complaints, jokes, or simply anything at all she wanted to share with me. Other times I just spent the whole time at school talking with the teachers about their children, husbands, family, and real life issues. Other conversations were held with graduates of the school or older enrolled students. The boys, especially the older ones, would often invite me (along with some teacher) to play Domino with them. Actually, I spent whole days in the field, especially at the very beginning, just playing Domino, even though it was not my favorite game. Not only were the endless rounds of Domino far from stimulating, the context itself was not conducive to fruitful conversations about more meaningful matters. I joined in simply because it appeared to be the most popular game in the school. That said, I must acknowledge that this game helped in building rapport with both students and teachers, acting as an icebreaker between us. At times, one

of the boys would tell me “you don’t know how to play, you must be from Damietta⁴²” and I would imitate his Upper Egyptian accent and everybody would laugh.

ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEWS:

From the onset, it was clear that my presence in the school was somewhat intimidating. Consequently, I decided to spend the first month of my fieldwork doing only participant observation. After a month of this method, I started my ethnographic interviews with the boys. My questions to them were mainly about why they left their former schools and joined the RS; about their work and the challenges facing them, the nature of their relationship with their parents; how they participate in their households expenses, their dreams as well as their fears. My second round of formal interviews targeted the teachers. I mainly asked them about why they decided to teach at the RS and their thoughts about the boys’ work and future. Although the main questions were very simple, they led to further questions and interesting points as the interviews were open-ended.

CHAPTER OUTLINE:

The first chapter focuses on the RS attempt to convert the boys’ economic capital into a cultural and social one through a constructed representation of itself and of the boys. To explain this point, I tackle the process of modernization as an attempt to turn the boys’ expertise into a socially valuable capital. After shedding light on their expertise,

⁴² I never totally understood why one of the School boys would refer to me as someone from Damietta while joking. Anyway, he always did when I was winning or losing too much while playing Domino with him.

I attempt to understand who they really are, not only as young people but also as individuals whom the school perceives as young experts rather than working children.

In the second chapter, I try to decipher the waste stigma – which has social and sensual dimensions- as a contributing factor in rendering the conversion of the RS boys' economic capital into a cultural and social one *quasi* impossible. This chapter is designed to explain the social dimension of the stigma of waste by using Marry Douglas and Appadurai's theories on purity and danger to explain how the non-Zabbaleen react to the Zabbaleen intimacy with trash. Then I utilize Goffman's account on stigma, in his "*Notes on the management of spoiled identity*", to analyze my informants' narratives.

The first section of the third chapter explores a more complex analysis of waste stigma by adding a sensory dimension. I argue that the zabbaleen experience this kind of stigma more strongly when they interact with non-zabbaleen individuals (such as myself) visiting the settlement. The chapter attempts to show the "silent" and symbolic side of the stigma - an aspect that cannot be limited to the verbal and physical abuse of the non-Zabbaleen. In line with the previous chapter, I will try to reveal the challenges of overcoming *the stigma of intimacy* with trash in Egypt as well as converting Zabbaleen expertise in the garbage business into a cultural one. In the second section of this chapter, I tackle the issue of Zabbaleen environmental sensibility, which further explains why the conversion of capital targeted by the school seems out of reach. I argue in this section that what outsiders see as a problem – that is, garbage - is something that other people have managed to live with for years without perceiving it to be a problem in its own right. However, the Zabbaleen I met seem to be suffering from the consequences of living with garbage: health problems

and also the occasional fires generated by garbage in the past (garbage left in the settlement for some time absorbs the heat in the air which is highly flammable). More pertinently, another hardship confronting Zabbaleen is how they are perceived by others – something which has a profound effect on their self-esteem. What I want to say here is that the Zabbaleen have reached the point where their “lifestyle” –even if it constitutes a violation of their lives and even if they are aware of it -is not their main concern. Rather, the Zabbaleen concept of their lifestyle/habitus does not favor a change of their economic capital into a cultural and social one.

Finally, I will conclude this thesis with a chapter entitled *Choices and Possibilities*. If the conversion of the Zabbaleen expertise is impossible for the above reasons, and if both the RS and its students are aware of this point, the following questions are raised: What factors keep the school boys in this business? How are their future possibilities negotiated inside the RS? What do they think about these eventual life opportunities or options?

CHAPTER I:

“THE WAKE UP CALL”: BECOMING MODERNIZED (OR MODERNIZATION AND CULTURAL CAPITAL)

The RS constitutes, in itself, a process of modernization; an attempt to cope with “globalization that has put the Mokattam rubbish collection in direct competition with multinational waste management services against whom they cannot compete.”⁴³

While talking to me, most of my interlocutors insisted that they are more competitive than the European waste management firms. They believe that these firms cannot handle garbage the way they can. Moreover they claim that Cairo was cleaner before these foreign firms invaded the Egyptian waste market. By this, they mean that they – as traditional Zabbaleen - provide door-to-door service to Cairo residents while the foreign companies merely take the garbage directly from the streets; this different approach, according to them, has made Cairo dirtier in the past decade.

In their discourse, my interlocutors, both students and teachers, often indicated that the government does not recognise them because they are not sufficiently modern in managing their business. My interviews with the school founder, teachers, and the SOY NGO director reveal that “pre- modern” in this context means that they do not use the most modern garbage trucks or landfills; they do not wear special garbage uniforms; and above all, at the time the Egyptian government made contracts with European firms, most of the Zabbaleen did not have officially registered companies. As mentioned by the RS director in *Garbage Dreams* (as well as to me in person)

⁴³ Iskandar, L. CID Consulting and the Spirit of Youth Association for Environmental Services. P.2

“those foreign companies, however, were a wakeup call for us to modernize ourselves and fight for our garbage.”

In this chapter, I argue that the RS is a consequence of this “wakeup call” targeted to produce a new generation of Zabbaleen capable of competing with the European firms by transforming their expertise into another form of cultural capital: dignity. I argue that the modern-to-be subject in this thesis is the RS student who is also a young working zabbal. In order to make these arguments, I will first define the notions of cultural capital in the Zabbaleen context. Afterwards, I reconcile the RS social imaginary of its students’ future to the notion of child labour in contemporary anthropology by mobilizing Olga Nieuwenhuys’ account on it. To do so, I employ Elizabeth Povinelli’s article “*The Child in the broom closet: States of Killing in letting die*”. To build my argument, I will base this chapter on a document that Dr Iskandar, the RS founder, shared with me to provide my research with concrete details of the reasons behind the establishment of the school and its curriculum. This document is actually a paper that she, as the head of CID presented in Shanghai in 2012 at the Global Conference on TVET Education.

A- MODERNIZATION AS CULTURAL CAPITAL

In this section of the chapter, I intend to contextualize the modernizing imaginary that undergirds the RS project. I also link it with the notion of cultural capital in the Zabbaleen case.

The RS is based on the idea that education should be designed to fit the needs of one’s lifestyle. That is, the RS has no interest in offering the Zabbaleen boys an educational model that offers future changes in where and how its students live. This school, in my view, is rather trying to help the Zabbaleen – as a community - to survive by

introducing them to some modern ideas compared to their traditional rural⁴⁴ way of living. These old ways, as many of my interlocutors indicated, repel many of the Cairene non-Zabbaleen encountered by my interlocutors during their work outside the settlement. In this sense, I view the RS modernization project as a “distinct” one that does not seek to westernize its students, but rather to help them regain what “the West” (the foreign waste companies) took away from them: “their garbage”⁴⁵ and its related economy. To expand further on how this project of development was brought about, I first refer to Iskandar’s Shanghai paper on the RS.

THE SHANGAI PAPER: ISKANDAR’S MODERN IMAGINARY OF THE RS

“We needed to start with the children – the new generation who would lead this quest for justice into the next generation.”⁴⁶

In this paper, Iskandar presents the reasons why she created this “Learn and Earn” educational project. She traces the history of the Zabbaleen community since their

⁴⁴ The Zabbaleen come from Upper Egyptian where they had a rural lifestyle such as breeding animals for instance. When they moved to Cairo, they maintained this style in managing their garbage business by breeding pigs and birds.

⁴⁵ All my interlocutors in the RS refer to Cairo’s waste as “their” garbage.

⁴⁶ Iskandar, L. (May, 2012). Informal Waste Workers Learn outside of School and Reduce Global Warming. Paper Presented at Global Conference on TVET Education Shanghai

migration from Upper Egypt to Cairo to work as garbage collectors. In a description of their situation, she says:

“The garbage collectors were illiterate, did not know how to drive motorized vehicles, and were unable to access credit to purchase their own trucks. They relied on the intermediation of middlemen (waahis) to assist them in obtaining licenses from the Cairo Cleansing and Beautification Authority (CCBA). They had not been service to cover the actual cost of providing a door to door daily collection service; were not recognized for their unfailing regularity of collection from households and commercial establishments; had been left to operate with no official contracts, licenses or registration documents; had been subsidizing the city's waste system even up to paying for the transport of the residual, non recyclable waste from their homes – where they sorted and recovered – to official dumpsites. They had not been compensated for the higher than global average recycling rates they achieved⁴⁷ (80% of what they collect); nor had they been supported in upgrading their industry and their technology. It became clear that an entire program needed to be designed around the most integral feature of learning in the whole wide world: JUSTICE! And so began the journey in 1982.”

I believe that the passage, fully quoted above, cannot merely be read as a representation of poverty and oppression. It is also a description of a pre-modern state in terms of technology and management. Within this modern/ traditional dichotomy lies the school intervention in the Zabbaleen children's lives. It is an attempt to provide them with a model of education that modernizes their traditional way of

handling their business. Thus, there is hope for an eventual change of the traditional image of the Zabbal – a word that is an insult to describe someone morally or physically “unclean”- in the Egyptian society. The school aims to offer its students a curriculum that enables them to be businessmen who can write, read, set up companies, and procure trucks and machines. This technological and managerial modernization also entails an aesthetic dimension; when the Zabbaleen, for instance, substitute their monkey carts with trucks, they would be more compatible with the car-oriented city of Cairo. This is, I believe, an attempt to transform the Zabbaleen work into a cultural capital that the city might embrace. To better explain this notion of capital, one of my interlocutors, Ramy, a 22-year old RS graduate and a teacher at the school, says: “We want to prove to the world that the garbage collector can read and write and recycle. We want people to understand that the zabal can be an educated and respectable person.”

B- THE SOCIAL DISTRIBUTION OF HAPPINESS AND DEATH

In the following, I relate part of Iskandar’s document to Olga Nieuwenhuys’ account of child labor in “*The paradox of child labor and anthropology*” and Elizabeth Povinelli’s view of the distribution of happiness and death in “*The Child in the Broom Closet: States of killing and letting die*”.

Iskandar points out that working children in the garbage industry, “*had already shown that they were MANAGERS⁴⁸ of an entire city's waste system! They had been going out every day protecting the educated, literate and wealthy from*

⁴⁸ Her caps that I decided to leave to clarify the point she is trying to make.

huge health problems! They had already honed their trading skills, their recycling know-how and their technical savvy in recycling. What exactly was it that we could offer that they did not know? How should we do it without risking them losing what they already knew?"

For Iskandar, the Zabbaleen community fully deserves to be in control of the garbage and recycling industry in Egypt not only because they have managed for so long “Cairo’s waste”, “protecting the educated” and risking their own health in the process. However, because the Zabbaleen have a lot of expertise in this domain, she thinks that this accumulated knowledge should not go to waste. It is precisely for this reason that Iskandar argues that “the know-how” of the Zabbaleen should be improved and modernised through a new generation of Zabbaleen with a savoir-faire that is capable of perpetuating the profession and their existence. This is why Iskander conceived the idea of starting with “the children” whom she describes as:

“... important workers in this system. They are unable to enroll in formal schools and therefore enter adolescence illiterate, disenfranchised and marginalized. Thus one of the problems which needed to be addressed is: how do you break the cycle of poverty from being perpetuated into their adulthood without extracting them from the market based learning of this highly valuable sector or withdrawing their much needed labor from a very important family enterprise.”

I believe that the previous quote as well as my next argument – about the discussion that the RS triggers concerning child labor - indicate that the RS constitutes a distinct model of modernization rather than a mere imitation of the Western thinking that

incriminates child labor for instance. In the following part of her document, Iskandar states confidently:

“Was this child labor?!!

Understandably, northerners who visited our recycling schools perceived them through their particular cultural lens. They were disturbed about children being brought to a 'learning place' where they were earning money and engaging in economic activity as if learning to earn income had to be or could be totally separate and distinct from learning how to read and write. They perceived the influx of multinationals and globalization of the waste trade in the city to be a positive improvement to the community as it would eliminate the need for children to help families in the recycling trade. They did not give a moment's thought to the traditional ways in which local economies are structured and to the constricted lenses they used to define 'learning', 'education', 'economic well being', family enterprise, national development....It was as if all the sustainability elements of life had to be neatly boxed and compartmentalized otherwise they were invalid.”

Iskandar's argument about the perception of “northerners” of the RS students' work and its association with the notion of child labor opens up a new avenue for anthropological inquiry. In *The Paradox of child labor and anthropology*, Olga Nieuwenhuys talks about the limits of the notions of child labor and exploitation. She argues that “the notion of child labor was associated with factory work and hence was limited to Western countries.”⁴⁹ She goes on to assert that “the dissociation of

⁴⁹ Nieuwenhuys, O. (1996) *The Paradox of child labor and anthropology*. Annual Reviews, The American University in Beirut. Retrieved from <http://www.annualreviews.org/> P. 228-240

childhood from the performance of valued work has been increasingly considered a yardstick of modernity.”⁵⁰ Consequently, she argues that the distinction between harmful and suitable work for children as well as the rules for it in most governmental and bureaucratic approaches were defined by western legislation and then adopted by many countries in the world.⁵¹ According to Nieuwenhuys, these new universal laws conveniently overlook the important contribution of children to the economy by excluding them from remunerated employment. This abuse has contributed to their exploitation. She also states that these very rules constitute the moral high ground to western human rights activists who respond with outrage towards any form of child labor –no matter how “mundane”⁵² it is - while anthropologists “romanticized with it in the colonies.”⁵³ Anthropologists have argued in favor of rethinking children’s work in the developing world on the grounds that poverty is the cause of their work and not the other way around. In addition, they argue that the work of children is sometimes a choice they make because they are unsure about the value of diplomas and because of marriage strategies that incite girls in Lagos, Nigeria, for instance, to spend much out-of-school time acquiring street-trading skills. The anthropology of childhood and child labor also shows that in some countries where schooling is

⁵⁰ Nieuwenhuys, O. (1996) *The Paradox of child labor and anthropology*. Annual Reviews, The American University in Beirut. Retrieved from <http://www.annualreviews.org/> P.246

⁵¹ Nieuwenhuys, O. (1996) *The Paradox of child labor and anthropology*. Annual Reviews, The American University in Beirut. Retrieved from <http://www.annualreviews.org/> P.239

⁵² Like housekeeping for instance.

⁵³ Nieuwenhuys, O. (1996) *The Paradox of child labor and anthropology*. Annual Reviews, The American University in Beirut. Retrieved from <http://www.annualreviews.org/> P.240

mandatory, children have to work to afford the cost of books and clothes as is the case in Kerala, India. Other studies such as Reynolds' of the Zambezi Valley explains how Tonga children need to work in subsistence agriculture while attending school simply to survive. Finally, some studies reveal that children might simply dislike school and prefer to work and earn cash.⁵⁴

Like Nieuwenhuys, the RS project problematizes the notion of child labor. It perceives the work of the young Zabbaleen as a “learning space”⁵⁵ or, “market-based learning”⁵⁶ that makes of them young experts and “managers”⁵⁷ and “illustrates how learning is anchored in the local practice or recycling, the joy of working, the fulfillment of earning income, the dynamism of trading, accessing credit, and the imperative of organizing communities.”⁵⁸ Such arguments, however, raise important questions about the children of Zabbaleen- the RS students; How could the notion of survival – that Nieuwenhuys and Reynolds argue can be the reason for children's work- be understood in the context of the Zabbaleen children? In which ways could the relationship between the Zabbaleen residents' choice to work and involve their children in the waste management industry and the RS (as a project of social

⁵⁴ Nieuwenhuys, O. (1996) *The Paradox of child labor and anthropology*. Annual Reviews, The American University in Beirut. Retrieved from <http://www.annualreviews.org/> P.244

⁵⁵ Iskandar, L. (May, 2012). Informal Waste Workers Learn outside of School and Reduce Global Warming. Paper Presented at Global Conference on TVET Education Shanghai

⁵⁶ Iskandar, L. (May, 2012). Informal Waste Workers Learn outside of School and Reduce Global Warming. Paper Presented at Global Conference on TVET Education Shanghai

⁵⁷ Iskandar, L. (May, 2012). Informal Waste Workers Learn outside of School and Reduce Global Warming. Paper Presented at Global Conference on TVET Education Shanghai

⁵⁸ Iskandar, L. (May, 2012). Informal Waste Workers Learn outside of School and Reduce Global Warming. Paper Presented at Global Conference on TVET Education Shanghai

entrepreneurship in the Zabbaleen settlement) - be analysed? And, most importantly, how *mundane* is the RS boys labor?

SURVIVAL IN THE RS STUDENTS' CASE: "EARN AND LEARN" APPROACH

In describing the RS idea in Shanghai, Iskandar tries to deliver a message suggesting that the first principle guiding this education project is that it should not be in competition with the income-earning labor of the RS students and their families. In the Shanghai paper, Iskander indicated that "*their labor was needed in their family enterprises and that withdrawing them from that labor and having the family go hungry (them included) just so they could become literate or learned, was not the answer.*"⁵⁹ The second principle, by which the RS operates, is the upgrade of young Zabbaleens' skills to take over Cairo's waste. In her document, while talking about the questions that the RS curriculum is meant to address, Iskandar asks:

"How to keep our grip on our market and our trade – to keep harvesting and recycling the city's materials in the face of globalization and intrusion by multinational waste companies."

One could argue that these two principles are connected to each other because when the Zabbaleen children and youth take part in the RS project, they will be able to generate an income, become businessmen, thus ensuring they will no longer go "hungry". However, the way Iskandar designed the rest of her Shanghai paper shows that she thinks of the RS as a micro national project that intends to create a whole new generation of "empowered" Zabbaleen capable of "facing globalization". What

⁵⁹ Iskandar, L. (May, 2012). Informal Waste Workers Learn outside of School and Reduce Global Warming. Paper Presented at Global Conference on TVET Education Shanghai

validate this assumption are the following questions and answers that Iskandar presented in the Shanghai conference:

“1. How to prepare ourselves for the imminent renegotiation of the city's waste contracts in 2017? Curriculum Elements: We needed to learn about contracts, to leverage partners to negotiate with the city, to win residents over to our side in the negotiations with the city, to prepare financial models as a basis for negotiations with the city, etc.

2. How to avoid evictions, relocations, confiscation of trucks and shutting down of our businesses? Curriculum Elements: We needed to integrate into the wider community of informal slum dwellers and collectively face the onslaught of these actions.”

The above reveals a pervasive aspect in the discourse of my interlocutors: the sense of competitiveness with the foreign waste companies and the sense of ownership of Cairo's garbage. The way the RS boys speak about their work shows that, if they are to remain in the garbage business, they will have to protect it and develop its growth. While discussing his career objectives, 22-year-old Emad says that his hope is to stop working for his taskmaster and set up his own workshop. Ismaeel, 18, hopes to have his own truck instead of renting one. Adel and Ragy, aged 22 and 20 respectively, are happy that they are financially independent from their parents, also mentioning that each member in the family “has his own work.” The boys mentioned here, including others, each make a monthly income ranging from LE 2000 to LE 3000. When it came to the younger boys in the school, it was hard for me to ascertain how much their parents make per month. However, their

narratives always show that their parents own some of the means of production of this business: a cart, a trunk, a building. Even if they have none of the means of production, they have the ability to rent a space where they can put their work.⁶⁰ In other cases, they live in the same building as their relatives and they all share the same building yard to sort the garbage. Actually, through my interlocutors' narratives, I learned that currently the Zabbaleen buildings are expensive and that it is almost impossible for anyone who does not have a space to store the garbage in to work as a zabbaleen⁶¹.

Clearly, the Zabbaleen do have some economic capital. The Zabbaleen settlement is a business space where everybody is engaged in work. It is both a platform of production and a place of residence for the labor force. In this sense, I view the RS intervention in the settlement as an attempt to transform the Zabbaleen' particular form of cultural capital – their know-how - into one that is accepted culturally and socially. The RS project, as a model of education, is not necessarily designed for the poorest of the poor of Zabbaleen. The notion of survival in the RS case could be understood as the sustainability of the Zabbaleen business rather than the generation of income for someone who has none at all. In other words, I see Iskandar's project as an improvement of what is already there – the skills of Zabbaleen - to empower and sustain the existence of the *whole* community of Zabbaleen. By this I mean, the existence of the place (the settlement), of the

⁶⁰ Most of the Zabbaleen residents rent the spaces where they work and live from richer Zabbaleen who own most of the buildings in the settlement.

⁶¹ See chapter 6- Om Mina section.

means of production (their know-how) and of the conditions of production (the Zabbaleen themselves as well as many of the methods they use in doing their job).

THE ZABBALEEN CHOICE AS *PRIVATIZED RISK*:

The Zabbaleen ownership of some economic capital does not negate the difficulty of their job as garbage collectors. The RS boys work very hard in order to sustain their family business or keep their jobs (if they are working independently in workshops). Beyond the material gains that they make for themselves, their families and the recycling and waste management market, every penny they make is well deserved⁶². There are many stories of pain that will be looked at in detail in the following chapter. However, before delving more deeply into the concerns of the RS boys over what they do, I will continue, in this last section of this chapter, to elaborate on Iskandar's document to clarify the relationship between the RS project and its students' choices. With that purpose in mind, I will mobilize Povinelli's idea of *privatized risks* in her article "*The child in the Broom Closet: States of Killing and letting die.*"

In this article, Povinelli uses Ursula LeGuin short story "The ones who walk away from Omelas." In this story, Omelas is the city of happiness where the well-being of

⁶² This is an attempt from me to refute a stereotype that the non-Zabbaleen I encountered while doing my research show in their discourse about the Zabbaleen community: that they are "the mafia of garbage in Egypt who like to live in dirt as long as they make money." Some of my interlocutors in the RS also told that they are subject to such statements all the time outside their settlement and show their disappointment from strangers who do not see their hard work.

its inhabitants depends on a young child being constrained to and humiliated in a small, putrid broom closet.”⁶³ When the residents of Omelas learn about the child’s situation, some of them decide to walk away from it. Through this short story, Povinelli is trying to deliver a message about the distribution of happiness/well-being and misery/death in the world. She uses LeGuine’s story to highlight that:

“My happiness is substantially within her unhappiness; my corporeal well-being is part of a larger mode of embodiment in which her corporeal misery is a vital organ. As a result, the ethical imperative is not to put oneself in the child’s place, nor is it to experience the anxiety of potentially being put in her place. LeGuin rejects the ethics of empathy. Instead, the ethical imperative is to know that your own good life is already in her broom closet, and as a result, either you must compromise on the goods to which you have grown accustomed (and grown accustomed to thinking of as “yours”) or admit that these goods are more important to you than her suffering.”⁶⁴

Povinelli then goes on to introduce Craig Calhoun’s notion of *privatized risks*; he argues that “individuals bear the brunt of hardships that are predictable in the statistical aggregate without effective mechanisms to share the burden, let alone reduce the

⁶³ Povinelli, Elizabeth (2008) *The Child in the broom closet: States of Killing in letting die*. P.500-517

⁶⁴ Nieuwenhuys, O. (1996) *The Paradox of child labor and anthropology*. Annual Reviews, The American University in Beirut. Retrieved from <http://www.annualreviews.org/> P.511

risk.”⁶⁵In other words, Calhun deconstructs this pragmatic thinking that he considers to be a central element of neoliberal ideology arguing that within this thinking each individual is expected to take sole ownership of her or his lifestyle choices. This pragmatic approach to life ignores the hardships of life shared by people of the same low socio-economic status. Rather than viewing such people’s suffering as a consequence of an unequal distribution of wealth – that everybody in any given society is responsible for - it is considered a consequence of their own choices.

Within this conceptual framework of distribution and choice, I believe that the RS is built on two factors in our Egyptian society: a) an unequal distribution of happiness and misery. B) governmental and social perceptions that the Zabbaleen poor environmental conditions is their own choice. Consequently, the RS argues that the redistribution of well-being or “justice”⁶⁶ would come about when the Zabbaleen, the ones who “deal with waste because they are independent entrepreneurs not because they like it”⁶⁷ - take over Cairo’s waste management. To convey this message, the RS argues that the Zabbaleen traditional way of managing their business, no matter how “unclean” it looks like, is, in fact, very effective:

“The Zabbaleen, Egypt's recyclers, collect over 8.000 tons a day of mixed household waste and bring it back to one of their “garbage villages. Men and boys collect it

⁶⁵ Nieuwenhuys, O. (1996) *The Paradox of child labor and anthropology*. Annual Reviews, The American University in Beirut. Retrieved from <http://www.annualreviews.org/> P.517

⁶⁶ Iskandar, L. (May, 2012). Informal Waste Workers Learn outside of School and Reduce Global Warming. Paper Presented at Global Conference on TVET Education Shanghai, P.5

⁶⁷ Same quote from the televised report on Zabbaleen mentioned in the introductory chapter.

from the doorsteps of residential units and bring it back home where adolescent girls and women sort through the rotting trash. They recover and recycle 80% of what they collect (as compared to 30% in many cities in the North). They save Cairo from getting buried under a perpetually growing mountain of waste, at no cost to the government. Five such neighborhoods form a ring around Cairo. To outsiders, they are synonymous with dirt, trash, and poverty.”⁶⁸

The above quote encapsulates Iskandar’s call for recognition and appreciation of the Zabbaleen labor that, according to her, “saves the rest of Cairo”. Iskandar’s words resonate with LeGuin’s “child” who has to work very hard so that the rest of Omelas remains happy. However, the Recycling School project is not really calling on the rest of the city of Cairo to relieve the RS boys from their hard work conditions; it is rather asking for Cairo’s approval of these boys’ work style. Admittedly, the RS runs a number of programs to help improve Zabbaleen work conditions. These include: “the Health program”⁶⁹ and the “Trash Segregation from the Source Program”⁷⁰. However, there are more complex aspects –that I will discuss in the following chapters - in these boys’ work that will not be erased through such long-term initiatives. In this context, it can be said that the redistribution of well-being and pain might be possible but to a very limited extent and impact.

⁶⁸ Iskandar, L. (May, 2012). Informal Waste Workers Learn outside of School and Reduce Global Warming. Paper Presented at Global Conference on TVET Education Shanghai,P.3

⁶⁹ A program that consists of having the RS teachers circulate in the neighborhood to give vaccines to the families to protect them from garbage related diseases like liver failure.

⁷⁰ A program where the RS teachers organize tour visit to buildings outside Zabbaleen to talk to appartments owner about the importance of segregating their trash for recycling.

CHAPTER II:

INTIMACY WITH TRASH: STORIES OF PAIN AND VIOLENCE

INTRODUCTION: RAMY THE TEACHER, THE ARTIST , AND THE GARBAGE COLLECTOR

Each of the six RS's round tables is situated within sight of the other. On one afternoon in mid November, 2011, I was sitting at one of these tables in the back of the entrance hallway in the Montessori section (which is always the quietest area in the school), with Ramy discussing his role in the school. If the reader automatically associates the word "zabbal" – which describes a garbage collector's job in the Egyptian dialect – with its negative connotations to describe someone physically and morally "dirty", then Ramy is far from being a "zabbal". He welcomed me with his bright smile and started telling me exactly what he does at the RS.

Ramy is one of the RS graduates which means that he reached a level where he can enroll in the e' dadya ⁷¹ exam. He told me that he is responsible for the drama classes in the school. He supervises the rehearsals of a dramatic production frequently put on by the RS boys called "A Naked Man's Cry" written by the SOY director, Ezzat Guindy. The play depicts the struggle of the Zabaleen residents who all came from Upper Egypt. Ramy explained that the drama classes give the children the chance to express their pain and the problems they experience at home and at work. According to Ramy, these sessions "can make a child cry or laugh to release his pain." He also clarified that "the script is always taken from the child's life."

At the time of the interview, Ramy was working on writing a second play entitled "Diary of a Garbage man". It is actually the story of a seemingly happy individual who goes

⁷¹ The Preparatory exam that one should pass to enroll in *Sanawya Amma* (secondary education)

around trying to talk with other people only to discover that they have a lot of pain inside them. He asks them to close their eyes, talk about what makes them sad, and try to find solutions for themselves. “We come to school every day, many of us wearing a happy mask without talking about our deep sadness, this class is like a counseling session; we tackle our main problems in the form of a play so that everyone can talk freely,” said Ramy. He adds that one of the main problems for some children is lack of confidence and the shame of facing the outside world with their job; “your opinion about me as a garbage man might be true, but keep it to yourself, because if you say it out loud, it might destroy me (...) I prefer to accept that being a garbage man is good,” adds Ramy.

This was a very emotionally charged moment for me and I had to make an effort to compose myself. As I listened further to him, I realized that Ramy, just like his students, is in need of sharing what he feels with a listener.

In the previous chapter, I talked about the RS as a project of modernization, trying to convert the RS boys’ expertise in the garbage industry into a cultural one by offering them a basic literacy and garbage-related education. In this chapter, I intend to shed light on the extent of the compounded stigma that the RS boys struggle with in their daily work routine. I argue that this stigma limits the ambitions of the RS by making the targeted conversion of capital challenging if not impossible. In order to tackle this point, in the first section of this chapter, I first focus on the Zabbaleen community as part of the Egyptian Coptic minority using *Arjun Appadurai’s account on minorities in Fear of Small number and Mary Douglas’ ideas on impurity and social categories in Purity and Danger*. In the second part of the chapter, I focus on the notion of intimacy with trash. For this purpose, I relate Appadurai’s notion of “cognitive anxiety” to Erving *Goffman’s account on the logics of stigma in Notes on the management of spoiled identity*.

**THE “SACRED NATION”⁷² AND SMALL NUMBERS: THE ZABBALEEN AS A COPTIC
MINORITY⁷³**

At the beginning of my fieldwork at the RS, in September 2012, most of the boys I talked with, especially the older ones, told me that they are proud of belonging to the Zabbaleen community and that they are “proud garbage collectors”. After I managed to build rapport with them, those boys, as well as some of their teachers, started speaking in different voices that show the near impossibility of being a “proud zabbal” in Egypt. Their later narratives also indicate that their ultimate dreams go beyond the perpetuation of their community and their business as garbage collectors.

Before presenting the RS boys’ narratives explaining the challenges of being a garbage collector from Zarayeb in Egypt⁷⁴, I will first relate the Zabbaleen case as a Christian minority of garbage collectors in Egypt to Mary Douglas concept of purity and Arjun Appadurai idea of social uncertainty in *Fear of Small Numbers*. In his article “Dead certainty: ethnic violence in the era of Globalization”⁷⁵, Appadurai argues that behind the modern nation-state lies the idea of *national ethnos* which is very dangerous⁷⁶ because it

⁷² Appadurai, A. (2006) *Fear of Small Numbers: An essay on the geography of anger*. Duke University Press.

⁷³ This does not mean that Copts are few in Egypt. The exact number of Copts in Egypt is a controversial matter. While the official statistics estimate that they are around 5.13 millions, many Copts reject this estimation claiming their number exceeds the double of the official one. See <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/53839/Egypt/Politics-/Egyptian-Copts-reject-population-estimate.aspx>

⁷⁴ for reasons that go beyond the Zabbaleen conflict with the multinationals and the government.

⁷⁵ Appadurai, A. (1998) *Dead certainty: ethnic violence in the era of Globalization*. Duke University Press.

⁷⁶ Appadurai, A. (2006) *Fear of Small Numbers: An essay on the geography of anger*. Duke University Press. P.3-5

leads “the sacred nation” to the idea of purity and ethnic cleansing. To support this argument, Appadurai draws on Douglas’ theory on the relation between the understanding of the notion of purity and social categories⁷⁷. Appadurai highlights :

“In her classic argument about “matter out of place” (which Malkki also discusses), Douglas made a symbolic structural link between categorical mixture, the cognitive anxiety it provokes, and the resultant abhorrence of taxonomic hybridity in all sorts of social and moral worlds. In subsequent work on body symbolism, Douglas showed how and why the body works to compress and perform wider cosmological understandings about social categories and classifications. Several recent analysts of ethnic violence have made useful recourse to Douglas’s ideas about purity and category mixture (Hayden 1996; Herzfeld 1992, 1997) in addressing issues of ethnic cleansing in Europe.”

This “cognitive anxiety” has to do with what he calls “social uncertainty”: the state of confusion where it is hard to tell “who exactly are among the ‘we’ and who are among the ‘they.’”⁷⁸ Douglas explains that the “impure” is actually a deviation or an “anomaly” ;someone or something that does not fit into a certain social category. Similarly, Appadurai’s minorities are also the ones who cannot fit into the “nation-state” because of the dominant imposed ideology and its individuals who have the qualities to represent it. Hence, the minorities are the “small numbers” that make the nation-state impure causing “social uncertainty” – a hybridity that provokes fear and confusion that “can drive projects of ethnic cleansing”.

⁷⁷ She explains this better through her study elaborating on the caste system in India that I will tackle in the following chapter.

⁷⁸ Appadurai, A. (2006) *Fear of Small Numbers: An essay on the geography of anger*. Duke University Press. P.5

As a matter of fact, the category of *cleansing* can be readily applied to the episodes of eviction that the Zabbaleen settlements were subjected to following several decrees issued by the Egyptian government. In addition to these evictions and displacements, some of the Zabbaleen's methods or modes of production, such as the breeding of pigs to eat the organic waste, were also subject to government cleansing. For instance in 2009, at the height of the global swine flu epidemic, the Egyptian authorities ordered the slaughter of all the pigs in Egypt⁷⁹. Back then, I remember how this massive slaughter fuelled major controversy. While some people perceived this act as violation of animals' rights and as a threat to the Zabbaleen enterprise, many Muslims – in my circle and in many Egyptian media saw this slaughter as a necessity not only to avoid the infectious disease but also to cleanse the country from this “dirty animal”⁸¹.

In 2013, in a conversation pertaining to swine carnage, one of the RS students told me: “since this incident, we decided to breed our pigs inside our buildings; we designate a space for them because they are important in our business and they are cheaper than other kinds of meat. But the Muslim government does not see that... they don't understand.” The Zabbaleen case is characterized by a high degree of sensitivity. Aside from the fact that they breed and eat “the forbidden meat” and are at the center of one of Egypt's most widely discussed problem, garbage,⁸³ they are also Christians. The Copts, especially those

⁷⁹ Very famous incident. See <http://www.barenakedislam.com/2012/02/25/what-does-egypts-new-hardline-government-mean-for-the-zabaleen-garbage-people/>

⁸⁰ Just by googling, all the internet sources say that 30.000 pigs were slaughtered.

⁸¹ This added a religious dimension to the already existing issues in the garbage business. At the time of the slaughter, this argument was very widespread amongst Muslims.

⁸² For an overview about this slaughter, see <http://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2012/03/09/nick-holdstock/in-cairo/>

⁸³ Just like traffic

of low-income household, are subject to discrimination from their Muslim counterparts. This stigmatization “has solidified, among the Coptic minority the sense that they are treated as second-class citizens in their own country.”⁸⁴ Copts are marginalized from the political space; their rights to construct churches are strictly limited; and, they are targeted by Muslim preachers. In addition, if they convert to Islam, by law, they do not have the right to return to Christianity. The law also forbids their marriage to non-Christians while it allows Muslim men to marry Christian women. Finally, some Coptic women are subject to pressure to convert to Islam.⁸⁵ Sectarian conflicts in Egypt have also taken violent forms such as church bombing⁸⁸ and burning, gang rape of Christian women⁸⁹ and trampling of Egyptian protestors by Egyptian Army vehicles.⁹⁰ The main accused parties in the brutal acts of violence against Christians are the Salafists, the Egyptian government

⁸⁴ Mahmood, S. (2012). Sectarian conflict and family law in contemporary Egypt. *Journal of the American Ethnologist Society*. Vol. 39, No. 1, pp. 54–62

⁸⁵ Camilla Shehata story:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/8501280/Egypt-the-two-women-at-the-centre-of-the-clashes.html>

⁸⁶ Soliman, S. (2009) *The Radical Turn of Coptic Activism: Path to Democracy or Sectarian Politics? In Political Protest in Egypt*. Nicholas Hopkins, ed. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press. pp. 135–154.

⁸⁷ See Omraneya Church incident: <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/691/Egypt/Politics-/Omraneya-church-pastor-speaks-out-.aspx>

⁸⁸ Al Kedissin Church bombing

⁸⁹ <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/video-shows-angry-mob-stripping-christian-women>

⁹⁰ Ibrahim, E. (October, 2012) Justice denied: Egypt's Maspero massacre one year on. *AhramOnline*. Retrieved from: <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/54821/Egypt/Politics-/Justice-denied-Egypt-Maspero-massacre-one-year-on.aspx>

and the Army. It is sometimes not very clear which of these three protagonists is the perpetrator of a given incident.⁹¹ The fact that State security forces do not crack down on those responsible suggests an apparently organized carelessness from the State's side.

The Zabbaleen are no exception to such violent attacks. I paid a visit to the RS immediately after the 2011 burning of the Mukattam church. The boys told me that they were there to protect their church. Some of them believed that the army was responsible for the attack while others blame the Salafists. What is certain is that a many Christians lost their lives during the attack. In the final analysis, it must be acknowledged that this mode of discrimination *or cleansing* is a fact: Christian citizens in Egypt are subject to many discriminatory laws, acts, and even jokes from the Muslim majority. In Appadurai's words, this *social uncertainty* that Copts as *small numbers*⁹² provoke is, in fact, amplified in the Zabbaleen case. As mentioned before, this is in addition to their daily dealings with one of Egypt's biggest problems: garbage. In order to discuss this point further, I will focus on the notion of *intimacy with trash*. What does it mean to be intimate with trash? How does it provoke what Apparudai called the *cognitive anxiety* of most of the non-Zabbaleen? And, how do the Zabbaleen I came across deal with this social pressure? In order to answer these questions, I first mobilize Goffman's account on *the logics of stigma*, and then I present the RS boys and teachers narratives that respond directly to these questions.⁹³

⁹¹ Mahmood, S. (2012). Sectarian conflict and family law in contemporary Egypt. *Journal of the American Ethnologist Society*. Vol. 39, No. 1, pp. 54–62

⁹² The words (small numbers) in this context is borrowed from Appadurai wording to refer to his own reasoning in developing his argument about the nation state and the projects of ethnic cleansing. I put the words (small numbers) because this is how Copts are perceived by the majority of the Egyptian Muslims who use "the numbers argument" as a justification to impose the Muslim ideology.

⁹³ Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. P. 1- 124

I- THE LOGICS OF STIGMA: THE RS BOYS INTERPRETATION OF THEIR

SOCIAL IDENTITY AS GARBAGE COLLECTORS:

In “*Notes on the management of spoiled identity*”, Goffman points out that the word stigma refers to an attribute that is deeply discrediting. This attribute is actually what makes one different from others “in the category of persons available to him to be, and of a less desirable kind.”⁹⁴ The category of “desired” or “normal” traits that people unconsciously expect to exist in a person different from them is what Goffman calls the “virtual social identity.”⁹⁵ When the person does not fit in this virtual social identity, she/he is described as someone with a failing, a shortcoming, a handicap⁹⁶. This attribute, then, causes an individual to be mentally classified by others in an undesirable, rejected stereotype rather than in an accepted, normal one. The manifestation of this *cognitive anxiety*, according to Appadurai, is described by Goffman as follows:

“By definition, of course, we believe that the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption, we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively if often unthinkingly, reduces his life chances. We use specific stigma terms such as

⁹⁴ Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. P.3

⁹⁵ Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. p.3

⁹⁶ Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. P.3

crippled, bastard, moron in our daily discourse as a source of metaphor and imagery, typically without giving thought to the original meaning.”⁹⁷

I believe that this is the case when the Egyptian non-Zabbaleen give the garbage collector the attribute of the “zabbal” as an insult to describe someone morally or physically unclean without necessarily thinking of its original meaning which is “someone who cleans by taking away garbage.”

In addition, Goffman argues that there are three types of stigma. First, there are the abominations of the body - overt or external deformations of the body or physical disabilities. Second, there are “the blemishes of individual character” such as mental illness, alcoholism, drug addiction, imprisonment, homosexuality, unemployment, suicidal attempts, and radical political behavior. Finally, there are the tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion which can be transmitted through lineages.⁹⁸ Goffman then goes on to assert that the stigmatized individuals do not learn about their stigma unless they come into interaction with those who fashion themselves as “the normals.” In this context, he talks about a girl who was born blind and only found out that she had a problem when she overheard a young man saying to his friends that he liked her but could never go out with a blind girl.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. P.5

⁹⁸ Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. P.4

⁹⁹ Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. P.33

The narratives of many of my interlocutors in Zabbaleen reveal that they perceive themselves as individuals with a stigma. I also noticed that in their discourse they learned about this stigma through their interactions with non-Zabbaleen and non-Christians. In the following, I will first present those narratives that show how this stigma is lived by my interlocutors and how they deal with it.

WHAT IS IT TO BE INTIMATE WITH TRASH?

The phrase “intimacy with trash” might sound shocking for people who do not work in garbage and directly connect it to questions of health and hygiene. However, it is a very accurate term to describe the relationship between my interlocutors in the RS with garbage. They do not perceive garbage as a dangerous, toxic, untouchable substance that can cause impurity or diseases like many non-Zabbaleen might think. Nevertheless, this is not to say that being in this profession does not put him under other types of anxieties.

The feeling that accompanies dealing with garbage is not the same for all of those working in the industry. Throughout the time I spent in the field and the interviews I conducted with everyone there, a sense of shame was palpable when the older boys, the young girls¹⁰⁰ as well as some of the female teachers talk about garbage as a job. The old Zabbaleen RS boys, the young girls and the female teachers are also the main people concerned with the question of pride or *Fakhr*: pride of being a zabal; or, pride of being a politically aware enlightened person from Zabbaleen¹⁰¹; or, pride in being educated; or,

¹⁰⁰ who visit the school occasionally and the ones I pass by while walking to the school

¹⁰¹The NGO workers and school director who often speak to the media and many outsiders who are interested in the Zabbaleen Neighborhood.

attending school regularly, despite living in Zabbaleen. The young boys' concerns and aspirations are different from those of the previous categories¹⁰². However, the common factor between most of the Zabbaleen community is the intimacy with trash. Having to deal with garbage in the sense of touching it and segregating it is not a concern for any zabal who spoke with me. However, practicing this job – in the presence of outsiders - is a big burden that takes various forms depending on the gender and the age of the zabala¹⁰³/zabal. This burden includes fear, not from “impurity” and its physical and metaphysical implications. In other words, for the Zabaleen I knew, fears arising from the intimacy with trash, are not from the world of microbes, it is rather from the world of human beings. In brief, being a garbage collector for the RS boys constitutes a heavy load -of “*elet el karama*” (lack of dignity), underrated hard work, fear of people and also of the police that they deal with in their own ways.

INTIMACY WITH TRASH AND “FORMULAS FOR HANDLING NORMALS”^{104,105}

In early November 2012, I had a chat with Ramy about the dangers of his work as a zabal and how he protects himself from them. What triggered this conversation were the burn marks on his arm that he showed me. He told me that a couple of days earlier¹⁰⁶, he was

¹⁰² I mean the older RS boys, the RS teachers and the young girls I met in the neighborhood.

¹⁰³ I never heard the word “Zabbala” -which is the female noun for zabal/garbage collector- in Zabbaleen. However, I mention it as a tribute to the women who work hard and take an important part in this profession.

¹⁰⁴ Ways in which the Zabal as person with a stigma deals with non-Zabbaleen who in this context are the “normals” in Goffman’s wording.

¹⁰⁵ Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. P.11

¹⁰⁶ From the date of our conversation

sorting a *gonia* (a big batch of garbage) using his bare hands when he found out that it contained liquid potash, a corrosive substance. I asked him if he was wearing gloves while sorting the garbage. “I don’t like to wear gloves; I prefer to work with my hands” he answered. For Ramy, working with gloves is not “working with his hands”. The way he perceives trash is very different from the way people who do not work in this industry do. For him, garbage is “work”, the same way steel is viewed by a construction worker. He told me, while he was laughing, “this work is not like you think... it’s not garbage... it is work you know... we make a lot of things from it...we recycle carton and plastic.” At that moment, I felt he was making a great effort to convey a certain message to counter what he sensed I was thinking. I believe that Ramy was trying to sell me the idea that working in garbage does not mean being “dirty” like some people call the RS boys in the streets during their work. More importantly, I think Ramy was really teaching me something that he knows I would never master as he does. In other words, he was “re-assessing my limitations as a *normal*”¹⁰⁷; a person who knows too little about the benefits of his suffering as a *zabbal*. He refers to his job – which is also his stigma - as a business lesson that *normals* cannot grasp quite well which make them ignorant and makes him the teacher (or the expert) in this case.

While this is true, this does not mean that Ramy is at complete peace with his job/stigma. As our conversation continued, he started showing signs of ambivalence. He told me that he does not like this job and that, as he put it: “I do not feel that I was meant to do it.”

I asked him why he does not like it and what the worst part of it is. He answered:

¹⁰⁷ Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall, Inc.

“the worst is when people look down at you...you know...and I have been made fun of many times before. Once we were performing on stage in Alexandria and the audience kept shouting and laughing at us saying these are Zabbaleen. I told my colleagues to just look at me and ignore them so that they could carry on performing.”

He continued by clarifying that:

“no matter what you do, no matter what your level of education is ... you know that in our community we have graduates from many big schools like medicine, engineering, business, tourism etc... but this does not matter , as long as you are from here, you will always be referred to as someone from Zabbaleen... People will always look down at you. I always look at more fortunate people and think, why wasn't I born like them in nicer places, with more means and better circumstances? ”

After this statement, I reminded him of an earlier one he made at the beginning of my fieldwork (Fall 2012), stressing his pride in being a zabal and how much he likes his jobs. He answered me stating that work in garbage “is a good *shoghlana* (job) that makes good money”. Then he started defending the work of the zabal by stressing that a zabal can be a good educated person who contributes positively to society. The ambivalence in Ramy’s discourse shows that he acknowledges his stigma which makes him dislike his job as a garbage collector. But at the same time, he knows he cannot escape the fact that, at the end of the day, it is his current job and that he is from Zabbaleen. Accordingly, he develops or finds himself developing ways to deal with his stigma like – as I showed earlier - teaching me about recycling and the benefits that come out of this job.

*GROUP ALIGNMENT AND EGO IDENTITY*¹⁰⁸

The same ambivalence shown by Ramy towards his job and belonging to the Zabbaleen community is also present in the discourse of certain teachers in the RS. Abla Nesma, another school teacher, is a pleasant and outgoing person to chat with. During one of our conversations, Abla Nesma told me that she was not born in Zabbaleen and her husband does not work in garbage. She kept repeating this information every now and then; each time in a low voice while staring into my eyes, as if she was telling me a secret. At this point, I felt that Abla Nesma was trying to tell me “don’t worry we are not working in garbage.” When talking about the RS boys, however, she stresses the importance of work in garbage. In the same conversation, she told me:

“These are poor kids, they have no choice, they grew up finding their parents working in this industry, and they have no other option but being garbage collectors. I always encourage the students who do not hand in shampoo¹⁰⁹ to do it so that they can generate an income for themselves.”

I asked her if she thinks the children like their jobs, she said: “they can’t like it, of course a child would prefer to sleep early in his bed instead of spending all night walking to collect garbage.” Like Ramy, Abla Nesma is also speaking in different voices: it seems that she appreciates the economic capital that the profession of garbage brings while at the same time, despite the fact that she is one of the main participants in the project of modernizing the Zabbaleen students, she refuses to associate her origins with this community. In others words, despite her position that makes one expect her to be keen on fighting the stigmatizing logic, she actually reinforces it by creating a social hierarchy in

¹⁰⁸ Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. P.105

¹⁰⁹ She is referring to the Shampoo program –I talked about in the introductory chapter- that the RS offers to its students.

the Zabbaleen community. Having said that, her attitude reflects the logics of stigma where the “stigmatized individual exhibits a tendency to stratify his ‘own’ according to the degree to which their stigma is apparent and obtrusive.”¹¹⁰ As an educated teacher who does not work in garbage like most women in the neighborhood, she sees herself while talking to me in non-stigmatic terms: she considers that her traits are not really identical to those of the Zabbaleen- which shows of course the social force of the stigma.

HARD WORK AS A FORMULA TO HANDLE STIGMA:

Ismaeel, an exuberant 17 year old student at the school, appears to have fewer sensibilities than Ramy and Abla Nesma. In addition to being vibrant, cheerful, and full of positive energy, Ismaeel is talkative, funny and, most importantly, always there for everyone. He collects garbage for nearly 10 hours a day. He hits the streets at 1 am and returns home any time between 7 and 10 am in the morning. While interviewing with me in March 2013, Ismaeel started to boast about his latest achievement at work. In a very confident and proud manner, he stated:

“Yesterday, *besm el masih*¹¹¹, I brought home six *gawani*¹¹².”

This is really impressive as it is impossible to bring 6 *gawani* in one round so he has to go back and forth at least 4 times pulling the metal cart. Like Ramy, he never uses any protective clothing except when he is using the recycling machine. By his own admission, Ismaeel states:

¹¹⁰ Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. P.107

¹¹¹ a Christian prayer to protect oneself from the evil eye

¹¹² (plural of *gonia*= big bag of garbage)

“I never wear gloves, they make the work really uncomfortable, I work with my hands.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?” I asked. “*lah ‘ady* (it’s no big deal)” he answered. According to Ismaeel’s stories, he does not really have a problem dealing with trash itself. His biggest discomfort is with the people he meets in the streets who accuse him of burglary. He sometimes has to empty his *gawani* to prove that he was not stealing anything. Very often, he would also hear people laughing at him asking him “What are you doing here, zabbal? He says that he ignores all of that because “those people don’t know who I am here in Zabbaleen, everyone here knows that I’m *gada’* (reliable).” Ismaeel’s solid gold reputation inside the neighborhood compensates for his feelings when he is outside of it collecting garbage and interacting with the non-Zabbaleen and the police. He also uses the same defense mechanism with those who abuse his job, those who curse his religion and those who associate his work with his religion. Ismaeel’s attitude towards his situation reveals that he is protected by *identity beliefs of his own*¹¹³: he is a reliable and productive hard worker who is appreciated and perceived as a star by those who really know him. “You know...there are a lot of people who don’t understand and appreciate *ta‘abik* (your hard work)” says Ismaeel. However, despite the fact that he refers to the category of work as a way to fight his stigma, I understood from his narratives that he would be keen to find a way out of his situation. He told me that if his parents approved, he would take advantage of the next opportunity to travel abroad and never come back.

While Ismaeel uses his hard work to deal with the stigma of being a zabbal, the younger boys do not seem to care as much about using this same form of resistance.

¹¹³ Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Hard work in their case is what repulses them from this job. In a conversation with Gerges by the end of Fall 2013, he told me the following about what he dislikes in his job:

“Everything in this job is very hard.”

Me: “What do you mean by everything? Do u mean collecting the trash or segregating and recycling it? Or Other things?”

Gerges: “The worst thing is carrying the *offa* (the bag where he puts the garbage); it’s too heavy, it hurts my back too much.”

Me: “ Are you bothered by collecting and segregating as well?”

Gerges: “I don’t like collecting, I walk a lot, that exhausts me and the staircases make me slip. Segregating is the easiest thing in this job; I don’t have a problem with that.”

Gerges and his peers’ narratives about their job show that it includes a lot of exhausting physical work. However, some of them manage to negotiate with their fathers about reducing their work hours or even convince them to leave this job and look for another one.¹¹⁴

THE CROSS ON THE HAND: SYMBOLIC VISIBILITY OF THE STIGMA AND THE STIGMATIZED DEFENSIVE REACTIONS

When it came to questions of religion as in how the RS as Copts deal with religious tensions and talk about them, the older RS boys were very careful while talking about it

¹¹⁴ Gerges stopped working with his father for a while until he gave him the choice not to go to the streets with him when he does not want to. Another student told me that he decided at an early age not to work in garbage at all and work as technician and his father did not get in the way of his choice. Other students however, do not have this choice and continue to work with their parents.

because they know from my name that I am Muslim. Consequently, whenever they want to talk to me about a conflict that they went through because of their religion, they would sugarcoat their stories as much as possible so I would not take it personally. It is actually through the younger boys of the school that I learned more about what really bothers many Zabbalen from being intimate with garbage. In my conversations with them, I did not sense that they are ashamed of working as garbage collectors like some of the old boys and younger girls. One of their main sources of anxiety, especially now after the election of an Islamic government¹¹⁵, is religious sectarianism.

By the end of my fieldwork in April 2013, I sat with one of the young RS students for a one-to-one interview that eventually turned into a focus group as his young peers were very interested in the discussion and each one of them really wanted to share his thoughts. When I asked Abanob about the hardest part in his job as a young garbage collector, he directly complained about Muslims, especially *people with beards*¹¹⁶. He told me: “I saw that guy insulting Christians, I did not want to get into any trouble with him... I was afraid he would see the cross on my hand and attack me, so I told him “Fuck Christians, man” (*kosom el msihyeen ya ‘am*). After this testimony, the rest of the boys got even more excited and then Abanob intervened again saying: “you know it really hurts me when they start insulting us, we did nothing to them, they hate us so bad, they want to get us killed. Sometimes, they rob all our work; one day my father and I parked the trunk and when we came back, we found it empty, why do

¹¹⁵ They are very aware of the political changes taking place in the country especially and the attack of their Church –the incident I mentioned earlier- really affected their judgment of the Islamist government.

¹¹⁶ Abanob’s wording. Usually Muslims who have big beards in Egypt are the Salafists.

they do this? They really hate us!”. He added: “the insults they say are really hurtful, you know... why do they insult my mother? They’ve never even seen her! But I don’t care, I’m not afraid of them, I go beat the hell out of them *batala ‘ dinhom*¹¹⁷ when they insult us”. I asked them how people they meet outside the settlement learn about their religion. They replied that the cross tattoos on their wrists were an immediate giveaway. In this context, one of the boys added: “Yes, I’m Christian and I love the cross on my hand and those who don’t like it are nothing to me.” Here the stigma of being Copt is symbolically recognized by non-Copts through a visual factor (by seeing the cross on the boys’ hands). When the stigmatized individual can be visually perceived, he is likely to feel that to be present among “normal” –like Goffman puts it- exposes him to invasions of privacy.¹¹⁸ The boys are using two formulas to deal with their situation. Stories about sectarian tensions are serious even inside the neighborhood whose residents are mainly Christians. Accordingly, as the RS boys’ reactions reveal, the stigmatized individual can react in two ways. First, she/he can respond in a very *hostile bravado*¹¹⁹ like Morkos did. Second, she/he can ignore the comments of the “normal” because he is comfortable with his *identity beliefs* and she/he is convinced that the problem lies in people not in his convictions.

Finally, the identity beliefs of the stigmatized person can also drive her/him to violent acts as happened with Gerges, the 12 year old RS student I introduced earlier in this chapter. On the second consecutive day of my interviews with the young RS boys, I sat with Gerges alone for around 20 minutes. He told me that before coming to the RS, he

¹¹⁷ He means that he reacts very aggressively (even violently in this context) to them.

¹¹⁸ Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. P.16

¹¹⁹ Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. P.17

was in a governmental school that expelled him. I asked him about what happened. He said that he was expelled from the school because he cut one of his peers' face with glass. He said that he did so because his peer ripped his religion book, so he took a soda glass from the ground, broke it and cut his face with it. I asked him if he felt that what he did was wrong. He answered: "No, he deserved it." Once again, Gerges' last answer really matches what Goffman argues about one's identity beliefs when the stigmatized person does not agree with "normal" about their perception of him and responds to it aggressively or even violently as we see in Gerges' case.

To conclude, in terms of the relationship of intimacy with trash in Zabbaleen, it is not so much the smell or the touch that are painful and hard to handle as the ears of the garbage collector and the eyes of others who do not accept the zabbal and see him as "impure". The problems of the RS boys do not seem to be, at least for now, solely related to the invasion of the waste management multinationals. Their complaints are related to the lack of sleep, the long work hours, the tough physical underrated work, the tensions with Muslims who insist on cursing and telling them to their face that Christians are dirty and this is why they are Zabbaleen¹²⁰ zabbaleen¹²¹. One can add to that the conflicts with the police, the thugs, or whoever decides to accuse them of stealing items. Furthermore, their religion is not welcome in Egypt whose demographic majority is Muslims. The place where they live is called Zarayeb which means pigsty. Besides, despite the "cognitive anxiety" that the Zabbaleen provoke for many Egyptians by being "impure", they have a reputation of being in a trade that "brings a lot of money". This gives a sense that the Zabbaleen are ready to maintain a "subhuman" form of life as long as it generates an

¹²⁰ The literal meaning of the job (Garbage collectors)

¹²¹ The insult in the Egyptian dialect

economic capital. This stigmatization and at the same time sort of jealousy of the Zabbaleen is a prominent feature in the RS boys' narratives about the strangers they meet outside the settlement who abuse them, verbally accusing them of being "the Christians who rob houses". "Being proud to be a Zabbal" is not something that anybody I met in Zabbaleen feels. The social tension arising from the force and complexity of the stigma of waste – in the Zabbaleen case, one mixed with the stigma of religion - does not leave room for pride and, therefore, renders the RS idea of converting its students' hard work at school and in the streets into a cultural capital a near impossible task.

CHAPTER IV:

THE SENSORY ORDER OF THE ZABBALEEN AND THE SENSORY LEVEL OF THE WASTE

STIGMA

In the previous chapter, I talked about the social dimension of the stigma with which the Zabbaleen live, particularly in terms of their interactions with non-Zabbaleen outside their neighborhood. In this chapter, I take on the sensory aspect of the stigma of waste and how the Zabbaleen – the subject of my research - cope with their stigmatization. Here, I argue that this dimension of the Zabbaleen stigma manifests itself especially when outsiders come into interaction with the Zabbaleen inside their settlement. I also attempt to relate this aspect of the Zabbaleen life to the RS project; one that aims to elevate its students social standing through their work in the garbage industry. I argue that this ambitious objective apparently ignores the fact that the Zabbaleen habitus differs from that of other Cairenes, thus impeding the conversion of forms of capital.

In the first section of this chapter, in order to discuss my argument, I present a brief review of the history of the anthropology of the senses. I then continue to mobilize the ideas of Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* and Bourdieu's *Habitus* to explain how the bodily experience of outsiders in Zabbaleen of dirt reflects orders which are at once cognitive and social. This bodily experience is lived through the senses whose 'unpreparedness' for a given environment leads to a symbolic violence on those at the bottom of the hierarchal social order. In the second section, I discuss my Zabbaleen interlocutors' discourses regarding their environmental sensibility. I argue that these discourses are, in Goffman's words, their "formula" for dealing with the sensory aspect of their stigma. I will conclude the chapter by linking the two sections on sensory stigma and environmental sensibility to the RS idea of modernization and conversion of capital.

I- WHAT IS BEING CARVED INTO HUMAN FLESH IS AN IMAGE OF SOCIETY¹²²: THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE SENSES AND THE SENSORY STIGMA

Anthropology's engagement with the study of the senses has experienced different stages. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, anthropologists studied the sensuous by measuring the "savage sensuality."¹²³ As these studies occurred in a context of exploitation, not only the land and resources were subject to mapping and measuring but the bodies of the diverse populations as well. This included for instance, "a measuring of the length of the arm, the breadth of the nose, the interior and exterior distances of the eyes and the circumference around the calf."¹²⁴ However rich in ethnographic data, such studies implied highly racist assumptions as they were mainly based on "scientific measurements" rooted in a sea of biases and stereotypes.¹²⁵ Due to this discriminatory aspect in the early studies of the sensuous, the post World War I saw a decline in exploring "the sensorium" in anthropology.¹²⁶ The use of the senses was then limited to the visual and auditory¹²⁷. Speaking of this tendency, Constance Classen and David Howes argue in their article "Making sense of Culture: Anthropology as a sensual experience" that anthropologists

¹²² Douglas, M. (1966) *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (p.116)

¹²³ Howes, D. (Sensual Relations : Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory. Chapter one: Taking leave of our senses. A Survey of the Senses and Critique of the Textual Revolution in Ethnographic Theory. University of Michigan Press, P.4-10

¹²⁴ Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. P.4

¹²⁵ Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. P.6

¹²⁶ Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. P.6

¹²⁷ Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. P.7

“ignored’ the heavy scents and savours of the marketplace, the riotous colours of native flowers, and all the sensory attractions that had so much appeal for tourists, in order to concentrate on the ‘underlying principles’ governing social life: principles of production, of exchange, of ideology, and so forth. The hesitation among late twentieth-century anthropologists to dwell on the sensory life of non-Western cultures was further motivated by a wish to refrain from seeming to exoticize the ‘other’ by contributing to the stereotype of ‘primitive peoples’ as ‘sensuous’ in contrast to the supposed rationality of modern Westerners.”p.(86-87)

By the 1930s, a handful of anthropologists started going against the trend that ignored the senses or concentrated only on the visual and auditory. They began to assess “the association between sensory practices and social values”. Thus, they constituted “the first true predecessors of the Anthropology of the senses.”¹²⁸ In this thesis – which focuses on stigma and social marginalization hindering one’s life chances – the sensory must not be ignored if we are to decipher the social and symbolic. As noted by Goody,

“the basic senses are our windows on the world. Through the senses we acquire information as well as sensations, which are related to the senses

¹²⁸ Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall, Inc. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. P.10

more than etymological way. The stimulus for sensations and feelings can come from the outside or from the inside."¹²⁹

In fact, it is through my fieldwork in Zabbaleen that I learned about the importance of the senses in determining the nature of social relations between individuals. Our bodies are an image of society whose transmission of signals is shaped by social training; these signals, in turn, determine our perceptions of others, from which stigma either arises or is avoided. As a non-Zabbaleen resident, I definitely see the Zabbaleen environment as one of a kind. It is a settlement where almost everyone works in the garbage profession; an activity that involves going out of their neighborhood, collecting trash and bringing it back to the settlement prior to the sorting and recycling selection.

As previously mentioned, most of the Zabbaleen residents originally come from Upper Egypt. When they came to Cairo, "breeding animals was one of the many ways they used around the settlement foraging into garbage-strewn streets surrounding their tin shacks."¹³⁰ Each family also has a pigsty. Pigs are used to help in the segregation of trash process as they eat most of the non-recyclable trash. On a routine workday, in front of every building in the settlement, each family has its own stash of garbage. The trash segregation process –also known as *el naa'd*¹³¹ - is done manually by the women, children, and sometimes men. This setting makes Zabbaleen –which is also called *Zarayeb*¹³² - an alien sensory place for urban Cairenes living in more privileged

¹²⁹ Goody, Jack (2002) *The Anthropology of the Senses and Sensations*. Retrieved from:

<http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/1480153?uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&sid=21102590639527>

¹³⁰ Iskandar, L. (1994) *Mukkatam Garbage Village*. AUC Press

¹³¹ Garbage segregation

¹³² Pigsty

neighborhoods. Urban Cairenes' bodies, as a result, can be considered poorly trained to fit in the Zarayeb environment. In fact, it could be argued that the training of the senses is also one of the reasons why, garbage collectors are not welcome in Cairo. In her book on the Zabbaleen settlement, Iskandar says:

“ the smell of the rotten food which emanated from their carts as they wove through the congested streets of Cairo bothers the Cairenes which reinforced the Zabbaleen feeling of being unwanted and marginalized.”

The above quote shows the power of the senses in determining social relations and participating in creating symbolic violence. I elaborate on this point further through another anecdote that focuses on olfactory boundaries encountered in Zabbaleen.

OLFACTORY BOUNDARIES:

By the end of my fieldwork in Zabbaleen in April 2013, one of the RS boys invited me over to his building to show me how his family has managed the breeding of pigs inside the house rather than in the street¹³³. The solution lay in carving out a special area for pigsties on an extra floor in their building. On our way to Nagy's place, I discovered a whole new street featuring a huge mound of garbage resembling a landfill with mostly women working in the middle of it. Almost everybody stopped talking while we were passing by. I tried to lower this expected tension by saying “*salamo 'aleeko*” every time a woman would look at me in the eye. I felt that I was invading their private space. At one point, a man we passed by asked Nagy out loud:

¹³³ They used to breed their animals freely around their buildings and throughout their neighborhood before the government killed their pigs during the Swine Flu wave-along with the other animals.

“is she a foreigner?” I found it better to answer this question myself to lower the tension. So I answered: “No, I’m Egyptian - from Alexandria, *salamo ‘aleeko*”. My presence in the midst of these people, on their own turf, seemed a kind of intrusion: they all stopped talking for a moment, stared very hard at me, then started murmuring.

During the 10 minutes walk to Nagy’s building, I was almost overcome by revulsion. The smell of rotten food was so powerful that, at one point, I came close to vomiting but I could not allow myself such a reaction. If I had succumbed, I would be vomiting not simply on “garbage” but on people’s work - an extremely offensive act to those women sitting in the middle of the smelly garbage batches working without complaining! I had to stop breathing then for a minute and then take one short breath. Heat rushed to my head and my eyes started to water. Nagy and Ismaeel (who was also accompanying us) asked me: “Are you ok? It looks like you caught a cold.” I thanked God for the assumption that I was coming down with a cold. On no account could I betray my feelings of repulsion to these boys; they would have been offended beyond words. Accordingly, I simply agreed with him that I was sick. As movement became more difficult, I had to work my whole body to lift one leg and place it in front of the other, looking for a space in the ground to plant my feet which were protected by protective shoes of sturdy leather purchased especially for my fieldwork. Meanwhile, Nagy and Ismaeel were two steps ahead of me, walking freely and swinging their arms. Ismaeel was even singing. This brief scene evokes the way Douglas describes the body as “a model which can stand for any bounded system”;¹³⁴ that “what is being carved into human flesh is an image of society.”¹³⁵ Little

¹³⁴ Douglas, M. (1966) *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* P.28-123

¹³⁵ Douglas, M. (1966) *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* P.116

did I know that the worst was yet to come. At some point, while walking, we had to step over rotting food, including meat bones, swarming with flies. I just stopped; I could not pass this particular point of the test. I just wanted to disappear at this moment until one of the Zabbaleen came to my rescue and moved his truck to create a space for me to pass without stepping on those black plastic bags of decomposing food. This was a critical moment during my fieldwork. It was as if my body – completely untrained to the intimacy with trash – was communicating my distress to the man who moved his truck – actually, expressing its utter rejection of his setting. Such interactions that included many silent moments where my body as a researcher was in silent communion with the minds of the subjects suggests the certainty of non-Zabbaleen bodies repulsion of the social world of the Zabbaleen. This situation concerning olfactory boundaries might be better understood through the prism Gale Peter Largey and David Rodney Watson generated in the *Sociology of Odors*. Talking about “Avoiding the Skunk”, they stipulated that:

“From the sociological standpoint, the "skunk" we avoid may be an individual, a group, or even a setting, that is, a physical environment. If we encounter an individual "skunk" (e.g., a person with "bad breath"), it is commonly accepted that we may step back from the person so as to prevent further violation of our sense of smell. Usually, we mentally label such a person, and we may extend our discreditation by informing others that the person has a "problem." Strangely enough, the person himself is seldom directly confronted about his "problem" because of the embarrassment it would cause the dishonored self to embarrass the dishonoring one.”

My point is that even when I allowed my sense of smell to be violated, the reaction of the body violated the researched comfort zone; its reactions were productive of a message that the Zabbaleen are bound to find insulting. The training of the body is what determines to a great extent our interactions with others. Even the most dedicated non-Zabbaleen would fall victim to the difficulty of adjusting their senses to the Zarayeb environment. As described by Iskandar, the olfactory senses of those entering the Zabbaleen community are assailed as follows:¹³⁶

“Fires burned constantly around the garbage village. Every little pile of useless garbage would be set on fire. These and the smell of garbage made the settlements unpleasant places to be in. No one ventured in unless they belonged, or had to pick up recyclables. No one, that is, except those who felt compelled to do something to help these people.”¹³⁷

This passage stresses the impact of the senses in perceiving the world and deciding what is “pure” and what is “dirty”. It also shows that our senses are subject to social training; what is a violation of one’s senses does not necessarily have the exact same influence on other individuals. This relativity, however, does not negate the fact that the training of our

¹³⁶ Furniss, J. (2008). Purity and Pollution between Researcher and Researched: Barriers to ethnography among a community of Egyptian garbage collectors. Retrieved from:

<http://www.nomorelandfill.com/images/wp2.pdf>

¹³⁷ Furniss, J. (2008). Purity and Pollution between Researcher and Researched: Barriers to ethnography among a community of Egyptian garbage collectors. Retrieved from:

<http://www.nomorelandfill.com/images/wp2.pdf>

bodies is a reflection of the social hierarchal order we live in - where the *lowest castes* have to deal with the most unpleasant *by-products* of the higher ones¹³⁸.

WHERE THERE IS DIRT, THERE IS A SYSTEM¹³⁹:

Usually we determine whether or not someone or something is dirty through our visual and olfactory senses. However, this does not mean that the notion of dirt exist in and of its own. Marry Douglas argues that it is a relative idea or *a matter out of place* that corresponds to one's cognitive classifications that are shaped by the social order.

Therefore, she argues that "we shall not expect to understand people's ideas of contagion, sacred or secular, until we have confronted our own."¹⁴⁰ Douglas uses the caste system in India to assert that the lowest castes in society are perceived to be impure while the highest ones are the "pure" who perpetuate their status in society through *the humble services* of the impure. To explain how dirt is a product of cognitive anxiety, Douglas says:

"We can recognize in our own notions of dirt that we are using a kind of omnibus compendium which includes all the rejected elements of ordered systems, it is a relative idea. Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in

¹³⁸ Douglas, M. (1966) *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. P.123

¹³⁹ Douglas, M. (1966) *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. P.123

¹⁴⁰ Douglas, M. (1966) *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. P.28

the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing lying on chairs; out-doors; upstairs things downstairs; under-clothing appearing where over-clothing should be, and so on. In short, our pollution behavior is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications."¹⁴¹

As mentioned above, the Zabbaleen settlement is one of a kind. It is unusual for the eyes and noses of outsiders such as myself and various others entering the settlement with me¹⁴². The very first time for me to visit Zabbaleen by bus in July 2010 with my summer development school we were warned, before even disembarking, against the following: taking photos in Zabaleen to avoid hurting people's feelings: holding our hands over our noses while walking around in the neighborhood so as not to give the impression that we felt the residents there were dirty: and, finally, staring at people. We were told repeatedly that we should understand that what is abnormal for us is normal for the Zabbaleen residents.

The discourse of the speakers is clearly related to our senses - "our" being us, the visiting students, as a group of outsiders. It tries to warn us about the symbolic violence that our senses and our bodies could inflict on the Zabbaleen inhabitants. It also shows a sense of awareness of the cognitive anxiety that the setting of the Zarayeb settlement could provoke by pushing outsiders such as ourselves to stare at women segregating garbage with their hands or putting our hands on our noses to avoid the garbage smell. The speaker's statement: "*what is abnormal for you is normal for them*" also means that as non-Zabbaleen (who live in what Bourdieu calls different *objective conditions*, different

¹⁴¹ Douglas, M. (1966) *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. P.35-36

¹⁴²My friend who once came to the field with me, the several taxi drivers that drove me inside Zarayeb and the group of youth I once visited the settlement with.

structuring structures, and who are governed by different *practical hypotheses based on past experience*¹⁴³) are more likely to find the Zarayeb setting alien.

The group discussion immediately following this visit (also known as reflection session) revealed that many of us were in a state of shock since it was our first exposure to such a place. Our comments revealed that, as non-Zabbaleen, all we knew about the job of garbage collectors was that they removed garbage from our homes or from the streets. We never gave a thought to what garbage collectors do with trash after they collect it. We never imagined that what we are always keen to get rid of – that is, garbage - ultimately constitutes both a livelihood and a way of life for others.

The cognitive anxiety provoked in us by the scenes of garbage in the Zabbaleen yards corresponds to Douglas' idea of classifications, order, and place. That is, in our minds the place of garbage is in garbage cans in streets rather than the courtyards of a residential neighborhood. Cognitive anxiety also featured a social dimension: I remember clearly that during this discussion many of us expressed a sense of guilt for not segregating garbage to make the Zabbaleen work easier. Back then, we did not think of the Zabbaleen's lifestyle as a way of life that they would defend¹⁴⁴; we viewed it as a product of injustice that we participate in creating. In fact, it is true that the Zabbaleen life and our perception of it is a reflection of the social order. In her "Purity and Danger", Douglas

¹⁴³ Bourdieu, P. (1990) The logic of practice. Structures, habitus, practices. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53-54

¹⁴⁴ I refer here to many of my interlocutors' narratives where they attempt to stress that they are comfortable with this life style and that outsiders see it as a problem because they are not used to it.

takes the example of the Hindu caste system in India to explain how our notion of dirt correspond to the hierarchal social order of society. She argues that the Coorgs

*“conceive status in terms of purity and impurity as these ideas are applied throughout the regime of castes. The lowest castes are the most impure and it is, they, whose humble services enable the higher castes to be free of bodily impurities. They wash clothes, cut hair, dress corpses and so on. The whole system represents a body in which by the division of labour the head does the thinking and praying and the most despised parts carry waste matter.”*¹⁴⁵

In fact, Douglas’ account on the caste system in India applies directly to the situation of the Zabbaleen. Actually, non-Zabbaleen bodies are heavily dependent on the Zabbaleen in the sense that the non-Zabbaleen bodies produce dirt which then has to be removed from their sphere and which ends up constituting the world of the Zabbaleen. In other words, what represents dirt for non-Zabbaleen is the by-product of a systematic ordering of matters which defines the experience of the world for middle-class Egyptians and their way of life. The Zabbaleen are those who have to deal with the by-product of this specific way of being. Despite this reality and despite the services that the Zabbaleen offer to the non-Zabbaleen, like the lowest castes in India, they are perceived as impure. In the following, I will tackle how the Zabbaleens’ awareness of this reality and how they come to terms with it.

¹⁴⁵ Douglas, M. (1966). *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. P.123

II- THE ZABBALEEN ENVIRONMENTAL SENSIBILITY:

A PRISE DE CONSCIENCE OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL STIGMA AND FORMULAS FOR DEALING WITH IT

INTRODUCTION: ROSE AND HER FRIEND: TWO LITTLE GIRLS FROM ZABBALEEN

In early October 2012, while walking by myself in Zarayeb in the direction of the RS, I met Rose, a redheaded girl of perhaps 10 years of age. Rose and her friend were teasing me as I was walking along, quite in the manner of “boys”. “Is this your real hair or did you have it done at the hairdresser’s?” asked Rose. Quite daringly, both girls pulled at my hair and drew back a little, laughing. They did this several times. Still laughing, Rose made a point of showing me her hands: “Don’t worry, don’t worry, see, my hands are clean... we are not Zabaleen, we are not dirty... we don’t work in garbage.” Rose and her friend then caught hold of my shirt, quite gently, saying: “You don’t look from here... but don’t worry *mesh hanwasakhek*¹⁴⁶”. I decided to tease Rose back as a kind of icebreaker: “Is this your real hair? I love the color, is it natural?” Rose immediately stopped teasing me, touching her hair, and proceeded to brag about her unusual hair color. Quite seriously this time, Rose informed me that although she and her friend live in Zarayeb, their parents do not work in the garbage profession.

I previously discussed how our senses and our bodies are a reflection of our social worlds. In this section, I discuss my Zabbaleen interlocutors’ awareness of this fact. I also talk about how their consciousness of this reality made them more tolerant of their environment than outsiders. I argue that the Zabbaleen - at least, my interlocutors - relate the notion of dirt to their social world in the same way that many non-Zabbaleen do. They

¹⁴⁶ We won’t make you dirty

know that what is rejected by the non-Zabbaleen is what constitutes their environment. They are also aware that many non-Zabbaleen lack the ability to belong to their environment. Knowing that their environmental sensibility participates in their stigmatization, the Zabbaleen develop several strategies to come to terms with their reality.

In a person-centered interview with Emad, one of the RS graduates, he revealed the following:

“We are used to this environment. For us it is ‘ady’¹⁴⁷. Outsiders see it as a problem because they were not born here and are not used to this bi’aa’¹⁴⁸... You know these things depend on where you were born... I know a person like you, for example, cannot live here because you are not mt’aawda’¹⁴⁹ to this environment...But we can live here because we were born here.”

In another interview with Ezzat Guindy, head of the SOY NGO, I was told that:

“We want people to get rid of the idea that we live in a disgusting place; we are used to this setting and we are making a great effort to protect our health.”

The above includes a significant comment frequently repeated on different occasions by my interlocutors inside the RS. It usually appears in a context where my interlocutors are attempting to defend the existence of their settlement to non-Zabbaleen such as the government and outsiders from their neighborhood. In their discourse, they usually

¹⁴⁷ Normal

¹⁴⁸ Environment

¹⁴⁹ Accustomed

express this point after talking about their life pains. For instance, either a teacher or a student would start by stating the problem of garbage-related diseases in Zabbaleen, the children's hard work, or the strong smell of garbage. The talk usually ends with a final comment that they are used to this life. I see the discursive mechanism of my interlocutors as an acknowledgement of and reaction to the violence inflicted upon them by the social order in Egypt. Moreover, I perceive the way they justify this violence - especially the environmental violence constituting both the essence of their life and their stigma - as a formula for dealing with their enforced "separateness" from the society. On many occasions, the Zabbaleen go beyond the register of being accustomed to their life; they use other formulas to deal with the sensual/environmental aspect of their stigma. They do so by redefining the category of the garbage collector, garbage itself, and also by negating that they all have a uniform degree of hygiene in the settlement: some of my interlocutors think that they are 'cleaner' than some of their neighbors.

"WE DON'T WORK IN GARBAGE; WE DO NOT BRING GARBAGE HOME":

A REDEFINITION OF THE CATEGORY OF 'GARBAGE COLLECTORS' AND 'GARBAGE'

In the following I will discuss Goffman's notes on the logics of stigma once again as they help decipher my interlocutors' discourse. My discussions with them revealed that some of the complaints regarding living in Zarayeb or being in the garbage profession sometimes arise from the smell of the garbage itself - a source of distress as well as respiratory problems to a number of Zabbaleen, including two teachers at the RS school. To trace the extent of this problem, I added an interview question asking whether the garbage profession violated any of their senses. Most of the boys, both the older and younger ones, told me the following: "*Ehna mesh benshtaghal fel zabala* or (we do not

work in garbage).” I asked them to clarify what they meant by their statement since they were indisputably garbage collectors. Gerges and Magued were the ones who cleared up my confusion. Gerges explained that he and his father receive L.E 3 a month from each apartment in a building in *Zawya* to collect their garbage. According to Gerges, the sorting took place in *Zawya*, and the recyclable items were then left outside the building. The actual waste would then be dropped in the landfill after which they would go back for another round of collection.¹⁵⁰ After filling me in, Gerges then turned to his colleague Magued to confirm whether this was the same procedure in his case. Magued answered that he and his father no longer work in garbage; their current activity is in paper only. Paper, not “garbage” or “trash”, is all they specifically collected. This means that the Zabbaleen who consider themselves “working with garbage” are actually the ones with an agreement with outsiders to provide them with a door-to-door trash collection service for a monthly fee.

Like Magued, Ismaeel made a point of arguing that “he does not work in garbage”. Last March (2013), we had a discussion about the role of the RS in shaping garbage collecting methods. So I asked him if he uses safety tools such as protective gloves while collecting and touching garbage in the streets. He replied that he does not wear gloves because they bother him and because “he does not touch garbage anyway or work with it.” He further explained that he just picks the recyclables from the garbage cans, leaving the waste as it is. For Ismaeel, this translates into *not* working with *zebala*.

I noticed that many of my RS interlocutors are really keen to make this distinction between working in *zebala* (garbage/waste) and working with *shoghl* (recyclables). The

¹⁵⁰ The bag of recyclables that they left by the building in *Zawya*.

majority of them (with the exception of Gerges) tend not to describe themselves as garbage collectors or as people dealing with *zebala*. Rather they see themselves as “recyclers” (*bnshtaghal fel tadweer*¹⁵¹) or as people working with *shoghl* (plastic or paper or metal). In this context, it can be argued that my interlocutors are fighting their stigma by identifying themselves with the categories appreciated by the non-Zabbaleen; they present themselves as independent entrepreneurs (recyclers) rather than traditional garbage collectors who rid Cairo of its waste.

The following anecdote shows my interlocutors’ raised confidence and comfort levels when they associate themselves with the category of recyclers rather than that of garbage collectors.

I met Helena and Mirette, two early adolescent pupils at a regular school, at the Computer Section of the RS¹⁵². Eager to initiate an introduction, Mirette said she very proud of her elder sister who had apparently “got great results in the *Thanawya Amma* Certificate and had been accepted at the School of Pharmacy which is only for high achievers” as she said. Helena also kept telling me stories about her educational background, mentioning the academic success of her sister, Magda. I deliberately said very little, quite happy to let the girls do all the talking. They kept telling me about the importance of education for both themselves and their parents. When I

¹⁵¹ This is the phrase my interlocutors use for the word “recycler”. They don’t use an adjective for the word.

¹⁵² The Recycling School is only for boys but younger visit every now and then to use or play its computers. Sometimes they also come to learn some computer skills with the help of the school teachers.

asked about their parents' work, on the other hand, the girls suddenly stopped talking. "Our parents do not work," answered both girls (who happened to be cousins living in the same building) quite firmly. "How is that? Are they old? Did they retire?" I asked. "No, our parents are young, you know, her mother is only 37" one of them volunteered. At this point I got a distinct feeling that the girls were probably sensitive about telling me, an outsider, that their parents work in garbage. I decided then to rephrase the question to find out what had taken the sails out of these two loquacious girls. After a moment, I asked: "So, neither of your parents work in carton or plastic?" at which both girls quickly answered in the affirmative. "Yes, yes, of course my father works in that" was Mirette's comment while Helena, following her lead, replied: "Yes, they do. They work together and bring the work with them in the trucks." I understood then, that while the girls were uncomfortable with admitting that their parents are "zabaleen", they had no problem with referring to them as "recyclers". I then asked Mirette and Helena whether their mothers help their fathers with their work. They both said that they do; "*Ommi bton'od el zabala ma'a Omaha*" which means both of their mothers work together in segregating the *shoghl* that their husbands bring home. I finally asked the girls whether they pitch in with their mothers, upon which they replied that they have nothing to do with these tasks at home because "our parents just want us to concentrate on our studies; they do not want us to work."

I interpreted the discomfort of certain Zabbaleen children with belonging to the category of garbage collectors in favor of that of recyclers as an acknowledgement of the stigma of waste and a way to deal with it at the same time. To fight this stigma, they try to impose their personal identity over their social one. Although they belong to the same community

and have almost the same work rituals, they emphasize the differences between them. They do so not just to make distinctions between *those who work in zebala* and *those who work with shoghl*. Additionally, they also stress the differences among themselves in terms of hygiene, education, and environmental sensibility. When appropriate, my interlocutors tended to claim that they are more educated, clean, or vulnerable to their environment than other Zabbaleen.

Once while talking with one of the RS graduates on the school premises, he confided that many people in the settlement “are not clean at all” and that “their houses are full of garbage”. The last day of my fieldwork in March 2013, another graduate told me that he does not appreciate it when some residents in the settlement throw garbage at the entry of the settlement instead of the landfill. One of the RS teachers also stated that people in Zarayeb suffer from ignorance and lack of awareness. She also told me that the stench of garbage really bothers her and causes her respiratory problems.

Most of the above distinctions come from the RS graduates and teachers who are more qualified to discuss matters of hygiene, education, and environmentalism. Although they are also the daughters and sons of the neighborhood, as are the rest of their community, they emphasize through their discourse that there are differences between them and the rest of the community. However, I noticed that after identifying those differences, the teachers and graduates conclude their talk by clarifying, quite matter-of-factly, that the Zabbaleen are simply used to this lifestyle; to maintain the status quo means to survive.

The Zabbaleens’ creation of sub-categories inside their community does not negate the fact that they belong to the same community, share the same name – Zabbaleen - and the

same environment. Their bodies and their senses are adapted to the same environmental setting. They share the same sensory and social order and they are all subject to the same symbolic and environmental violence. Moreover, they express very clearly that they are aware of these defining factors. However, my Zabbaleen interlocutors strive to deliver a message to the outside world of non-Zabbaleen to which I belong; being accustomed to their environment does not preclude being educated and diligent. This message reconciles with one of the RS's objectives in the sense that it does not seek to extricate the RS students from the garbage/recycling working sector and the environment that enables them to recycle "80% of collected trash." Due to the social and sensual aspects of the stigma of waste and the Zabbaleen's environmental sensibility, the RS aims to endow the lives of its students with an image of "dignity" – an innovative goal, however hard it may be to accomplish. In the following chapter, I take into consideration all the limitations of the RS project and try to explore the RS boys' motivations in taking part in it.

CHAPTER V:

CHOICES AND POSSIBILITIES

INTRODUCTION:

THREE CONVERSATIONS WITH EZZ OVER THREE DIFFERENT YEARS (2010, 2011, EARLY 2013¹⁵³)

As previously mentioned, I had visited the RS several times in 2010 and 2011 before starting going there regularly for my thesis fieldwork in September 2012. These explorative visits gave me an opportunity to observe the RS boys' discourse, especially the younger ones, over a period of time.

2010: THE UTOPIA OF EZZ

The first time I saw Ezz was in 2010. I was sitting with him and a group of RS younger students at one of the school tables. We were having a group discussion about why they joined the RS and jobs they aspire to have in the future. To my question Ezzat answered:

“I want to be a doctor.”

At this moment, another student sitting at the table mockingly asked:

“What do you mean ‘doctor’? We are Zabbaleen! That’s what we are!”

I reminded myself on that day that Ezz was the youngest boy at school and also a new arrival, the school director told me, adding that:

“From the very first day he came, he keeps saying he wants to be a doctor.”

¹⁵³ I mean the first one was 2010, the second 2011 and the third 2013

2011: EZZ'S BELIEF IN EDUCATION

The second time I saw Ezzat was in 2011; he was all sleepy and exhausted, sitting in a corner in the school all alone. I went to have a chat with him and see why he was in such a state. He told me that he was not feeling well because he left his former job at a technician workshop and his parents were upset by this.

Ezz: "The man used to swear at me and strike me with a wire across my middle... when I told my father he didn't believe me and accused me of making up stories."

Me: "What did you say to your father after that?"

Ezz: "I told him that I want to stop working because education or (*el a'lam*) is better."

Me: "Why do you think education is better for you?"

Ezz: "Because it's good for me, I want to be a doctor and cure diseases."

EARLY 2013: A DISENCHANTED EZZ

This year, in March (2013), when I asked Ezz him about his current job and his future dreams, he said:

"I now work with my father in garbage. When I grow up I want to remain a zabbal."

Me: “But this isn’t what you told me before.”

Ezz: “Yes, I remember what I told you...but, you know, I want to be a support to my father ... I feel comfortable with the work now... actually, I feel good about it...I get the chance to play with my cousins while we sort the trash we collect...”

Me: “So you no longer want to go to Medical School like before?”

Ezz: “Not any more... *kolaha ktaba w eraya* (it’s all about writing and reading), I prefer to work with my father and help him.”

The discourse of the RS students and teachers show an awareness of the difficulty to gain cultural capital through the job of garbage collector in Egypt. The symbolic and physical violence that the RS students are subjected to is acknowledged in the narratives of all the actors in the RS. However, this violence is accepted by the RS boys and their teachers as being their “fate” or their best option: they have to accept it in order to survive. In addition, they also look at this violence as something that can assure them a better life in the future.

In this last chapter, I do not intend to reduce the RS students’ dilemma in choosing to remain in the garbage industry or participate in an educational model that further entrenches their existence in this industry to questions of “fate” and “survival”. In this chapter, I explore the ambivalence between acknowledging the violence of work in the garbage industry and the sometimes-heady choice to remain in this job. In order to do so, I base most of this chapter on person-centered interviews with the RS boys and teachers

and I mobilize Paulo Willis account on the education and work choices of working class children.

“CARE “ AS A REASON TO WORK MORE AND A JUSTIFICATION TO STUDY LESS:

“IT’S ABOUT WRITING AND READING, I PREFER TO WORK WITH MY FATHER AND HELP HIM.”¹⁵⁴

During my work with the RS boys, I noticed that one of the compelling reasons that drive them to work as garbage collectors is to help their parents. Some of the older boys told me that they would seize any opportunity to travel abroad if they were sure their parents could cope without them. Kinship relations in the RS boys’ life are vital. Most of the Zabbaleen live with their relatives in the same building. Male family members sometimes take to the streets together to collect trash and bring it home to the womenfolk to sort it together as well. They even get into fights quite frequently with neighbors to defend a relative or a parent.

The aspect of care is omnipresent in the boys’ narratives about how work is organized in the settlement. In some cases, however, the RS boys are not given a choice and their parents are ready to use violence against them if they do not work with them. The school director once told me that Ragy and Magued’s father once forced his way into the school and beat them up savagely in full view of the whole school to punish the boys for going to school instead of accompanying them on the trash round. According to the school director and other staff, since their mother’s death due to liver failure, Ragy and Magued’s were pressured even more by their father to work alongside him. They now collect the trash in the streets and they also sort it when they go home.

¹⁵⁴ Ezzat’s statement to me in 2013

For other students, especially the younger ones, working with their parents by virtue of “care” is a reason to justify their lack of interest in education. Ragy and Magued, for instance, tell me that they like to work with their father and they want to remain garbage collectors for good so they can help him. In fact, I never saw any of them taking a *hissa*. When I asked Magued about the reason why he comes to the RS regularly, he said: “I come here to play, I rarely take a *hissa*... I don’t want to study or go to university... I want to keep working with my father so that I could have the chance to play with my cousins during work.” We see in Magued’s comment that many children operate within constraints where they have to organize a balance between work, education, and fun. In this context, the balance means that education is short-changed since work is mandatory and fun is a much needed compensation strategy. Like Magued and Ragy, Ezz says that he lost interest in taking education seriously. As we can see in the introduction of this chapter, Ezz’s discourse about education changes over time. When he joined the RS, all the teachers told me that he kept repeating his wish to become a doctor. During my regular visits to the school in 2013, I saw him only once taking a *hissa* with one of the teachers. The bulk of his time is spent in the Computer Section playing video games. Ezz told me that he gave up on education because it is too serious and he prefers working with his father to help him. I cannot tell whether “care” is his primary reason to work with his father or not. What I can affirm is that he mainly comes to school to play –a right that the RS acknowledges and respects.

In “*Learning to Labor*”, Paul Willis discusses cases that are similar to Magued’s, Ragy’s and Ezz’s ones by raising the following question: “Why do working class kids have working class jobs?” In the mid-1970s, in a West Midlands comprehensive school, fictionally called Hammertown Boys, Paul Willis embarked on a period of

educational research in order to understand why working class “lads” have working class jobs. After conducting many interviews and using participant observation, Willis concludes that these “lads” believe in manual work: that is, what they can do with their own hands rather than any theoretical knowledge gained at school. The lads call the disciplined students who do not miss classes and obey their instructors “the ear’oles”. The following quote by an interviewed “lad” shows why these working kids hate “the ear’oles”:

“(…) I mean what will they [the ear’oles] remember of their school life? What will they look back on? Sitting in a classroom, sweating their bollocks off, you know, while we’ve been ... I mean look at the things we [the Lads] can look back on...”¹⁵⁵

Willis' interviews with 'rebel' students suggest that this counter-school culture of resistance and opposition to academia and authority has a strong resemblance to the culture one may find in the industrial workplaces. Willis calls this resistance to school discipline “self damnation” that “is experienced, paradoxically, as true learning, affirmation', and appropriation as a form of resistance.”¹⁵⁶

Building on Willis’ observations, I view some of the RS boys’ choice of having a manual job as a form of resistance to an unknown and intimidating future. Their narratives show that the world of “words and books” requires considerable effort that they are not willing to exert for education. They perceive what they can do with their hands – the manual job -

¹⁵⁵ Willis, P. (1977) *Learning To Labor*. Columbia University Press; Morningside edition. P.3-14

¹⁵⁶ Willis, P. (1977) *Learning To Labor*. Columbia University Press; Morningside edition. P.3

as easier and less complicated. In addition, the choice not to study somehow compensates them for the obligation to work. In other words, the RS context provides the luxury of choice lacking in the home context. It is important to point out, however, that this applies to some of the younger boys at the RS. The older ones have different attitudes towards education. Some of them, such as Emad, for example, tell me that they made identical choices as the younger boys when they were children that they now regret.

**THE CHOICE TO WORK IN GARBAGE AS THE ONLY AVAILABLE OPTION FOR A
REGULAR EDUCATION DROPOUT:**

One of the advantages of conducting my fieldwork in the RS is the fact that the students age at the school vary from 11 to 24 years of age. All the boys, aged from 17 to 23 years, trod the same path as the newcomers like Ezz, Magued, Ragy, and Gerges. They were all dropouts from governmental schools when they joined the RS. The highest achievers amongst them are in their early twenties studying for the Middle School Diploma. My interviews with these students, especially the ones in their twenties, reveal that they are dissatisfied with what they are doing now, especially Emad. It was on a Sunday in March 2013 that I saw Emad for the first time. The teachers told me that he only came on Sundays to take the Middle School Diploma lessons for his exam. Ramy, the drama teacher, introduced me to him as a researcher, asking him if he would not mind talking with me for the purpose of my research. Emad accepted and I started conducting an interview with him. He began by telling me what he was doing before joining the RS.

Emad: “I was doing very good at school... I was among the best students... I reached *Ibtida’i*¹⁵⁷ with very good grades... I quit to work with my father.”

¹⁵⁷Primary class; before prep.

Me: “ Did your father force you to quit school to work with him?”

Emad: “ To be honest, my father wanted me to continue my education... he saw that I was doing good and wanted me to go on and obtain a *shahada*¹⁵⁸ ... *bas zay mat' ouli keda*¹⁵⁹... I was already working with my father while studying and saw that the family business in garbage was getting bigger and bigger so I slowly started focusing more on the work which meant neglecting my studies.”

Me: “Do you now think that you made the right choice back then?”

Emad: “ Of course not, *ana daya't nafsi*¹⁶⁰, I was doing good at school, I wanted to be a *tabib garah*¹⁶¹ ... you know I feel a little angry at my parents... I was still young when I quit school...they could have pushed me a little bit more to continue my studies... look at me now...my options are very limited... I can't work in anything else but in garbage and I don't even have my own business... each one of my brothers and I is working for his master...we don't have our own thing...this situation is very hard to change, especially because we don't have a place to store our work in.”

Me: “ Why don't you continue your studies? You are now finishing your last prep year right?”

¹⁵⁸ A certificate

¹⁵⁹ An expression used to clarify something meaning exactly “you can deduce that...”

¹⁶⁰ I destroyed my future

¹⁶¹ Means (a surgeon), Emad could have just said *gara7* which also means surgeon but he used the word *tabib gara7* like how the famous singer Georges Wassuf uses it in a very popular sad song. The use of the word in this manner, I think, expresses the extent of his regret and sorrow about his “lost dream”.

Emad: “ That’s impossible... I can’t be like a regular student... I dropped out a long time ago, I no longer have a regular student’s capacity to study plus I have a work commitment, who will pay for my studies if I went back to school?”

Me: “ Savings? Family assistance? You said everybody in your family works, right?”

Emad: “ We all work, but each has his own money, his own thing, plus we pay for the house rent, water, and electricity... that also requires money.”

The way Emad talked shows that he is very hesitant about leaving his job for education. His job has essentially become his security. In addition, like many of the other older boys I talked with, he is not in the habit of borrowing money from his parents or using their assistance.

Emad: “Here you have to work to live... If you don’t work you won’t eat... *ehna msh zayokom*¹⁶²...”

Me: “What do you mean by ‘us’?”

Emad: “I mean people like yourself, you don’t have to work... you can do whatever you want whenever you want.”

¹⁶²Means “we” are not like “you” (in the plural not the single subject).

Here, Emad is evidently referring to educational opportunities as a middle or upper class luxury with a time limit which, if missed, cannot be compensated for later in life. He added:

“It’s not easy... those who quit school at an early age...even if they come here (the RS)...their options will always be limited...they will never be like those who continued their regular education.” continued Emad.

In this context, Emad fleshes out the difference between the RS education and regular education. He thinks that the RS cannot make up for what he missed by dropping out from regular education. He makes it clear that the problem lies in the timing factor mostly. Dropouts joining the RS vary in age from 9 to 13. Since they have work commitments, it takes them longer than regular students to reach e`dadya (Middle School Diploma). By the time they enroll in high school, they are 23 and 24 with heavier workloads that disables them from pursuing college education. Emad’s analysis, as pessimistic as it sounds, reflects the reality of the RS boys’ situation. In fact, none of the RS graduates was able or took the decision to enroll in college.

Me: “What’s your main goal now?”

Emad: “I dream of running my own business and stop working for my taskmaster.”

This was Emad’s way of explaining that working as an independent entrepreneur is the sole route to job and real life success. He clarified that given his life constraints and the

limited options arising from not having a *shahada*¹⁶³, his only chance is to own his own recycling workshop in the settlement instead of working for someone.

VALUE OF WORK IN THE RECYCLING SCHOOL:

Emad's dream seems to be supported by the RS formal and informal discourses that stress the importance of work. In the RS, work is a valuable category despite what it might entail. The work of an 11 or 12 year old is seen as a "certainty of income" or "good planning for the future", no matter how hard it may be. "We know that their work is hard but here they are used to it, it is normal" I was told by one of the school teachers.

Actually, the whole school philosophy is based on this understanding and appreciation of the category of work.

As mentioned in the introduction, the school is funded by the P&G group. Abla Samia, the school director, met me at the school one morning with "great news" to share:

Abla Samia: "I just learned that P&G have doubled the amount of the annual fund they usually give us; this year they are going to pay LE 300,000. We started with LE 60,000 so it's a really big achievement."

Me: "How did you manage to get P&G to raise the amount of money they give to the school?" .

Abla Samia: " It's a question of the trust between us and P&G."

Me: "What do you mean by trust?"

¹⁶³ certificate

Abla Samia: “ We recycle only their containers, you know, even when the kids bring in any other bottles by mistake that are not P&G’s, we put them aside and do not recycle them.”

When I commented that the school must be offering great service to P&G, she agreed and showed me the number of shampoo bottles gathered monthly and annually by the school children. According to the sheet she showed me, the school collects around 40.000 bottles of shampoo annually. On average, a student collects between 1000 to 2000 bottles per month.¹⁶⁴

Abla Samia: “I can let the children earn more than LE 500 by handing in more plastic per month¹⁶⁵, I know they can do that if I asked them to but I can’t do so because I want everybody to hand in shampoo bottles, I want everybody to work!”

Abla Samia and the teachers always strive to find ways to motivate all the students to work and “hand in shampoo”. Saleem, for instance, is a handicapped 17-year-old boy

¹⁶⁴ Like mentioned in the introductory chapter of the thesis, according to P&G, the total number of P&G containers collected by the RS boys since 2000 is 2 million.

¹⁶⁵ The RS boys buy the plastic P&G containers from residents in the neighborhood and hand them to the school to gain a monthly pay. This pay cannot exceed 350 L.E per student because the school has a limited budget for those pays. This is why Abla Samia was telling me that she cannot accept an amount of plastic containers from a student that is worth more than 350 L.E. This way, she will be able to distribute the pays budget equally on all students without depriving any of them from a deserved pay.

who lost the whole of his left leg in a car accident while he was driving his father's garbage truck – grim evidence of occupational hazards facing workers in the garbage industry. Since the accident, he stopped working, and quit school. Thanks to the school teachers' awareness tours, however, Saleem was finally convinced to attend the RS. According to the teachers, he has lost his appetite for work since the amputation. For instance, he is less productive and rarely hands in shampoo¹⁶⁶. He also does not take kindly to requests to help peers remove the shampoo brand name and separate the bottles from their caps. Everybody in the school, especially the teachers, urges Saleem to work. They always tease him, telling him that he is very lazy. Sometimes, they get more serious and they tell him that he is no longer a young boy and that he should work and depend on himself to build his future. Saleem never shows anger or sadness, he always speaks loudly, laughs, teases his friends and plays domino with the teachers or video games on the school computers. Whenever called on to work with his colleagues, Saleem makes out as if he is really busy just to get out of doing the work. Everybody treats him with patience and kindness, especially those teachers who would like to see Saleem taking work more seriously one day. The generally tolerant attitude towards Saleem's "laziness" is significant in the sense that it clarifies how important work is for the Zabbaleen. In fact, it can be argued that those who do not work are stigmatized by their own community of which the RS is an inseparable part. Any student who rebels against work, for any reason, is instantly described by cohorts and teachers as "spoiled" or "lazy" or "not man enough"¹⁶⁷.

¹⁶⁶ He does not buy the shampoo bottles from families in the neighborhood to hand them in to the school. For the school, this task is not hard for him even as a handicap as this only requires negotiating with his neighbors in the settlement.

¹⁶⁷ All the words between quotes are those of my interlocutors'.

The value of work, especially in the garbage industry, also manifests itself through other modalities of talk in the school, such as jokes to give an example. Young teachers and older students tease each other about work-related matters with such comments as “Oh Rady, I can see why you’re smiling, you made them ha? Tell me how many did you sell? Huh? Come on, Rady, say it, don’t be shy.” Rady walks around the table where Nessrine and Marian, the teachers, and myself are sitting. He has a big smile on his face and does not answer when I ask: “I don’t get it, what are you guys talking about and Rady, I’m happy to see you smiling today, yesterday you were really in a bad mood.” Rady thanked us and answered Nessrine “It was just 2 tons, I delivered them to the factory owner but he hasn’t paid me yet.” Here Nessrine intervened to clear up my confusion and satisfy my curiosity: “He is talking about the meat bones, you know after El Eid, some people work in meat.” What she meant is that some people who work in the garbage industry and who live in the Mukattam garbage village collect the meat bones from the streets and from butcher shops, then sell them to factories which use these bones in glue making. As I understood from him, Rady managed to collect literally “tons” and deliver them to the factory. Marian and Nessrine kept teasing him; they really wished that their young husbands were as enterprising as Rady by taking advantage of the Eid opportunity to make some money. There was more than a hint of envy in their eyes as well as an obvious curiosity about the exact amount Rady made out of this *Maslaha*.¹⁶⁸ Such instances of envy or “giving others the Evil Eye” exist in the world of garbage collectors. By her own account, Om Mina, the RS cleaning lady, considers her family “unlucky” because they cannot afford to work in the garbage business.

¹⁶⁸ Business deal

THIS JOB IS FOR THE LUCKY ONES:

A DAY WITH THE SCHOOL CLEANING LADY: OM MINA

One day I arrived at the school, for some reason, quite exhausted. As soon as I went inside the building, I sat at a table where Om Mina, the RS cleaning lady, was sitting. Due to my physical exhaustion and her interesting stories, I found myself unable to move from the table and decided to spend the whole day just listening to her. She informed me that she does not live in Zarayeb (the Mukattam Garbage Village), but in the general vicinity of the south of the Mukatam area. When I asked her if her husband works in garbage, she replied: “unfortunately not. I would have wanted such a lucrative job, but I have no place to store the *work* (garbage).” This was confusing to me because from what I see during my walks in the neighborhood, the residents of each building put the garbage in their yards and sort them in the morning. I found out from Om Mina that these yards are spaces that are owned or mostly rented by individuals to store their work/garbage and sort them. I also found out, like I previously mentioned in the thesis, that most of the people living in Zarayeb rent the building they live in from richer Zabbaleen. According to Om Mina, those working in garbage in the Mukattam Garbage Village are the “lucky ones” who have a storage place for their *work* (garbage). Om Mina was sad while telling me her story, she seemed clearly put out with her father-in-law, who, according to her, “had given each of his sons an apartment except for her own husband who could have worked in garbage if he had gotten one.” The discourse of Om Mina, RS teachers, and some of the students concerning families who work in the garbage business and have a place for sorting and storing their garbage shows that they are considered lucky - high achievers even. As such, those achievers would be seen as fools if they ever quit the garbage profession.

**“WORKING IN GARBAGE IS BETTER THAN WORKING IN OTHER THINGS”: THE HL¹⁶⁹
FACTORIES TRAGEDY:**

Early in October 2013, I had a memorable chat with Ramy, the Drama teacher, and Ms Samia alone while they were having their morning tea. We talked about other education-based projects that Dr Iskandar was involved in. It was during this conversation that I heard about a horrendous story circulating in the school about a group of brick factories in HL whose owners routinely hire underage boys. Although I myself did not visit these factories to ascertain the truth about child labor there, it was confirmed by another source who was working at the Spirit of Youth NGO that supervises the RS as well as the HL education initiative. Ms Samia told me that Dr Iskandar wrote an education curriculum for the HL boys as a part of her Learn and Earn initiative.

In response to my question regarding the origins of these child laborers, I was told the following story:

There is a person hired by these factories who goes around in a big truck to small villages in rural areas and collects all the young boys whose parents want to put out to work. With each round, this man collects around 20 children in exchange for a small amount of money given to the parents for a month's work in the HL Factories. The children work from 8 am until late in the night and have to carry heavy bricks all day. Ramy recalls that “One day, I came across a child there who couldn't even move his bruised and swollen arms as he has been carrying bricks all day with a rope around his neck.” Ramy then added: “You know what happens to those kids? They actually sleep inside the factories with older men and they get raped by them.” I was overcome

¹⁶⁹ I replaced the factories name with those two letters because my interlocutors expressed a sense of fear of the those factories owners who as they said “could kill them” as they are “baltagya”

with horror and asked Ms Samia whether the police had been alerted. She answered: “Police? Do you want to get us killed?! Those *m’almeen*¹⁷⁰ are not guys to mess with! They already hate us because we’re Copts and they can trace us back here to Zabbaleen and murder us.” In response to another question about the nature of their activities at the HL Factories, Ms Samia stated they go there with food supplies, notebooks, and pens to “teach the children how to read and write during their break - only 15 minutes a day.” I could not understand how anything could be accomplished in such a heartbreakingly short respite from the children’s toil. Ms Samia said: “You have no idea what those 15 minutes mean to the children. They become incredibly excited when they see the school tool kit and start working right away.” Ms Samia added that at least they managed to get the factory owners to separate the adults from the children while sleeping. She added: “Those *m’almeen* know how to skirt the law; if you mention illegal child labor, they’ll tell you they don’t have any children working for them, they tell you so even while the children are coming and going right in front of your eyes carrying the bricks.” During this talk about the HL children, Ramy’s eyes were bright with emotion. I kept listening to him intently because he seemed to be speaking in a new voice that I had never heard from him before. He said “Those kids live in heartbreaking conditions, I feel so bad for them... I see them and I say *Alhamdulelah*¹⁷¹”.

This was clearly the moment of truth when it dawned on Ramy that the Zabbaleen youngsters are comparatively better off than the HL boys. This narrative - even if it was

¹⁷⁰ Traditional entrepreneurs

¹⁷¹ Thank God

slightly embellished or even entirely fictional - is significant for several reasons: it has an effective function to deal with the stigma of waste, it alleviates the pain of the garbage profession; it gives a garbage collector such as Ramy a sense of comfort that enables him to accept his life with its constraints. I see this narrative as a remedy to Ramy and many of the RS older students and graduates who desire to have a better life. Finally, I see it as an incentive to remain in the garbage business which, in this context, seems better than other jobs.

CONCLUSION: POSSIBILITIES

The above section shows how the RS boys' choice to work as garbage collectors came about. I refer to their work as *choice* because it is how they phrased their participation in the garbage industry. However, the discourse of the young students is slightly different from that of the older ones or the graduates. In their narratives, the young RS students do not stress the importance of education in their lives. The older RS boys speak more about the importance of education. Very often in their discourse, they associate education with future prospects. They speak of education as a tool that could expand or limit their future possibilities. Many of them also speak of education as a dream in itself: the dream to join medicine or tourism school. It is something that they wish for, but none, not even the graduates have achieved. While the young boys do not talk much about the stigma of waste, the older boys do. They are the ones who often mention the word "dignity" in their discourse; they are the ones who show that dignity lies in an alternate future related to education. The RS teachers spoke differently about "dignity" – in their scheme of things the Zabbaleens' "dignity" hinged on being rooted in work in the settlement.

As mentioned in the thesis introduction, the older RS students are the ones whose ages vary from 17 to 22 years. None of them have passed their e' dadya exam as yet. They say that they want to enroll in this exam to be able to go to college afterwards. One of the more telling features of their discourse is the repeated mentions of college as a reverie rather than a future possibility. Their voices take on an almost wistful tone while talking about going to college as if a sense of realism imposes itself on their unattainable desires.

On the last day of my fieldwork in March 2013, I met Essam, one of the RS

graduates, for the first time. He is very interested in painting; everybody in the RS calls him *El Fannan* (the artist). He was initially too overcome by shyness to talk to me, but was prevailed upon by one of the other graduates on familiar terms with myself to let me interview him on a one-to-one basis. I was interested in talking with him because he is one of the graduates who is no longer involved, at least directly, in the RS activities. I was keen to discover what he did with his life after his RS education. He told me that he got married to a girl from outside the settlement who helps him with his work as a garbage collector. He said that her help is very important because it allows him to keep his job going. I asked him if he intends to go to college. He stated that his dream is to go to the School of Arts because he really likes painting. Essam maintained his shy demeanour even when he smiled and said: “*Nefsy wallahi, dah hilm hayaty bas mafish waat.*”¹⁷² Like Essam, Ismaeel is soft-spoken and also smiles slightly when expressing his dream to go to Medical School. He told me that he still needs a lot of time and preparation to enroll in e⁶ dadya and he does not know exactly when he can do that. While we were sitting alone at one of the school round tables, another RS student, Michael, also told me that he wishes to go to Tourism School. Like the others (Ismaeel, Emad and Essam), Michael pointed out that he does not have a clear image of how this wish could be realized. Like the rest of the older boys and the other graduates that I met in the RS, he makes L.E 2500 a month independently from his family. He says that if he takes education more seriously and goes to school, he will have to quit his job. He told me that his father has a fruit shop and each one of his brothers is working and makes more money than him. He cannot ask any of them, however, to assist him financially so he can go to university because,

¹⁷² “This is what I wish to do, it’s the dream of my life, but I do not have enough time to do it.”

as he simply put it, “*kol wahid ma‘ a nafso.*”¹⁷³

In terms of their potential future, there is a common theme in all the older boys’ and graduates’ reflections on the future. They all tend to associate it with a university education. However, they do not speak of university as a possibility; they rather speak of it as a dream. They smile, speak in a low tone and look at me with wistful eyes while speaking of this dream. I also noticed that most of the RS boys -who speak about a university education as a distant dream- are the ones between 17 and 22 year old who have not enrolled in e‘dadya yet. The younger boys and the ones¹⁷⁴ going through the e‘dadya degree tend not to speak about going to university. They say that they prefer to remain garbage collectors and not go to school. The e‘dadya students just want to get the e‘dadya degree or enroll in a vocational learning degree. I noticed in this context that the younger boys were not taking education seriously and were not considering going to university because they already have a heavy workload. They simply want to spend their non-work time having fun.

The older boys,¹⁷⁵ who are now literates, seem to believe more in education. They are in a state of betwixt and between. Education does not seem very hard for them as the younger boys since they know how to write, read, and solve mathematical problems. The level of

¹⁷³“everybody is on his own taking care of his own business”

¹⁷⁴ Whose age start from 21 and above

¹⁷⁵ Those from 17 to 22 who have not enrolled in Third Prep yet

education they were experiencing does not require a lot of effort and they manage to make a balance between their work time and education.

The RS graduates who are enrolled in e‘dadya face the biggest education load. They speak less enthusiastically about going to university. They talk more about a less burdened path, which is *Sanay*[‘]. Like the younger boys, their discourse is less *dreamy* than the ones in betwixt and between. Last March (2013), Ramy who is a graduate enrolled in e‘dadya and a teacher in the school at the same time, talked with me in a person-centered interview about the RS boys’ future possibilities. The following conversation is an extract from that interview:

Me: “What is the thing that you really hope for the children?”

Ramy: “I really hope for them to get any *shahada*¹⁷⁶ to be able to have more job opportunities.”

Me: “What kind of *shahada*?”

Ramy: “Anything in *Sanay*^{‘177}, it will make life easier for them.”

Me: “Don’t you think that they can make it through *thanawy ‘am*¹⁷⁸ to go to college?”

¹⁷⁶certificate

¹⁷⁷ Technical certificate

¹⁷⁸Regular Secondary Education that enables one to go university.

Ramy: “This is very hard, I don’t think that they will go on...especially with those tough economic conditions we live in...everybody is struggling...it’s very hard.”

My interviews with the other teachers do not really differ much from Ramy’s views on the RS boys’ future. When I asked Abla Amal about how she imagines the boys’ future she said:

“You know, here, we are Zabbaleen... We grew up finding everybody around us working in this profession... It’s always preferable that they stay in the neighborhood and keep working here... If they go outside... They will be workers, but here they can have or already do have their own business... Here is better for them... It’s true that their job is very hard but it’s a *‘dy* (normal)... Here we are used to this work”.

Miss Hayam also said that

“The boys in the school are very smart... When they grow up, I expect them to be very good traders who know how to bargain, buy and sell... They already know a lot of things... They just need more discipline to do better.”

When I asked the teachers what the RS graduates are now doing, they told me that most of them got married and are still working as garbage collectors and recyclers: Some of them rent a car that they use as a cab but none have made it to university. As one can notice, the teachers’ discourse does not include a possibility of an alternate future for the RS students. For them success lies in taking advantage of their resources in the settlement to develop their garbage business.

In fact, their discourse is in line with the RS founder’s presentation tackled in Chapter 2. They both attempt to introduce a new understanding of a successful future; they both look

at education as what grants one dignity or cultural capital as a mean to achieve when the RS students become entrepreneurs in the garbage business. They acknowledge the social and environmental violence that the RS boys experience; however, they do not talk about this violence in detail and only highlight some aspects of it. In the RS discourse, we do not hear much about the sectarian violence, for instance, that the RS students face in their daily work routine. We do hear very often, however, about the police confiscation of the RS boys' carts and work when they go to the streets. The violence the boys are subjected to is acknowledged by the RS but in a discreet, selective way that does not disturb its social imaginary of the future for the RS students. The RS discourse also does an effective job of suggesting that non-Zabbaleen residents should understand that the Zabbaleen settlement is not a dirty place; rather, it should be viewed as a place where diligent workers recycle 80% of everything they gather.

The RS also helped launch campaigns for educating the Zabbaleen residents about the vaccines that should be taken to avoid garbage-related diseases. By doing so, the RS is attempting to deliver a message that the Zabbaleen are exerting a great effort to protect their health. Thus, outsiders are encouraged to stop looking at their environmental setting as a threat to their health. This smart initiative, however, cannot eradicate the sensory aspect of the stigma of waste. Like I showed in Chapter 4, human beings interact with each other through their senses and their bodies are an image of their social world. The Zabbaleen settlement constitutes a social world that is very different from the rest of Cairo. Through my experience and my confrontations with outsiders and taxi drives to go to Zabbaleen for the fieldwork, I can confirm that every non-Zabbaleen resident I came across while going to the settlement points it out as a place that violates their senses. The first thing the cab drivers did while driving me inside Zabbaleen is close the cab windows

and make negative comments about the smell and the place. Such comments are a part of the symbolic violence the Zabbaleen have to live with.

The RS attempts to create out of the Zabbaleen living settlement and way of life a cultural capital with a given social weight in the big city of Cairo is no easy task. As I pointed out in this thesis, the challenges that the Zabbaleen face are numerous; the stigma they live with is severe and multi-layered. The Zabbaleen are rural Christian garbage collectors living with the waste of a city that, as they say, does not acknowledge their hard work which provides Cairenes with a better livable space. The RS intervenes in the life of a small fraction of their children and youth to offer them a better life that they still have not figured out how to achieve.

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