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In the Shadow of the Colonizer: Studying Up in the Postcolonial Middle East

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses challenges related to studying mobile elites in a postcolonial country, Egypt. It draws on the author's ethnographic fieldwork with privileged members of Egyptian society during a politically turbulent period between 2011 and 2014. It illustrates how both the positionality of the researcher and the research subject are shaped by various geographic, social, and temporal locations. By delving into the complexities of elite research in a context that is informed and shaped by colonial legacies, the article questions the analytical value of binaries such as 'Western' and 'non-Western,' the 'Global South' and the 'Global North,' and 'colonized' and 'colonizer'. These binaries, embedded in various research agendas, are often too shallow to grasp the existing social hierarchies and power asymmetries. Instead, they can be co-opted by the elite in pursuit of power and influence. The article proceeds by first tracing the (colonial) histories of contemporary taxonomies of difference in the Egyptian context. It then examines how subjectivities and agendas shift along political constellations and calls for political reflexivity.

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INTRODUCTION

> Your reflexive positionality. You know. Coming in from European background. Gaining access to all of this and making judgements about this developing country. Making judgements about this privileged educated few. As if, and I have heard this a lot from Europeans in Egypt and Western scholars even [...] They literally look down on the elites and make judgements about them because they feel like, you know, they have this country, which is very underdeveloped and look at them driving sports cars and going to Europe all the time on vacation and they have all these multimillion homes.
>
> But what produced the elite class in Egypt, who influenced the culture of this group, where is colonialism in all of this, where did this all come from?

The lines above were part of a commentary on my research delivered by a North America-based scholar at a workshop.[1] It is not difficult to guess that the scholar was unhappy with my writing and the choice of my research subject: the Egyptian liberal elite's counter-revolutionary sentiment in the aftermath of the Egyptian uprising in 2011. The words of my critic also showed that they were questioning my ability and motivations, as a white-European scholar, to conduct the research. My ethnographic research in Cairo took place during politically turbulent times between 2011 and 2014. At the time, the formerly banned Muslim Brotherhood, often labeled as the 'Islamists', had become an important political force. It won the presidential election and the majority of the seats in the parliament. Many of my interlocutors, the Cairo-based elite and upper-middle classes,[2] were frightened by these political changes. While they lived transnational lives, they had also benefitted from the rule of the ousted President Hosni Mubarak and embraced his family's secular and lavish lifestyle. President Mubarak's overthrow by the revolutionary forces in 2011 came as a surprise to many. My work documents the liberal elite's discontent with the new Islamist rulers who stayed in power for a brief period between 2012 and 2013. My critic's frustration with my work needs to be read within this political context.

The critique above indicates that my discussant took my writing personally and identified themselves with my interlocutors, whose discourse I had studied. Their critique was primarily based on their feelings rather than any scholarly research on (anti-)revolutionary sentiments among the elite in Egypt or studies on elite distinction. The discussant did not develop scholarly counterarguments but rather used various techniques to put me in place. They said that, as a junior scholar, one had to be cautious when criticizing senior scholars. They also positioned themselves as a member of the Egyptian upper class that constituted the subject of my research by referring to one part of my work, in which I discuss Egyptian upper-middle classes' emotional responses to the Muslim Brotherhood's accession to power. 'Yes, this is what we felt,' they said and reiterated the sentiment I had recorded among my interlocutors in Egypt 10 years earlier. In addition to questioning the relevance of my work, my

1 I use a gender-neutral term 'they' here to ensure anonymity.

2 Although I agree that in some contexts it is an analytically unproductive choice to use the two terms 'elite' and 'upper class' interchangeably (Scott 2008), I have decided to do so because during Egypt's politically turbulent period, the existing societal structures and hierarchies were shaken. The (then-former) elite was about to lose its dominant position. These two terms ('elite' and 'upper class') are used to refer to people who control and have access to economic, cultural, social, and (sometimes) political resources (Khan 2012).

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discussant asked who I was. They were of the opinion that I should exercise more self-reflexivity and write about myself as a European conducting research in Egypt. In this way, they implicitly pointed to the power relations that seemed too obvious in the postcolonial context: I, a white European woman, was conducting research in Egypt, a country that was previously occupied by European colonial powers.

Viewed from a critical feminist point of view, I experienced the discussion with the scholar as hostile. I felt that it was my position as a white European researcher that was at stake in the workshop, and not the research I had conducted. While I represented a white European researcher from the Global North, my discussant used the voice of the (formerly) colonized subject. Yet, their institutional affiliation and senior position complicated the power relation between us. Questioning and dismissing someone's epistemic authority on the basis of their geographic origins (Talebi 2024, in this issue), can also be a way to discredit critical research. While self-reflexivity is an important part of ethnographic research, especially in conflictive postcolonial situations (Abdelnour & Abu-Moghli 2021) such as Egypt, Kobayashi (2003) warns that one should be critical about its limits and about making it the main focus of one's research. Self-reflexivity has little relevance, if it is not connected to an agenda meant to advance social change (Kobayashi 2003: 349).

My discussant's technique was indeed successful, as after the workshop, for several weeks, I kept asking myself: Who was I to do this research? Against all the harm done by European researchers, who was I to offer conclusions about Egyptians and their political struggles? I wondered whether my work could be read as another text grounded on the orientalist premise that Egyptians are poor and uneducated and should not 'drive sport cars and travel to Europe', as the scholar had suggested. Did the knowledge I produced exist in continuity with the different forms of colonialism Egypt had experienced under the Ottomans, the French, and the British? Indeed, social sciences as a discipline was not an innocent bystander to colonial rule. The production of 'colonial difference' relied on 'empirical truths' created by positivist social sciences (El Shakry 2007). A discussion about the role of knowledge production surfaced again in 2011 in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Significant funding was directed toward research in the region. However, Egyptian academics complained that they were reduced to the role of mere service providers (Abaza 2011). Indeed, while the Arab revolutions captured attention, a number of scholars with little knowledge of the region became experts overnight. Mona Abaza observed a power asymmetry familiar from the colonial period, in which European thinkers were the 'knowing subjects' and non-Europeans were the 'objects of observation'.

Against this background, the article explores the challenges of elite ethnography in a formerly colonized context. It draws on my fieldwork with members of Egyptian upper-middle classes from 2011 to 2014. While the limitations to this type of elite research are multifaceted and often of technical (i.e., financial) nature, this article highlights two predicaments that are specific to the postcolonial location where the research was conducted on one hand, and the study of transnationally mobile elites on the other. First, I discuss the conditions informed by colonial histories that shape the experience of elite research in the Middle East. Second, I reflect on positionality from two perspectives: that of a researcher and that of the researched. The circumstances following the revolution in 2011 in Egypt, characterized by political instability and armed violence, call for political reflexivity on the part of the researcher (Abdelnour & Abu-Moghli 2021). In addition to my structural privileges pertaining to my whiteness and European passport, my fieldwork was conditioned by a plethora of

emotions related to the ongoing political struggle and my informants' stakes in it. The political developments in Egypt thus affected my positionality and relationship with my interlocutors while navigating power relations and hierarchies.

This paper delves into questions that are specific to elite ethnography in a context that is profoundly shaped by colonial legacies. By showing how my interlocutors related not only to me as a researcher but also to other Egyptians, I am able to question some of the binaries that shape research agendas. The examples presented in the article illustrate how conceptual binaries such as those between Western and non-Western, colonizer and colonized, and Global South versus Global North are often too shallow to grasp the existing social hierarchies and power asymmetries. While approaching the practice of ethnography from a postcolonial perspective, the article raises questions that should be considered in the discussion about decolonizing knowledge production in the Middle East.

STUDY OF MOBILE ELITES AND SOCIAL HIERARCHIES IN A FORMER COLONIAL CONTEXT

My experience with the scholar discussed above is an illustrative example of possible reactions of what can happen 'when they read what we write' (Brettell 1993), or in other words, when research interlocutors read the work written about them. The scholar's response is by no means unique or specific to Egypt. For instance, Richard Handler's reflection on the criticism his work on nationalism among Quebecois anthropologists and social scientists received is illustrative: It angered them, was considered offensive, and was perceived as an 'arrogant outsider's attack' on them (Handler 1993: 73). Similarly, in the Nordic context, a book about the attitudes of the Finnish money elite toward politics, the welfare state in Finland, and other citizens, *Top Earners: The wealthiest 0.1% in Finland* (Kantola & Kuusela 2019), faced considerable criticism by members of the elite (Määttänen 2019). Yet, while elite research is a contentious and difficult endeavor everywhere (Abbink & Salverda 2013), conducting research with upper-middle classes in Egypt and the wider Middle East, which, in the language of international organizations, is part of the so-called Global South, or as my discussant noted 'very underdeveloped,' comes with its own particular challenges. These challenges are tied to the legacies of colonialism, the current geopolitical order, and the resulting social hierarchies.

Accessing elite milieus is a difficult process that requires context-specific knowledge of the milieus being studied (Higgins 2019). As a white European researcher in Egypt, my access to the field was affected by the power structures that shape Egyptian society on one hand, and Egyptians' position vis-à-vis non-Egyptians on the other. My whiteness, understood as a structural advantage connected to cultural practices and history (Faria & Mollett 2016: 80) and my Europeanness (Harpaz 2019; Pool 2024, in this issue), considerably facilitated my access to the circles of Egyptian upper classes. Nevertheless, my privileges in Egypt were contextual and temporal. While researching lower-class Egyptians, my privileges seemed striking (Mustonen 2020a), but in conversations with transnationally mobile members of the upper class (Mustonen 2020b), I never considered myself more privileged than my interlocutors. I lived as a privileged and mobile migrant for more than 30 months in Egypt between 2010 and 2014. When I arrived in Cairo, before the Egyptian revolution, my plan was not to write a Ph.D. but to study Arabic and later find a job in the prospering non-governmental organization (NGO) sector that attracted scores of Europeans and North Americans

to Egypt. My experience at the American University of Cairo, a regionally renowned elite university, where I studied Arabic, and the exposure to a specific milieu of Cairo's upper-middle class residents (Egyptians and other nationalities), shaped my understanding of class differences in Egypt. While I had not benefitted from multilingual socialization as a child, I listened with amazement how my informants easily switched between three or four languages and visited their family members' residences in different countries. Many of them had attended expensive elite schools and universities in the UK or the USA.

In the highly stratified social context in Egypt, I wondered why there was so little research on what Laura Nader (1972: 289) called 'the culture of affluence'. After the Egyptian revolution in 2011 when I embarked on a Ph.D. program in Italy, I wanted to understand how this privileged part of Cairo, which was accessible only to a few of the city's inhabitants, myself included, related to other lived realities in Egypt. I considered research on upper-middle-class Egyptians as important as any study on poverty, religion, or the courageous people who initiated the revolution in 2011. But because, traditionally, social scientists have been less interested in studying society's powerful actors (Nader 1972; Schijf 2013) and my informants were not used to being the subject of study, their responses and reactions often mirrored the earlier-mentioned critique expressed by my discussant at the workshop. They asked: Why would you study us? They would then explain how the 'Egyptians' were, and while doing so, they excluded themselves from the category. Such statements reflected a cosmopolitan assumption of a universal view from nowhere that is inherent in the traditions of European modernity (Van der Veer 2002).

A glance at Egypt's history sheds light on the conditions that inform the field of social sciences in Egypt and within which research is conducted in the country. It also provides insights into the broader social context within which the Egyptian elite operates. When the remaining British troops left Egypt in 1956, the country had experienced centuries of different forms of colonial governance, ranging from semi-colonial to classical colonial (El Shakry 2007: 3). El Shakry calls the different colonial rules by the Ottomans, the French, and the British 'nested colonialism'. The best known is the British occupation of Egypt (1888–1936/1956), as it initiated wide-ranging social and legal reforms. Francophone culture, in turn, had a particular impact on knowledge production in the fields of geography and anthropology (ibid.). An important body of scholarship shows how European rulers and functionaries infantilized the local inhabitants and considered them inferior humans. Separate court systems existed for the 'natives', a racist term to describe Egyptians, and they had to deal with much heavier punishments than Europeans (Hanley 2017). The inferiority of the 'natives' was often expressed in gendered terms: Muslim women were victimized, and men seen as oppressors (Ahmed 1992). As Edward Said (1979) made clear, it was with the help of Orientalist scholarship that an epistemological and ontological distinction was created between people in the 'Orient' and the 'Occident'. Orientalist knowledge production thus fixed the difference between 'the West' and 'the East' and made it appear natural (Abu-Lughod 1991: 141; Said 1979).

Viewed from the Egyptian perspective, El Shakry's (2007) work shows how the local knowledge production often relied on colonial methodologies and hence intersected with and borrowed from the occupiers' taxonomy. While trying to demonstrate to Europeans that Egypt had its own internal sources of development, Egyptian intelligentsia appropriated categories used by the occupiers and consequently internalized notions such as 'backwardness' and 'progress'. These notions then

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became important elements of the Egyptian nationalist project (ibid.: 5). The Egyptian intellectuals constructed themselves as civilized citizens aspiring to modernity, while they associated ignorance and backwardness with the peasantry (Gasper 2009). A study of upper-class Egyptians in the early 19th century shows how they were more Westernized and considered themselves more cultured than society's lower social classes (Baraka 1998: 9). The differences between the social classes were, among others, produced through the education system. While upper-middle-class Egyptians chose secular and foreign education for their children, lower class Egyptians attended religious learning centers (ibid.: 129).

Beyond these hierarchies signifying authority and superiority—between Europeans and the Egyptian intelligentsia on the one hand, and the intelligentsia versus Egyptian peasants on the other—the category of race helps in observing another hierarchy emerging. In the Middle East, blackness is considered non-indigenous and functions as a category of difference signifying inferiority and spatial positionings as 'out of place' (Gross-Wyrtzen 2023: 637). The separation from southern African countries—the neighboring country Sudan in particular—and their black-skinned inhabitants has been a dominant element of Egypt's nationalist ideology and has normalized racist discourses (Troutt Powell 2003). Egypt's dissociation from the rest of the African continent, a process advocated by Europeans and the Egyptian elite, is based on racialization of white Egyptians versus black Africans (Gross-Wyrtzen 2023). Scholars have shown how the colonial imaginaries of difference are today reproduced in (popular) cultural production across the Middle East (Tayeb 2021). In Egypt, as elsewhere, skin color significantly impacts the country's inhabitants' possibilities in various domains of public life (Gross-Wyrtzen 2023: 639).

This brief and by no means exhaustive contextualization of the ways in which difference is produced with the help of racialized and class-based attributes in contemporary Egypt helps to shed light on the social hierarchies that society's dominant actors might be keen on upholding. These hierarchies, inherited from the periods of European occupation, did not just vanish in the course of decolonization, but they also mutate and take various new forms of existence (Stoler 2016). For example, earlier scholarship has shown how the term 'backward' is part of the vocabulary of Egyptian artists and intellectuals (Abu-Lughod 2005; Armbrust 2019; Winegar 2006). During my ethnographic research in Cairo, I encountered the use of the term frequently. My interlocutors used it to describe the Muslim Brotherhood, other Islamists, and their supporters. The term 'backward' was thus part of the taxonomy of social difference that was available to my interlocutors (Mustonen 2023a). The contemporary use of notions inherited from the colonial era and appropriated by various actors in privileged positions to illustrate their superiority demonstrates the plasticity and mutability of the categories that describe and produce difference (El Shakry 2007: 219).

The taxonomy of difference available to my interlocutors was also tied to their lifestyles. They considered themselves more liberal than other Egyptians. They were wealthy, and many of them possessed foreign passports. In comparison to the majority of Egyptians, they were highly mobile. Their comparative ease of travel demonstrates how social class affects people's abilities to negotiate the increasingly restrictive mobility regime that otherwise complicates the movement of most people in the formerly colonized countries (Caglar and Glick-Schiller 2018). Due to their foreign passports and visas, my interlocutors' mobility was not impeded by the restrictions set by this regime.

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Although there is an increasing interest in privileged mobility, most of the studies on privileged mobility limit their focus on the north to south movement of highly qualified professionals (Armbruster 2010; Benson 2013; Cranston 2017; Kunz 2019; Le Renard 2021). The study of transnationally mobile individuals from the Middle East, whose mobility is less restricted by the North American and European migration regimes, complicates the binaries between the Global South and the Global North, as well as the colonized and the colonizer. Challenging these binaries, however, is not always easy. First of all, the elite might have an interest in the status quo and even insist on the use of these binaries if they benefit from the old order attached to them (Bourdieu 1979/1989: 111). As mentioned in the opening quote, my discussant considered Egypt a 'very underdeveloped country' and accused me of making 'judgements about the privileged educated few' as if the small number of the elite made it appear insignificant in the larger context. Second, as already indicated earlier, following in the footsteps of highly mobile individuals and entering spaces where society's powerful network can be difficult, as access to those spaces is often restricted by money and various spoken and unspoken rules. My encounters in Cairo illustrate these challenges.

STUDYING UP IN A POSTCOLONIAL AND TRANSNATIONAL SETTING

A friend with whom I studied Arabic at the American University of Cairo took me to one of Cairo's most exclusive hotel bars one October evening in 2012. As we entered the bar, my friend spotted his acquaintance Mahmoud. Mahmoud invited us to join him at his table. He was a businessman who had recently returned to Cairo after years abroad. When we met, more than a year had passed since the 25 January Revolution. At the time, the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood had been in power for a few months. In this troubled political climate, we were curious to learn about Mahmoud's take on the political developments in Egypt. Most people who frequented places such as the exclusive bar were uneasy with Egypt's new leadership. Despite the tense political environment, Mahmoud did not discuss politics but instead complained about his disconnection with Egyptian society. He explained to us that he did not understand Egyptian TV and never watched the hugely popular soap operas. Moreover, he told us that he only drove between his housing compound and workplace, indicating that he had no proper connection to the majority society in Egypt.

Our conversation was brief, but Mahmoud handed me his business card and promised to stay in touch. Interested to learn more about Egyptian elite's transnational lives and how they related to the country's political situation, I contacted Mahmoud a few days later. I explained my research project in an email to him and asked if we could meet for an interview.[3] He was willing to meet and chose another hotel bar in one of Cairo's upper-middle-class neighborhoods as our meeting point. On the day of the interview Mahmoud was late. He was not just a little late but late by a couple of hours. This pattern was repeated later with many of my informants. When he finally arrived,

3 Oral consent was sought from the research interlocutors before the interviews. Given the rapidly changing political context and violence associated with it, I had to rethink the premises of the research project multiple times. Regarding research ethics, I rely on the principle astutely expressed by Fassin: While being responsible to the people with whom I have conducted research, I also have a responsibility to those who are concerned by the issues at stake in the research, i.e., Egyptians who are affected by the doings of elites. My loyalty to the elite, as Fassin's loyalty to the French police, rests on deontological grounds (Fassin 2013: 640–641).

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he warned me that he could not stay long because he had a dinner engagement soon. Yet, despite his seemingly busy schedule, he ordered a bottle of Omar Khayyam, an Egyptian wine, and told me about the wine's history. He made a connection between the history of the wine and the ancient past of the building that was now housing the hotel and the hotel bar.

Mahmoud spoke incessantly, but in abstract terms, unlike the very first time I had met him when he had specifically spoken about his own disconnection with Egyptian society. He told me about the Prophet Mohammed, about Islam in general, and about its role in Egypt. Despite his other engagements for the same evening, Mahmoud continued to talk and made no signs of moving. He decided to skip his dinner plans. It became dark, and I barely managed to take notes. Also, I did not find the historical overview of the Prophet Mohammed's life relevant to my research even though I found it interesting that he was so well-informed. My efforts to steer the conversation in a different direction failed, and I could ask only a few of the questions I planned to ask. The interview situation was also shadowed by other insecurities. As it grew dark, I felt worried while we were sipping wine. At the same time, I took his penchant for drinking as an opportunity to witness daily upper-class practices, which I viewed as his natural habitat (Burawoy 1991: 2).

When I met Mahmoud, elite research was a new field to me, and I had rarely met such excellent speakers before. Mahmoud was foreign educated, and his English was impeccable. He told me that he had recently returned to Egypt. When I told him I was studying Arabic, he laughed and said I should teach him some because other Egyptians would not understand him when he spoke Arabic. Other scholars have indeed shown how the use of the English language serves as a marker of social distinction in Egypt (de Koning 2009). These noticeable habitual differences made me worry that my conversation partners would think that they were wasting their time with me and would not want to continue the conversation. My fear did not materialize during the interview with Mahmoud, but with other informants, it did a few times. It was never communicated to me directly, but some of my informants expressed their disinterest in my research by spending most of their time talking to other people on the phone. On those occasions, I felt myself powerless in front of my research interlocutors. I had nothing to offer to them, and they had little to gain from me. Although at first it was frustrating to realize that I might spend the whole interview listening to my informants' phone conversations, later I learnt to appreciate such instances, as I could learn from my informants' discussions with their peers and friends, especially if these conversations dealt with politics.

WHEN THEY KNOW BETTER: SHIFTING POSITIONALITIES

The interview with Mahmoud illuminates several challenges related to the power dynamics that define interview situations with members of society's elite. Mahmoud clearly dominated the interview and chose the subjects of discussion. I was impressed by his performance, confidence, and ability to speak. As a young scholar, I would often rehearse my presentations in advance, but even with preparation, I still felt nervous when presenting in front of an audience. I thus wondered whether Mahmoud had rehearsed for the interview or looked up some of the information in advance. How could he remember and pronounce all the details so eloquently? When I listened to Mahmoud and observed his overtly confident body language, I felt that my verbal

skills in English were too limited, and I lacked his self-confidence. As with many of my other interviewees, due to the gender dynamics at play, I also felt as though I was not being taken seriously. Mahmoud was teaching a young female researcher about Egypt. Later during my fieldwork, I discovered that Mahmoud's way of speaking was not unique, but it was shared by many Egyptian upper-class men, reflecting a common habitus. Mahmoud's confidence was a result of his upper-class socialization. Given his elite position, it was natural for him to take up the space and educate me about Egypt (Bourdieu 1996).

In spite of the uncertainties I experienced during my interviews with the Egyptian upper classes, my whiteness, my Western habitus, and the affiliation with a university in Europe (where I was completing my Ph.D. degree) 'opened me doors' and 'jumped me queues' (White 2002) in the postcolonial city of Cairo. My research benefitted from the racial and gender dynamics that originate from the colonial era and lead to privileging of whiteness and Westerness in the Middle Eastern context (Le Renard 2021). The fact that I was a white female researcher with Western European nationality[4] helped me enter the circles of upper-middle classes in Cairo. The positive identifications attributed to Westerness worked to my benefit: I was often considered a white 'ally' (Armbruster 2010) in a country that my research informants feared was becoming more conservative, patriarchal, and uncivilized (Mustonen 2023a).

My positionality influenced many interview situations, as the encounter with Mahmoud exemplifies. When I first met Mahmoud at a bar with my friend, our foreign status in Egypt led him to share a specific narrative of his life. We were a receptive audience to his ideas. He related to our foreign status and constituted 'us' by expressing feelings toward the 'others'—the outsiders of our milieu (Ahmed 2004). The fact that we were sitting in a bar that offered expensive (alcoholic) drinks indicated that we shared the same cognitive map and endorsed Mahmoud's lifestyle (unlike, as it was rumored, Egypt's new political elite, the Muslim Brotherhood), which was the lifestyle of a small minority in Egypt. Mahmoud assumed that we would be able to relate to his experience and, for example, not watch the hugely popular television series that he ridiculed. If the researcher had been an Egyptian from a different (lower) social class than Mahmoud, he would have most likely explained his relationship to Egypt in different terms. Thus, as researchers have shown in other (post)colonial contexts (Armbruster 2010), my whiteness and European nationality overrode my class belonging.

Despite all the privileges, in a politically volatile context, positionalities also shift. The changing of positionalities, in turn, impacts interview situations and access to the field (Abdelnour and Abu-Moghli 2021). While I was able to build on a long-term engagement with my research subjects and followed some of my informants beyond predetermined locations (Marcus 1995), the political turmoil in Egypt significantly impacted my positionality. At the outset of my research, my engagement with privileged Egyptians elicited feelings of amazement and inferiority. Following the military coup in July 2013, which overthrew the democratically elected President Morsi, in turn, I experienced anger and discomfort when listening to my interviewees' defenses of the coup. While I was initially often warmly welcomed by Cairo's upper classes, after the coup, the situation changed. Conducting interviews became

4 For example, I learned from people with Eastern European passports that, owing to their nationalities, they were not treated with the same respect as those with Western European nationalities.

particularly challenging after the Rabi'a massacre on 14 August 2013 that cost the lives of hundreds of Egyptians. While during Morsi's presidency my interlocutors were insecure about their privileges and elite status in society, after the coup and the criminalization of the Muslim Brotherhood, many of my interlocutors felt again more comfortable with the political situation. In this context, I was viewed with suspicion, similar to the group of foreign journalists who criticized the military coup. It became more difficult to arrange interviews.

SHIFTING SUBJECTIVITIES AND AGENDAS

The ethnographic method is particularly useful for the study of elites who consider themselves above any analysis. In the words of Fassin (2013: 630), it 'allows witnessing where those in power do not want evidence of what is ongoing to be seen'. Even if a researcher is able to conduct research with the same interlocutors on multiple research sites, other challenges occur, as illuminated by my encounters with Mahmoud. The two meetings with Mahmoud show how an accidental encounter with an informant can reveal different and sometimes more crucial information than a formal interview (Khan and Jerolmack 2013). As mentioned above, owing to the location (an exclusive bar in Cairo), Mahmoud initially considered me one of his peers (Armbruster 2010). He marked his position in the Egyptian class hierarchy by distancing himself from the majority population. He created a boundary between his social circle and the society's majority population by relying on elite discourse that constructs distinction through taste (Bourdieu 1979/1989). This became evident when he explained that he did not understand the Egyptian soap operas. He told us that he frequented selected places in Cairo that were accessible only to a small minority—exclusive bars and restaurants and the gated compound where he lived. These references indicated his class position in Egypt, where the average inhabitants' lives are characterized by more existential questions about physical survival.

The ways in which elites and the upper classes demarcate their social location differs depending on the context in question and their political agendas. Elites' class belonging can span 'different sites of social relations' and thus produce complex claims and attachments (Anthias 2012). My informants' international travels to Europe and the USA complicated the discovery of their social locations. I was not able to follow Mahmoud when he visited friends in the USA, and I could not attend the gala dinners my informants were invited to in London or Geneva. To keep up with what my informants were doing and saying in different context, I had to rely on other materials. Besides interviews and ethnographic observations, I collected information from social media and various publications. This type of written material is useful to complement multi-sited ethnography, but it leaves open questions such as the informants social positioning and class belonging in the countries they visit (Van Hear 2014).

Another example from my fieldwork in Cairo illustrates the research subjects' different social locations. Riham, a woman in a privileged position in Egypt's class hierarchy who has dual nationality, shared Mahmoud's ideas about Egyptian society. She had a well-paid job, and she explained to me that she earned more in Egypt than she would in any European country. Like Mahmoud, she had lived several years abroad and had considerable financial, cultural, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1979/1989). She was well immersed in the milieu of upper-class Egyptians and spoke several languages fluently. When I first met her, she complained to me about the Egyptian revolution that overthrew President Hosni Mubarak. As with many of my other informants, she

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thought that the revolution and the political turbulence that followed it would only worsen Egypt's social ills. Despite her aversion to the revolution that she expressed in private discussions, in the aftermath of the revolution, she became a commentator in the international media and was sometimes portrayed as a human rights defender. In violent and unstable postcolonial contexts, foreign scholars and media representatives find it difficult to collect information due to language barriers, and hence they sometimes take local elites to represent the grassroots (Ibarra-Colado 2006).

The multi-sited approach allowed me to observe contradictions between what Riham said in one context and what she said in another context. Her talking points in an interview with an English-language TV channel differed from how she discussed topics with her peers in the same exclusive bars where I had met Mahmoud. Also, when compared with other human rights defenders in Egypt (whose lives are constantly under threat or who are imprisoned in Egypt's notorious prisons), her understanding of human rights was limited to a small clientele and, for example, did not extend to members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Her socialization in elite schools ensured that she was able to narrate stories about the situation in Egypt and felt at ease speaking in front of large audiences (Khan 2011). She was a perfect cosmopolitan interlocutor (or interpreter) of the third world (Brennan 1997) who knew how to speak the language of international news outlets. As Brennan (1997) notes, such interlocutors do not only possess the required language skills, but they also know how to avoid themes such a colonialism and resource allocation that could be considered uncomfortable for international publics and donors. The criticism of Egyptians' role as service providers for European and North American scholars and news agencies who produced knowledge about the Egyptian revolution (Abaza 2011) is justified, but this critique needs to be taken a step further. Not everyone is considered qualified to inform foreign audiences. Those invited are often Egyptians who can relate to the Euro-American experience and politics and can explain the Egyptian perspective from a 'foreign' perspective.

I was unable to follow my interlocutors to by-invitation-only events and could not ask them why they said different things in public than in private discussions. For example, the information Mahmoud shared about his professional life and stays abroad on the LinkedIn platform did not correspond with the information he shared with me during the interview. Similarly, as explained above, Riham's public performances stood in stark contrast to her opinions she shared with me and her peers privately. Yet, what seemed to me to be shocking contradictions might not be perceived as such by the research informants. Combining these different sources of information is nevertheless a crucial task when generating knowledge about power asymmetries that shape social relations. The disclosure of the discrepancy between saying one thing in one context versus saying something else in another context is intricately tied to the elite's social positioning and their different contextual attachments. As elsewhere in the world (Yanagisako 2002), elites in Egypt wear different hats in different contexts. The examples here thus illustrate that, in addition to studying colonial legacies, transnational elite research requires particular sensitivity to the multiple geographical, social, and temporal locations of both the researcher and the research subject (Yuval-Davis 2015: 95).

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RETHINKING POWER ASYMMETRIES

Other articles in this special issue approach the power asymmetries between the researcher and the informant in multi-sited migration studies from the perspective of disenfranchised migrants. They focus on migrants who flee war contexts and live in precarious conditions in postcolonial Europe (Stock 2024, this issue; Pool 2024, this issue). These important works point to uncomfortable moments and helplessness experienced by researchers when being confronted with migrants' financial struggles on the one hand (Stock) and their hospitality on the other (Pool). Precisely because of these power imbalances translating into difficult emotions, studies on vulnerable migrants are often characterized by forms of epistemic violence (Spivak 1988)—the gap between the authoritative discourse produced by the researcher and the everyday language of the research informant (Abu-Lughod 1991). Elites can question this epistemic violence associated with research practices because they can read and criticize the work written about them. Since many of my research informants had received education in elite universities, were literate, and fluently spoke various languages, they could easily access my work and challenge it. For example, before one interview, an interlocutor had read my earlier writings and wanted to discuss them.

In contrast to research interlocutors in socially disadvantaged positions, my interlocutors could speak back to me and criticize me for conducting epistemic violence. My informants could disregard my writing as an 'outsider's attack' (Handler 1993) as the case of my discussant who associated themselves with the Egyptian upper-middle classes in the workshop illustrates, or read political intentions into it by branding me as a supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood. They could also claim epistemic superiority by identifying themselves with a 'third-world locale' (Brennan 1997: 42) and assuring me that they knew better. This was the case, for example, when the Egyptian security forces stormed Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya and al-Nahda squares and killed hundreds of President Morsi's supporters. My interlocutors deemed such actions necessary and dismissed any other perspectives (Mustonen 2023b). In doing so, they unwittingly challenged the roles that are foreseen in the dichotomy between Global North versus Global South. Such binaries are thus less useful when conducting research with society's most powerful actors, as they presuppose sameness across postcolonial contexts (Clayton 2004).

The way members of society's elite speak about society's other members also indicates their power to narrate stories. The interview with Mahmoud shows that elite members are often reluctant to talk about their lives in a formal interview situation. Many of my interlocutors did not understand why I asked questions about their lives and instead returned to a general narrative about Egypt's social ills. At the same time, they constructed narratives about other Egyptians who, in their stories, belonged to another category of people whose lifestyle and thinking differed from theirs. They were thus also 'knowing subjects', a role traditionally associated with the colonizers (Abaza 2011), who could explain Egyptian society to foreign researchers.

CONCLUSION

This article has engaged with questions I encountered while conducting fieldwork with members of transnationally mobile Egyptian upper-middle class. The examples from my fieldwork show that the power asymmetries are a more complex web

than the binaries between Global South versus Global North, Wester and non-Western, developed and underdeveloped, or colonizer and colonized allow us to understand. Research interlocutors' positionalities and agendas change in relation to the researcher. Depending on the political context and social context, elites position themselves differently, which enables them to amplify their access to various resources. Similarly, I have shown how my positionality as a researcher was affected by the political situation in Egypt, as well as the social and geographic location in which the research was conducted.

Binaries that construct two worlds, the developed and the underdeveloped or Western and non-Western, are particularly unavailing when conducting research with society's most powerful actors, as they assume sameness across postcolonial contexts. In fact, my examples illustrate that such discourse that relies on well-established binaries can be appropriated by society's powerful actors who want to delimit what can and should be studied in a former colonized context. Instead of citing these binaries, the claims of epistemic superiority—including those that draw on Middle Eastern exceptionalism and try to efface internal power struggles—need to be scrutinized in detail. The historical examples as well as the contemporary use of the term 'backward' and widespread anti-blackness in the Middle East show the plasticity of the different forms of racism inherited from the colonial era and thus call for a historically grounded analysis of their contemporary uses.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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