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Farha Ghannam

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# Between Field and Text: Emerging Voices in Egyptian Social Science

Seteney Shami  
Linda Herrera  
Editors



## Contributors

Nadje Al-Ali  
Iman Bibars  
Anita Fabos  
Farha Ghannam

Sari Hanafi  
Heba El-Kholy  
Hania Sholkamy  
Mohammed Tabishat



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# TRAJECTORIES IN THE CITY: REFLECTIONS ON FIELDWORK IN UM AL-DUNYA<sup>1</sup>

FARHA GHANNAM

Fieldwork cannot appear primarily as a cumulative process of gathering 'experience' or of cultural 'learning' by an autonomous subject. It must rather be seen as a historically contingent, unruly dialogical encounter involving to some degree both conflict and collaboration in the production of texts (Clifford 1988: 90).

In recent anthropological literature, the 'field' and 'fieldwork' have come under increasing scrutiny and rethinking. This literature has critically examined the meaning of the field, the assumptions embedded in this concept, and the methods that anthropologists have used in the study of the 'other' (Kuklick 1997; Passaro 1997). This paper aims to contribute to the discussion of fieldwork in urban areas. It is a reflection on my ethnographic research in Cairo, which started in February of 1993 for my PhD dissertation<sup>2</sup>. My work focuses on some of the 5,000 Egyptian families who were relocated from central Cairo to public housing (*masaakin sha'biyya*) in al-Zawiya al-Hamra, a low-income neighborhood in northern Cairo between 1979 and 1981.

Rather than viewing the field as a laboratory (Kuklick 1997) in which facts are gathered and looking at fieldwork as a simple process through which the anthropologist simply learns the rules of the other's culture, fieldwork, as Clifford states above, is a continuous process of negotiation. Fieldwork, I argue, entails negotiations of at least two types. The first involves a dialogical interaction between the researcher and her informants. Second, the researcher has to negotiate hegemonic definitions of 'the field' (widely evident in anthropological literature) with her own experiences and findings. Central to this negotiation is the process of defining what is

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<sup>1</sup> *Um al-Dunya*: literally, 'Mother of the World.' A term used by Egyptians and other Arabs to refer to Cairo.

<sup>2</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to the MEAwards Program in Population and the Social Sciences, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Inc. and the International Office at the University of Texas at Austin for supporting my field research.



viewed as the data and the boundaries of the field. My discussion explores these issues by looking at some trajectories that shaped my understanding of the field and the subsequent analysis of the data. I will focus on how I selected my research topic, the negotiation of various positions and aspects of my identity while conducting the fieldwork, and my struggle to define the boundaries of the field.

### **The 'Field' in Urban Anthropology: Selecting a Dissertation Topic**

For a long time, the 'field' in anthropology indicated "a place set apart from the urban" and usually referred to "a place that is agrarian, pastoral and maybe even 'wild'" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 8). In fact, the city as a focus of research has been neglected in anthropology until recently (Low 1996). While a great deal of attention was devoted first to the study of 'primitive' and tribal societies and then to rural communities, urban life remained outside the interest of anthropologists until the past two decades (Foster and Van Kemper 1988)<sup>3</sup>. Even though the city remains "undertheorized" (Low 1996: 383), anthropologists have shown a growing interest to the study of metropolitan life and urban space.

Globalization and the increasing interest in the study of the city bring new methodological and conceptual challenges to anthropology. How can one use methods that have emerged from the study of small and spatially-bounded communities in the study of a "mobile, changing, globalizing world"? (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:3). Urban anthropologists in particular have been struggling with questions related to the boundaries of the field, the appropriate unit of analysis, and the search for adequate methods with which to understand the city (Foster and Van Kemper 1988). These issues contextualized my fieldwork on urban space and inner-city displacement in Cairo.

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<sup>3</sup> This tendency is clear in the Middle East where major attention has been directed to Bedouin communities and tribes (for recent examples, see L. Abu-Lughod 1986; Layne 1994; Shryock 1997). Until recently, the study of the city in the Middle East has been dominated by two groups of scholars: historians tracing the essential features of the 'Islamic City;' and sociologists and demographers studying problems related to urbanization (see J. Abu-Lughod 1989 and Eickelman 1989 for more on these two approaches).



My interest in relocation projects and the social reconstruction of space started during my MA graduate studies at the Institute of Anthropology and Archaeology at Yarmouk University in Jordan. As a research assistant, I did some documentary work on Umm Qeis, a village in northern Jordan that is also a well-known archaeological site. Its population was to be moved to a location near the original village in order to facilitate additional excavations and maintain the already excavated ruins. I was part of a team that was documenting the social history of the village, an effort that included collecting genealogies and recording the oral histories of its families and their dwellings before relocation. This work gave me the opportunity to observe people's feelings about their village and reactions to their expected resettlement.

Another of my field experiences, in the Jordan Valley, revealed the strong relationship between state understanding of 'modernization' and housing patterns (Ghannam 1990). 'Modern houses' (that is, cement houses) were perceived by state planners as better than traditional houses (that is, mud houses). This pattern was similar to development projects in other parts of the Arab world. I wanted to understand why the state perceives the construction of modern or Western-style houses as a central component of development (Shami 1990; Hassan 1985). At the same time, my review of the literature on population displacement in the Middle East directed my attention to the need for studies that examine the socio-cultural aspects of inner-city displacement (see Shami and Ghannam 1994).

My interest in relocation and housing was enhanced when I began studying for my doctorate in anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin. This interest intersected with a growing theoretical literature aimed at denaturalizing the relationship between space, identity, and culture (Malkki 1992; Gupta 1992). These writings emphasized the need to examine the vital role of the state in the creation and the transformation of "naturalized links between places and peoples" (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 12). Inner-city relocation and the role of the state in rewriting the history of the city and changing its future promised to allow me to investigate the interplay between space, power, and identity.

During my studies at Yarmouk University, the importance of conducting research in other parts of the Arab world was greatly emphasized. Since I had done a fair amount of field research in Jordan, I



wanted another Arab country in which to do my PhD dissertation fieldwork. During my first year at the University of Texas at Austin, I reported to one of my classes on Hamid Ansari's book *Egypt, the Stalled Society* (1986). Ansari referred to an area called al-Zawiya al-Hamra as the site of sectarian conflicts between Muslims and Christians during 1981. What attracted my attention was Ansari's argument that: "[t]he immediate cause of the sectarian conflict was the government's decision to use the little space left in Zawiya al-Hamra to relocate inhabitants from slums in other parts of the city" (Ansari 1986: 255). An article by Madiha Al-Safty suggested that the people resented their relocation because they "were not used to living in blocks of flats, as is the pattern in their new quarters." She argued that the group had "developed a strong attachment to their former physical environment and therefore had to adjust to a new pattern of living" (Al-Safty 1983:3). These readings suggested that al-Zawiya al-Hamra could be a promising site to explore my interest in relocation, the production of urban space, and the formation of local identities.

I started trying to learn as much as possible about a specific relocation project, one that relocated a group from the central district of Bulaq to al-Zawiya al-Hamra. My first step was to review the state public discourse and the articles published in Egyptian newspapers to justify the project. I was intrigued by the state public discourse and how it appealed to modernity in its efforts to legitimize the project. Notions such as *hadith* (new or modern), *'asri* (contemporary or modern), and *madani* (civilized or refined) were widely used to justify the project (Ghannam 1997). The relationship between space and subjectivity was also interesting. For example, the state's discourse assumed that resettling displaced families in 'modern' houses would transform them into 'modern citizens' (*Al-Ahram*, April 23, 1979: 8). This discourse presented the resettled group as drug dealers, criminals, and trouble-makers. They were also viewed as 'isolated' from the rest of the country. Relocation was needed, the state public discourse argued, to integrate them into the nation, a prerequisite for enabling them to contribute to the construction of the mother country. The state discourse also emphasized the modern image of Cairo, presenting it as the 'civilized face' of Egypt that should be maintained, cleaned, and beautified (*Al-Ahram*, December 27, 1979). I was also struck by how global forces and demands, such as the need to construct facilities that cater to tourists and international



business, were central to the state's public discourse. Theoretically and methodologically, I became interested in examining how people appropriate and resist these discourses in their daily lives. In short, the research in Cairo seemed to reconcile my interest in doing research in an Arab country with an attempt to contribute to the growing scholarly work on place, space, and identity (Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Watts 1992) as well as the "sociology of displacement" (Malkki 1992: 38).

### Doing Research in Um al-Dunya

I passed my proposal to an Egyptian colleague, Omar, at the University of Texas at Austin for some feedback. He liked the proposal and told me that his sister's fiancé, Ahmed, lived in al-Zawiya al-Hamra. Omar gave me the phone number of his family, who lives in a middle-class neighborhood, and promised to ask them to help me. When I arrived in Cairo in early 1993, I visited his family. They were supportive and invited me to come again with my husband to talk to Ahmed about my research. Ahmed, a university graduate and a government employee, immediately started talking about the identity of al-Zawiya and life there. He did not know people from the relocated group but he proposed to introduce me to his family and some other families in the area. That is a good start, I thought.

Despite the fact that I had toured al-Zawiya on my own, my visit with Ahmed felt very different. My feelings were a mixture of excitement and apprehension. It was 'the real entry to the field' and a chance to meet future informants. I met with Ahmed in al-Tahrir Square in central Cairo after the break of the daily fast during the month of Ramadan (*iftar*) and went to visit his family. After spending a couple of hours with his parents, Ahmed suggested a visit to the family of the driver, Abu Hosni, who works with him in the office.

Um Hosni was waiting for us in a tidy and clean apartment. Abu Hosni talked to her about my research and emphasized that I want to learn about life in al-Zawiya '*ala ttabi'a*' (in a normal or natural manner). I was amazed at how quickly Abu Hosni and his wife grasped my research and my attempt to understand daily life in al-Zawiya al-Hamra. They immediately started planning for my next visit and insisted that I break my fast with them two days later. Abu Hosni suggested that I go with his wife to the market to start



learning about daily life in al-Zawiya. He said that if I wanted to go to the market and 'blend' with other women, it would be better if I covered my hair. He gently pointed out that, as a married Muslim woman, I should cover my hair to distinguish myself from Christian women in the area. I got the message and after that, I always wore a scarf to cover my hair while visiting al-Zawiya.

Abu Hosni was a great informant. We often spent the evenings after his return from work talking about his rural and urban experiences. He enjoyed teaching me about the history of the area, its population, and traditions. I only had to ask a question or to show some curiosity about something and Abu Hosni would talk for hours. Um Hosni also played a central part in my field research. The next time I saw her, she pointed to her apartment and said: "Now you are one of us and that is why I did not put the new cover on the couch that you saw last time." That day, she took me with her to the market. We bought the vegetables and beans that we needed to prepare the evening meal. Because she wears a larger size than mine, she borrowed a gallabiya from her neighbor, Um Ali, and asked me to change my clothes. She said that I would be more comfortable in a gallabiya and that I would not stain my clothes while helping her. I was sitting on the couch sorting rice and lentils to prepare *kushari* when Um Ali came to help Um Hosni in chopping onions and tomatoes. We soon moved to sit on the floor and Um Ali asked me about my cooking skills. I told her that I do not know how to cook Egyptian food such as *kushari* but that I would like to learn. She commented: "My sister, even *el-'amsha* (one who is bleary-eyed) knows how to cook for her husband." We laughed so much at her description, which indicated that even a bleary-eyed woman was more skilled than I am. That was the beginning of a long friendship. We remembered and laughed at her sentence many times in our subsequent meetings.

Since that day, I visited Um Hosni and Um Ali on a regular basis and without needing an appointment. They both took great interest in teaching me about life in al-Zawiya. On the roof-top, where Um Hosni and Um Ali kept their chickens and ducks, they told me about many aspects of life in al-Zawiya al-Hamra. They took me with them to the market, local mosques, hospitals and clinics, schools, and other places that they visited in their daily efforts to meet the demands of their family. They included me in their social activities such as weddings, birthday parties, and celebrations of the seventh



day after a child's birth (*subu'*). They also introduced me to their friends and relatives in and outside al-Zawiya. At times, they got involved in my research in unexpected ways. I still remember the horror I felt when I visited the market with Um Hosni, who wanted me to talk to the traders there. Without any warning, she introduced me to the potato seller and announced that I would like to ask her some questions for my research. I was totally surprised and struggled to formulate a few questions. I do not think that either of them was impressed by the questions that I asked about the source of the crop and where other sellers came from. That experience stayed with me for a long time. When one day Um Hosni and her sister took me with them to visit the nearby fields and introduced me to a farmer there, I was prepared with questions about the history of the area and life in al-Zawiya.

### **Newly-Married Anthropologist in the Field**

*In my experience, fieldwork is, above all else, surprising* (Slater 1996: 30).

Except for a few extremely religious families, there is very little sex segregation in daily life in al-Zawiya. I had the chance to interact and meet with men from different age groups. Being married, my presence did not threaten other women. Many felt comfortable having me around and tried to promote conversations with their husbands and male relatives. However, most men work throughout the week. Except for unemployed or part-time workers, my interviews with men were limited to evenings and holidays. I played cards, chess and dominoes, and watched television and videotapes with them. We discussed topics that ranged from politics, terrorism, and soccer to resettlement and inter-group relationships. Still, my gender limited my participation in male activities such as drinking beer and socializing in coffee shops. My information on such activities remained limited to general observations and stories told by men.

In general, being a woman facilitated my work in that it allowed me access to both domestic and many public spaces and enabled me to have direct contact with members from different genders and age groups. I would like, however, to focus on one aspect of my gendered identity, my marital status, to show how female anthropologists are a heterogeneous group.



Class, age, education, and marital status shape the interaction between a female researcher and her informants, structuring her access to data. It also shows how our research is influenced by factors that we do not always anticipate.

Being female and newly married when I started, my fieldwork was directed to aspects of the group's daily life that I did not plan to examine. Many women felt a certain kind of responsibility for introducing me to married life. They asked me to participate in activities associated with married women such as buying cheap vegetables and preparing food. They also discussed sex, contraception, and childbirth. Pregnancy was especially important in our discussions. Women pressured me repeatedly to have a baby and emphasized its importance in stabilizing marriage and consolidating relationships between spouses. In a short time, they succeeded in persuading me that the pill is a bad contraceptive method that leads to infertility and ill-health. They also tried to convince me to see a doctor to check that I am capable of conceiving children. They thought that I should visit the doctor without telling my husband so that I would be able to treat any physical problem that I might have without his knowledge. They often prayed to God to grant me a baby and many comforted me by telling stories about themselves or relatives who did not have children for a while but then through medical treatment or traditional methods had had several children<sup>4</sup>. These stories were aimed at making me feel better about my "infertility" and encouraging me to seek medical advice.

My new status as a married woman meant that women offered a lot of advice and information to me (without any effort on my part) on these topics and the role of a husband in the wife's life. The many questions that both men and women asked about my husband and his background made me quickly realize the central role of a husband in a woman's life. I learned that, as a good wife, I should present my husband as a source of authority in my life. I realized how strange it seemed when I agreed to participate in various activities without first consulting with him. I also learned the advantage of using the husband as an authority to achieve certain purposes and avoid undesirable social obligations. Others rarely argue when a

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<sup>4</sup> See Inhorn (1994) for more on infertility and the various methods utilized by Egyptian women to ensure pregnancy.



decision is presented as having been made by the husband. So it was sufficient to tell my friends that he did not allow me to do this or that when I did not want to take responsibility for rejecting a proposal to participate in some activity. At the same time, I gained knowledge of how women resist their husbands tendencies to try to control their activities and movements. For example, rather than directly defying the requests of their husbands, in public women often accepted the orders of their spouses. They, however, helped each other in negotiating their own preferences (for instance, which neighbor to visit, when to go the market and with whom) with the requests of their husbands.

### **But is this the Field?**

*In real time, a depressing number of apparently wonderful ideas are duds, and a blessed number of blind alleys lead to grand spaces we never suspected were there* (Jackson and Ives 1996: ix).

Things were going very well. I was engaged in ethnographic research and supported by several informants who tried to help me in any way they could. But a nagging feeling kept pushing me to ask whether I was doing work in 'the right field.' Was I spending my time meeting, interacting, observing, and participating in 'the wrong field'?

When I first visited al-Zawiya what was really important for me was to meet people and have access to the area. This feeling was informed by the literature on ethnographic work, which tends to focus on "entry" (Lareau and Shultz 1996), "getting in" (Horowitz 1996), "gaining entry" (Smith and Kornblum 1996), and "the frustrating period every field researcher goes through while trying to gain acceptance by the people under study" (Kornblum 1996: 4). At the same time, my readings about the solidarity and strong relationships that characterize neighborhood relationships in Cairo (Nadim 1985; El-Messiri 1978; Early 1993) made it seem reasonable to expect no difficulty in meeting others in al-Zawiya. But things unfolded in unexpected ways.

My first informants resided in *ahali* (private housing) and I soon sensed a clear distinction between *ahali* and *masaakin* (public housing)<sup>5</sup>. There was

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<sup>5</sup> *Masaakin sha'biyya* is the full term used to refer to public housing. However, in al-



a big difference between Um Hosni and Um Ali in terms of how they viewed *masaakin*. The former grew up in the old *masaakin*, which were constructed in the early 1960s as part of President Nasser's policy to secure housing for low-income groups. Um Hosni associated life in *masaakin* with having separate housing units, each with its separate bathroom and kitchen. She felt that this was much more preferable to her current unit in *ahali*, which she shares with another family. Um Ali, who grew up in the countryside, considered living in *masaakin* inferior to living in *ahali*, where she has been residing since she came to the city more than 20 years ago. She described the people who live in *masaakin* as rude and trouble-makers. Both Um Hosni and Um Ali, however, expressed similar views when it came to the new *masaakin* constructed by President Sadat during the late 1970s and early 1980s, which house part of the population that was relocated from the city center. Like many of their neighbors, Um Hosni and Um Ali strongly believed that the resettled group consisted of drug dealers, criminals, alcohol abusers, and trouble-makers. Um Hosni and Um Ali linked many negative things with this group. Thefts in the market, for example, were blamed on women from the relocated group. These women were depicted as rude and vulgar. Abu Hosni described how a woman from this group came into the mosque wearing a sleeveless dress and that revealed her bosom. She was scolded by the mosque attendees who explained that she should not enter the mosque dressed like that. Abu Hosni ridiculed her justification that she left the house in a rush because she was worried about her missing child.

Residents of *ahali* have limited interaction with those who live in *masaakin*. My main informants in *ahali* did not know or desire to know the relocated group. In fact, close informants such as Um Hosni and her neighbors resisted my attempts to go to the new *masaakin* on my own. This resistance was based on a genuine concern about my safety; one family suggested that I go escorted with their oldest son, a police officer.

Having rejected the offer to visit with a policeman, I was waiting for a chance to meet some informants from the relocated group. I grew more and more restless when I sensed that time was passing without entering 'the

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Zawiya, people drop the word *sha'biyya* (public, or literally: popular) with its positive connotation and refer to the project as *masaakin* (dwellings). *Biyut ahali* is the full expression used to refer to private housing but people drop the word *biyut* (houses) and call them *ahali*. For more on this, see Ghannam (1997a).



right field.' I was counting on the fact that as soon as I started meeting people they would automatically lead me to each other. This was true with *ahali* residents, who introduced me to others in different parts of al-Zawiya. But the situation was different when it came to the relocated group. Despite the fact that I toured the new *masaakin*, where the group was relocated, I did not want to just walk into one of the apartments and introduce myself as a Palestinian-Jordanian graduate student at a United States university doing research less than one year after the Gulf War. This was especially important as I sensed some hostility toward Jordanians and Palestinians, who were seen as allies to Saddam Hussein.

One day, I went with Um Ali's daughter to the wedding of the sister of one of her close friends. Two young beautiful women attracted my attention, especially when they started singing about Bulaq. Their song expressed their pride in coming from Bulaq and their disappointment in being moved to al-Zawiya al-Hamra. The song contrasted the two areas in terms of food and the quality of life: "We, the people of Bulaq, eat peaches and apples while the people of al-Zawiya are sick with *fuul* (broad beans)."<sup>6</sup> I talked to the young women during the wedding and was overjoyed when it was confirmed that they were part of the relocated group. They had become close friends of the bride whom they had met in a sewing factory outside of the neighborhood. I visited their family to show them pictures from the wedding. Through these two young women, I finally managed to establish a connection with the relocated group.

I was very lucky to meet Safa', a 22-year-old woman. I liked her from the first time we met. She was joyful, warm, and articulate. Her insights and questions impressed me very much. So when she invited me to visit her family, I did not hesitate for a second. Her mother, a widow in her mid-50s, was very warm and welcomed me to visit at any time. In addition to Safa' and her mother, the household included a 16-year-old daughter and two sons, 19 and 29 years old. I started spending more and more time with them and their neighbors. I enjoyed so many chats with Safa's mother while the others were at work or school. While stuffing cabbage or sorting rice in the living room or frying fish in the kitchen, she shared with me her memories

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<sup>6</sup> *Fuul* is considered the food of the poor in Egypt. The song suggests the superiority of the people of Bulaq who can afford to eat various fruits and the inferiority of people of al-Zawiya who cannot afford but *fuul*.



of relocation, life in Bulaq, the first days in al-Zawiya, and many other aspects of her life. She discouraged her children's attempts to pressure me to spend the night with them when my husband did not know of the arrangement beforehand. But she was the first to insist on my staying over when he was out of town. Whenever I spent the night at their place, Safa', her siblings, and I stayed up until early morning eating peanuts and roasted pumpkin and water melon seeds. We spent hours joking and chatting. I cannot imagine my fieldwork without their help, friendship, and insights.

After starting my visits to the housing project where Safa' and her neighbors were relocated, I often felt torn between my desire to continue to visit with my friends in *ahali* and the feeling that the field is in *masaakin*. I wanted to collect needed data from the residents of *masaakin* without missing the chance to interact with my generous and affectionate informants in *ahali*. My first few visits to the *masaakin* were resisted by Um Hosni, Um Ali, and other informants from *ahali*. Luckily, their pressure was reduced since I managed to form two separate networks. But I had to negotiate when and who to visit. This was facilitated by my housing arrangement, which I had considered at first a flaw in my fieldwork.

### **Where to Live When Researching the City?**

The methodology of anthropology rests on the idea that one should observe and participate in people's activities over a long period of time. This methodology emerged from studying small and spatially bounded communities, which can be holistically comprehended if one participates in local activities. These ideas have been criticized by many anthropologists (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Malkki 1997). One, however, still reads in anthropological texts that: "nonresident fieldworkers often have more difficulty gaining the confidence of the people they intend to study" and that: "important activities often take place at times when commuting anthropologists are not present" (Gmelch and Zenner 1988: 87). Residing in the field is viewed as central to understanding local views and practices.

When I arrived in Cairo, I was totally convinced that I should live in the field (that is, in al-Zawiya al-Hamra). My attempts to live in al-Zawiya, however, were frustrated. Housing options were limited and the apartments of my close informants were often too small for their own family members.



Another more important reason was that, while it was easy for people to understand my interest in researching life in al-Zawiya and the importance of observing and participating in their daily activities, it was hard for them to understand why I was ready to live in al-Zawiya and leave my husband living alone in Garden City (where he was close to his work place at the American University in Cairo). Neither Abu Hosni nor Um Khalid could understand the logic behind my interest in living in al-Zawiya. They both explained to me that I was welcome to stay with them as long as I wanted but that I should not leave my husband alone. Being a good wife demanded that I stay with my husband but being a good student demanded that I spend a lot of time in al-Zawiya.

I continued visiting al-Zawiya on a regular basis but felt uneasy about not living 'in the field.' However, I soon discovered the advantages of such an arrangement, in particular when I needed to be away from the field for various reasons. This ranged from when I was sick to when I needed distance to evaluate my work and decide on how to proceed. Perhaps most importantly, moving between al-Zawiya and other neighborhoods also reminded me that it is linked to Cairo and that the practices of its residents shape the city in different ways. Stories in the city bus, encounters with taxi drivers, and events on the Metro were important in analyzing life in the area and its relationship with other parts of the city. I also came to learn different things about al-Zawiya by being outside of it. Moving between al-Zawiya and upper or middle class areas was "tacking between cultural spaces" (Scott in Clifford 1997: 214). Reactions of upper and middle class Egyptians to my work in al-Zawiya became part of my analysis of the area, especially in terms of its location in social space and in the imagination of other groups in Cairo.

But above all, I would have been more restricted had I chosen to live in a specific part of the area. Coming straight from the outside allowed me more freedom to visit various families in different parts of al-Zawiya. During celebrations, trips, and events that demanded I stay over night, Um Hosni offered a bed at her place. In *masaakin*, I often shared the bed with Safa', typically once or twice every week, and at times for weeks when my husband was out of the country. Coming from the outside enabled me to negotiate the time and length of visits to different families. It also enabled me to negotiate the feelings associated with fieldwork, which caused me to



feel anxious when I was not researching the right field. While I increased the number of studies to Safa' and her neighbors, I did not stop my visits to Um Ali and Um Hosni. I had two paths that led me at times in different directions but always brought me back to a complex and interconnected reality.

## Conclusion

My research in Cairo and the way my work unfolded made me question the idea of the field and how to set its boundaries. In many ways, my detour into *ahali* enabled me to move from focusing on a "local" into looking at various "locations" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 5). I was moving between the older approach, which emphasizes fieldwork in communities that are spatially bounded, and the recent emphasis on the openness of boundaries and the complexity of urban life. The group in *ahali* and its housing project became one location among others, albeit a privileged one, in my research. My detour via the older neighborhoods of al-Zawiya in reaching the resettled group opened the possibility to learn about how others view and perceive this group and its relocation. It brought to my attention the limited interaction between old inhabitants and the resettled group and provided me with vital data related to inter-group relationships and perceptions. It also enabled me to examine how the state public discourse used to justify the relocation project shaped the views of the old residents. My detour directed my attention to the multiple histories of the neighborhood and the continuous struggles over urban space. It also directed my attention to how the identity of al-Zawiya is constructed in opposition to upper-class and other lower-class areas in Cairo. Therefore, what I first thought was a waste of time became a main road to valuable knowledge central to the analysis of the resettled group's identity and how it is being situated by others inside and outside the new neighborhood. Was the field only al-Zawiya al-Hamra or was it Cairo at large? Should I focus only on the relocated population or should I also interact with the older inhabitants? Who should my informants be? These questions that I had to ask about the field are in fact questions about the relationship between al-Zawiya al-Hamra and Cairo and other parts of the world.

It was not only the detour in reaching the relocated group that forced



me to rethink the boundaries of the field. Other activities also forced me to rethink what I viewed as data. Visits to local markets outside al-Zawiya, trips to beaches and the Corniche of the Nile, and visits to relatives in other neighborhoods and the countryside became central to my research and analysis of data. Various activities and unexpected tasks also pushed me to rethink what I viewed as the field. For example, when I was asked to write letters to sons and husbands who work in the Gulf, the field had to be expanded to include such transnational connections. Through letters, audio tapes, and phone calls from and to male relatives who work in oil-producing countries, labor migrants often participated in various important decisions such as arranging the marriage of a sibling or adding a new room or balcony to the housing unit. In short, my experience in Cairo taught me that fieldwork consists of a series of trajectories. Some could be detours as was the case in my encounter with Um Ali and Abu Hosni. Most often, however, these trajectories were simple tasks such as a visit to a local mosque, a ride in the city bus, or writing a letter on behalf of a mother to her son in Kuwait. All these trajectories pushed the boundaries of the field in different directions but in an increasingly interconnected world.

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