Paper title: Multi-sited Ethnography: Potentials and Challenges
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Introduction

This paper explores the potentials and challenges of conducting multi-sited ethnographies in a world bounded by transnational social fields. I present the process and logic of my ethnographic encounter, which is a result of the interplay between me as a human agent and structures of academic institutions, state apparatuses, labor and family regimes. In light of my fieldwork aim to tackle the following questions: 1) Why "multi-sited" ethnography as opposed to "single-sited" ethnography? And how can we link it as a methodological approach to transnational social fields as a conceptual framework? 2) What are the boundaries of multi-sited ethnography? 3) How can we define the notions of "home" and "host" countries while conducting multi-sited ethnography? 4) What are the resources needed for multi-sited ethnographies as opposed to other approaches? And 5) who can access them?

This paper is based on my MA thesis, which focused on the less-privileged middle class Egyptian families whose male bread winner work in New York City's service sector, while maintaining transnational families in Egypt. Based on a two-year multi-sited ethnography with Egyptian migrant workers in New York City and their families in Egypt, I explored how the intimacies of the lives of migrants' families are constructed and negotiated within the larger context of economic global capitalism and neoliberalism in countries where they live transnationally. In answering this question, I tackled: 1) local, regional and global processes and connections between

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workers in New York City and their relatives in Egypt who are key actors in producing transnational practices such as marriage, transnational households, shift in parenting; 2) the role of the Egyptian and the American states in shaping these transnational practices embedded in social, cultural and economic contexts; 3) the unequal power allowing the U.S. to maintain an imperialist domination, represented in the extension of power of the U.S. regime over the political, economic, social and cultural life of Egypt today and its effect on the production of transnational practices?; and 4) the everyday negotiations to maintain transnational practices as such.

I used the concept of transnational social fields, a concept that has emerged as "networks that stretch across the borders of nation-states" and that are disciplined by Bourdieu's notion of social field which highlights the role of both structure and agency in regulating and being regulated by such fields (Schiller 2005). However, much of the transnational scholarship, as Glick Schiller notes, treat nation-states involved in such movements as if they enjoy equal sovereignty in the global terrain, resurrecting methodological nationalism "in a form of transnational methodological nationalism through maintaining a form of boundary-making through linking transnational practices to territorially based-nation states and their maintenance or construction" (2005:443). For example, to-be-migrants are not only engaged in transnational practices that are regulated, though at-a-distance by nation-states, but their choice of the U.S., as a destiny, is very much shaped by US transnational interventions in Egypt. In fact the United States has long played a key role, albeit contradictory, in Egypt's economic and political spheres. On one hand, it has coordinated with Egypt's presidents namely, Sadat and Mubarak on the Middle East peace process with the aim at ensuring a "regional stability" and at countering terrorism. On the other hand, the U.S. funds development and human rights

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organizations to reinforce "democracy" through monitoring the Egyptian government. Moreover, transnational capital, known as foreign aid, manifested in the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans have been granted by the U.S. and other powerful states to Egypt. Furthermore, since 1975, USAID has allocated a total of $ 26 billion to the Egyptian government for promoting economic growth, education, health, democracy and governance, as well as environmental and infrastructural development.[1] With regard to the cultural linkages, the U.S. enjoys many forms of cultural dominance over Egypt. As a matter of fact, Egyptians across socioeconomic classes are exposed on a daily basis to the socially constructed baggage of the "American Dream" (De Koning 2005). This has been manifested in the rapid emergence of global modes of consumption and leisure culture that are often associated with the West, particularly the U. S. (Ibid). Moreover, flashy electronic and newspaper ads with titles such as, "immigration to America in 30 days" play a role in constructing the making of this dream as achievable.

Multi-Sited Ethnography: A Story from the field

Near the end of August 2005, I left for New York City to study anthropology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY) and to conduct research among Egyptian migrants with funds provided by Fulbright Commission. I arrived in colossal New York City with no previous contacts except for a few given by family, friends and professors in Cairo. I landed in JFK Airport on an ordinary humid summer day. Since I did not know anyone in New York, I called a company to send a car to take me to the YMCA hostel in Harlem, where I had made prior reservations. I took the car number and waited in front of the airport. When the driver came, the moment he took my luggage to put it in the car, I knew that he was Egyptian. I asked him and

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[1] See http://www.usaid.gov/locations/asia_near_east/countries/egypt/egypt.html.

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he confirmed my assumption. I introduced myself and he told me that his name was Ashraf. As I talked with him on the way to Harlem, he told me that he was an accountant in Egypt and left the country ten years ago. His five children live in Alexandria and he lives between both cities. When he asked about why I came to the US, I told him about my research. For him, it is a convenient situation since he is in need of money to cover the expenses of his children in Egypt. In addition, having the Green Card in hand allows him to move easily between both cities. He enthusiastically told me that I have to visit "Little Egypt" in Astoria, where the largest Egyptian population in New York resides. After finding an affordable lodging and registering for courses at CUNY, I began to explore neighborhoods in Queens and Brooklyn boroughs where Egyptian migrants reside. I agreed with Ashraf and identified Astoria's Little Egypt as a convenient research location as it was the neighborhood where Egyptians were mostly visible and accessible through public places such as mosques and restaurants and where I felt somehow home away from home.

Ashraf became my first research participant. I took his phone number and he suggested that we meet in Astoria the following Sunday. I met Ashraf at *Zokak El Madaq*, an Egyptian coffee shop or *'ahwa*, located in Steinway Street between 24th and 25th Avenue. As we sat, Ashraf narrated his story. After a couple of meetings, he asked me to give his daughter Afaf, who is in the last year at school, some advice regarding university education in Egypt. I gave Ashraf my phone number and we agreed to have a conference call with his daughter the following Thursday. Of course one phone call was not enough to discuss Afaf's career aspirations. Accordingly Ashraf, Afaf and I made frequent virtual appointments till she reached decision. Afaf is now in her second year in the Faculty of Psychology at Alexandria University.

My story with Ashraf is but one example that highlighted the transnationality of my field. Initially, I planned to conduct fieldwork in New York City over a period of nine months during my Fulbright grant. I wanted to learn about the experiences of "migration" and "settlement" of the Egyptian migrant workers in New York City. But this did not seem to work. A few weeks later, I found myself heavily engaged in transnational activities and trajectories that pushed the boundaries of my initial field. For example, people I interviewed asked me to send gifts and money to families in Egypt, to help them learn how to talk with their children through internet, and to assist wives, sisters and daughters in filling out visa applications for their loved ones in Egypt. It was not very difficult to notice that, similar to the case of Ashraf, most of my research participants are engaged in transnational activities and practices. In fact few days after I started my fieldwork, I realized that many men I met have established transnational households as their wives and children live in Egypt.

I was confronted with the traditional anthropological question "where is my field site?" I realized that the spatially bounded field site is incompatible to my research project. How could I neglect the fact that most of the people live in Cairo, Alexandria or Kafr al-Dawar and in New York City? How could I not include how desires around migration are articulated, challenged and realized in cities where migrant workers live, earn livings and construct homes? I realized that ethnography is classically considered a method of collecting data through human interaction with subjects and events as they occur in their natural settings, then conducting a multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, which is transnational in nature, among this population is a suitable methodological approach and indeed a *naturally* emerging one. I decided to follow the people, the objects, the goods (Hannerz 1996), and to expand my fieldwork from one single site to a multi-sited ethnography and to conduct fieldwork

in Cairo, Alexandria, Kafr al-Dawar, Egypt and in New York City, the United States. This approach matched my research questions as well as my multileveled analytical framework as it offered a broad understanding of transnational processes, linking marco- to intermediate- to micro-perspectives (Marcus, 1998).

Indeed, this approach enabled me to understand how Egyptian labor migrants are positioned as agents, actors, and subjects in a world system that is structured to supply labor migrants in a compressed time and space from less to more advanced nation states in the global capitalist economy. By understanding their positions as such, I was able to understand how migrant workers are situated in a transnational world system that is taking place in the post-1990s neo-liberal moment. In other words, I learned how neoliberalism in Egypt and in the U.S. is constituted via the movement of labor between unequal geographies in today's neoliberal order. For instance, I examined the circulation of low-wage/low-status Egyptian migrant workers, their families, their resources, as well as foreign currency between Cairo, Alexandria and Kafr al-Dawar and New York City. In addition, I learned how migrants, differentiated by class, gender, marital status, family arrangements, religion and strength of religiosity, live their transnational migration experiences between cities. Moreover, doing research in Egypt allowed me to observe how labor migration and its associated transnational activities contribute to the formation of urban localities in Egypt (Ghannam 2006). Furthermore, talking with migrants' core family members in Cairo, Alexandria and Kafr al-Dawar provided me with insight on how cultural and material meanings and symbols on labor migration to the West, particularly the U.S., are constructed and reproduced among the Egyptian middle class, particularly kin of labor migrants. I also learned how class structure and notions such as "families" and "households" are reworked in specific locations. For instance,

as I will note latter, in Kafr al-Dawar families of migrant workers have witnessed an unprecedented social and financial mobility, thanks to the remittances of migrant workers in the U.S., Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. This mobility, however, took place selectively not only in the same neighborhood but also within the same family (Ghannam 2006). Conducting a multi-sited ethnography also taught me that transnational social fields among academics have limits in today's world system. As I moved between cities, I was often confronted with issues of visas, citizenship, as well as gender and class politics in airports, airplanes, embassies, streets, restaurants, homes, living rooms and kitchens. I ended up divided into three main parts: from October 2005 until March 2006 and from the beginning until the end of April 2007 in New York City; and from the beginning of May till the end of June 2007 in Cairo, Alexandria and Kafr al-Dawar. In what follows I describe the process and logic of my ethnographic encounter, which is a result of the interplay between me as a human agent and structures of academic institutions, state apparatuses, labor and family regimes.

I started my fieldwork through frequenting Astoria, a neighborhood in New York City where many Egyptians reside. I met them in streets, subways, buses, mosques, coffee-shops and delis. After nine months of friendship and work, I returned to Egypt in the summer of 2006 carrying some presents for migrant workers' families as well as a phonebook with their phone numbers. At the time, I was still not sure if conducting fieldwork in Egypt would be convenient and since I did not take the permission of migrant workers to interview their families, I decided to wait. I just delivered what I carried to concerned family members in public places around AUC. I took my comprehensive examinations, and developed a detailed proposal for my thesis. I realized that I would need to return to New York City to conduct a second

round of interviews and to fill in gaps in data I collected earlier and to take permission from my friends to interview their wives, children and siblings. I applied for an AUC graduate research grant and received it. Then I had to undergo the process of applying for a US visa. The application process was a difficult task because applying for a US visa for educational purposes without affiliation with a US institution is uncommon. I felt somewhat bitter and frustrated when I compared my situation with that of North American and European researchers studying the 'developing' world. Moreover, although my AUC graduate research award is very generous, it only covered my expenses to do follow-up interviews over a period of one month. I could not ignore the fact that privileged anthropologists who have a North American or a European citizenship enter Egypt and many other countries without visas and benefit from differences in currencies to spend long periods of time conducting fieldwork. On the other hand, global south academics often choose to study their home countries because it is more convenient and even small attempts to conduct transnational research, which entails traveling to the North, are fraught with a number of challenges, as discussed above. I link my experience as a global south academic to Marcus' insight on the richness of multi-sited ethnographies in understanding today's world system. In fact my position in the world system-manifested in my historically situated citizenship[2]- taught me that the global world order is not only about the position of migrant workers whom we write about in academic papers but also about the political economy of knowledge or the geopolitics of academic in which we are situated. Anthropologists have been critically reflecting on their positions in the fields (i.e. Narayan 1993), however, they often neglect discussing the structural factors that shape the different options available for academics who vary in terms of their

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[2] I historically situated myself as an Arab-Middle-Eastern Muslim conducting research in the U.S. in the post-9/11 era.

citizenship as well as accessibility to resources as they work in and move between unequal geographies.

In March 2007, my passport was stamped with a five years visa, thanks to my affiliation to AUC and my Fulbright position, and I returned to Astoria in April 2007. I looked for my previous research participants and quickly realized that finding all of them would be more wishful thinking than a real possibility; many had left the neighborhood, gone to another state, or returned to Egypt. Yet, many still remembered me and few were suspicious. Only once did an NGO officer asked me to produce a letter from my advisor concerning my research project, a copy of my passport, and an abstract of my research. Submitting these documents promptly meant accessing research participants without problems. I completed my fieldwork in one month and returned to Egypt.

At first, I thought that conducting interviews with the families in Egypt would be an easy task, as I was often asked during my pilot ethnography to connect with their families. However, I often sensed that asking research participants if I could conduct interviews with their family members was unwelcome. Many did not want to disclose information about their low-status jobs in the U.S. In other words, they did not want to lose their social status among neighbors, family, and friends. I learned that there is a divide between the social worlds of migrant workers in Egypt and in the U.S., as Ashraf notes 'here' and 'there.' Moreover, migrant workers often witness contradictory class mobility in the U.S., which has been defined in the literature as an increase in financial status and a decrease in social status (Parrenas 2001). On the other hands, families of migrant workers witness a synchronized upward social and economic mobility. Not only families of migrant workers improve their housing units, but they gain a socially distinct status in the neighborhoods among family members,

siblings and neighbors. Moreover, male participants were uncomfortable mentioning that they knew me, a single woman alone in the U.S. Once, I was asked to tell a participant's wife in Egypt that I worked at the NGO in order to avoid raising suspicions. In the end, I only interviewed families of those with whom I became a good friend. These were five cases.

The Transnationality of Research Locales

This section describes some of the transnational practices that take place in New York City and in Cairo, Alexandria and Kafr al-Dawar in Egypt.

1) **Egyptian Astoria of New York City**

Egyptians and their diaspora outside of the homeland fondly and nostalgically describe Steinway Street between 25th and 28th Avenues, as "Little Egypt." Immigrants who have long resided in the neighborhood mentioned that this area became predominantly Egyptian during the middle of the 1990s with the influx of Egyptian migrant workers. Astoria has several immigrant lawyers' offices, real estate agencies, a remittance agency, mosques, Arab delis that sell long distance calling cards with the maximum number of minutes to call the Middle East, Arab restaurants and cafés that serve *shisha* or *huka,* as well as male barber shops. The Egyptian population in Astoria is predominantly Muslim. Many types of immigrants live in Astoria including: single men and women, young couples, and families with children.

Migrant workers mentioned that they choose Astoria for residency and work for several reasons. These include: the existence of fellow immigrants in the neighborhood, class, religiosity, and marital status. The established presence of an Egyptian immigrant group has mobilized further immigration. It has been observed in the literature of migration that pioneer settlers in certain areas guide new arrivals to

choose their destinations (Portes and Rumbaut 1996). Moreover, network connections established through the already-existing of immigrants lower the costs, raise the benefits, and reduce the risks of international migration (Foner 2001). Indeed, most of the research participants had at least a friend, a cousin, a brother, or a neighbor in Astoria before migrating. For instance, Fouad initially applied for the visa because he had a brother in Astoria. He said that life in the U.S. otherwise would have been unbearable due to both financial and personal reasons. He stayed with his brother for few months before moving to another apartment.

Astoria is also home to many Egyptian migrant workers (both men and women) who are searching for employment but lack English proficiency and knowledge of the US labor market. With regard to language skills, many research participants did not have any knowledge of English before arriving in the U.S., whereas others knew basic English but not enough to get by. Hussein's narrative illustrates my point,

> *Although I thought that I knew English before coming. Here I discovered that I don't know any English. Nobody understands me and I hardly understand anybody who speaks with an American accent... That's why I had no options but to work in Arab restaurants here is Astoria.*

A lack of understanding of the US labor market is another problem expressed by respondents. Although Huda tried hard to look for employment opportunities outside Arab restaurants, she failed due to her inability to understand an ambiguous labor market. Huda says, "*I really wanted to work in an American supermarket instead but I did not understand how to apply... I was also uncomfortable to work in an environment that I am very unfamiliar with.*"

Many Arab observant Muslim migrant workers mentioned that they chose Astoria because it is a place where they can perform Islamic rituals collectively. They are trying to form a Muslim community through collecting donations for the

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establishment of Islamic schools, doing their errands in *Halal* meat stores, and participating in religious congregations, etc. Parents of Muslim children also favor Astoria for their children because they can socialize with other Muslim children. Interestingly, many of them perceive the world of Manhattan as loose as opposed to the conservative world of Astoria. For instance, when I asked Soha, a thirty-year old mother, if she goes to the Muslim Parade in Manhattan, she answered, "*no, Manhattan is another world. People there are weird and I don't like that my children see this…We rarely go there. Only my husband goes for business.*" This quote mirrors other couples who are concerned with the religious and cultural upbringing of their children.

Egypt: Cairo, Alexandria and Kafr al-Dawar

In Cairo and Alexandria, I mostly conducted in-depth interviews with research participants at homes and public places. In Cairo, I conducted three interviews; two in restaurants, one owned by a returning migrant worker whose brother is in New York City and the other by the son of a migrant with whom I became friends during the first phase of my fieldwork. The third one was in a family house of the migrant's mother located in Nasr City, a neighborhood where many of my research participants had apartments. As for Alexandria, interviews were conducted in the home of the migrant's sibling located in *Moharam Bek*, a classical middle class neighborhood. The duration of interviews ranged from one to two hours.

My fieldwork in Kafr Al Dawar was mainly conducted in new areas that were developed thanks to the remittances of migrants in the Gulf, the U.S. and Europe. Houses that I visited are located on unpaved streets with sets of crossroads and alleys running through rows of four- to six- terraced narrow cement family houses with balconies, and roofs where satellite dishes are installed. Research participants

mentioned that building a house after several consecutive years of migration is a material manifestation of the migrant man's success and woman's patience. It is a visible site for the married migrant and his family for expressing upward social and financial mobility, and for the unmarried, proof that he fulfils marriage requirements.

Apartment and the type and quality of furniture are central markers of social status in Kafr al-Dawar. As a result, a number of participants mentioned that migrants and their families invest money and effort in improving housing units. Improvements such as furnishing, painting and decorating, as Ghannam argues, are "signs of distinction and manifestations of the material and symbolic capital of its inhabitants" (2006:260). Most of the migrant's apartments I visited consisted of two bedrooms, a fancy dining room with a niche, a living space to receive guests, a luxurious bathroom with colored ceramic tiles and a kitchen. As most of these apartments were left locked due to the absence of the husband, chairs were covered with white sheets. The value of gold that the wife wears is another marker that the migrant was able to make it. Hassan's wife, for instance, wears gold that value five thousand Egyptian pounds; however, she mentioned that this is considered the minimum and that the standard is twenty thousand Egyptian pounds.

Men are notably absent in these houses and wives, in-laws, and children are the main actors. Most women did not work for wages, and their lives revolve around managing remittances, budgeting, taking care of the house and the children, matching brides with single friends of their husbands in the U.S., and visiting families and friends. Migrant workers "with papers" or legal documents such as those who enter the U.S. through the Diversity Lottery or sponsorship programs visit their families at least once a year, usually during the summer whereas those "without papers," especially those who break the visa and stay more than six months in the U.S. come

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home once and for all as they are forbidden to enter the U.S. once they leave. However, one strategy that migrant workers use is to leave right before the six months allowance period. In these cases, migrants leave every five months, stay in Egypt for a couple of months and then return again. Wives of migrant workers "without papers" are only connected to their husbands through telephones, e-mails and other means of communication. For instance, Mona did not see her husband Ahmed for the last ten years. Ahmed overstayed in the U.S. and is considered illegal. If he decides to return he will not be able to go back. Mona's story is similar to that of many women who are trapped between the pain of physical separation and the dependence on the material rewards generated by this separation.

Conclusion

Drawing from my fieldwork with Egyptian migrant workers in New York City and their families in Egypt, in this paper I discussed some of the potentials and challenges of multisided ethnography. Conducting a multi-sited ethnography is appealing for a number of reasons. It could be useful when projects tackle transnational practices and social fields that transcend national boundaries on the theoretical and methodological levels. It also enables the researcher to observe meanings and perceptions around concepts of "locality" and "transnationality" in both sending and receiving countries. On the other hand, multi-sited ethnographies require resources that are not equally accessible to researchers across the globe.

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