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The American University in Cairo
School of Humanities and Social Sciences

**Anxious Dwellers:
Housing, Labor and the Potentiality of Tanks in Nahda**

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

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
The degree of Master of Arts/Science

By Marwa Sabah

Under the supervision of Dr. Helen Rizzo
June/2015

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ABSTRACT

The neoliberal reconfiguration of the Egyptian metropolis of Cairo has rendered the lives of the working poor in informal and destitute urban neighborhoods precarious. Over the past thirty years many of these families and communities have been resettled to new neighborhoods in desert peripheries of the city. This thesis focuses on the everyday lives of women and their networks that have been relocated to Nahda, arguably one of the most targeted neighborhoods in Cairo for relocated and displaced communities. Resettlement is a costly process especially for the working poor who not only have to deal with the physical and emotional costs of relocation, but also equally struggle to secure their livelihoods in light of a continual threat of dispossession and displacement. This constant threat for the poor is part and parcel of the neoliberal city, which is premised on the relentless drive to generate space for new capital.

Movement is an essential part of the everyday lives of the two generations of women in Nahda among whom I conducted fieldwork. In this thesis I explore how relocation to, and the perpetual mobility of populations in and out of Nahda, have shaped the ways in which my interlocutors reconstruct their social spaces, spaces in which new meanings of friendship, trust, security, home, and family are created and are constantly changing. Through their everyday strategies of emplacement, I look at how my interlocutors created new networks, which not only enable them to secure their livelihoods, but have also replaced their severed ties from their 'original' neighborhoods. I examine how my interlocutors take risks with whatever possible means attainable to them, be it marriage, selling vegetables or having a child, to survive in an informal economic structure. I explore how in their struggle for and to secure housing they both use the law to claim rights from the state and gain visibility, and subvert that same law to navigate the threat of relocation. Finally, I explore not only the effects of the January 25, 2011 popular uprising on the neighborhood, but of equal significance the relationships between precarity and "the event" (January 25, 2011 uprising) and the dreams of my interlocutors in envisioning better and other futures.

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Chapter One

An Introduction to Nahda: Dispossession and Relocation

This thesis is an ethnographic study of everyday life in Nahda, one of the new planned communities for the working poor built at the edges of Cairo over the past two decades. While there is a vast literature on the making of modern urban Cairo, such as Singerman and Amar 2009, Singerman 2009, Ghannem 2011, Bayat 2000, Sayyid and Roy 2006, Ismail 2006, Elychar 2010, most of these studies focus on inner city neighborhoods. No in depth ethnographies have been conducted in the new planned communities that constitute arguably the most significant urban transformation of neoliberal Cairo over the past few decades. Most of the existent literature has been confined to the field of urban planning. Given the state's plans to eliminate the bulk of informal communities in Cairo proper over the next two years (by 2017) a fuller understanding of the costs of resettlement are timely.

This thesis focuses on a network of women in Nahda who have been relocated from central Cairo following the 1992 earthquake. It examines how through everyday emplacement strategies these women reconstitute their social domain and how the social gets reassembled through their narratives and practices (Latour, 2005). It explores ways in which everyday practices navigate the perpetual threat of dispossession and relocation by focusing on how relocated communities struggle to make a "home" through the constitution of networks and livelihood strategies. It examines ways in which my interlocutors navigate multiple discourses of law and legality in their everyday to secure their housing and claim rights to housing from the state. Given the global phenomenon of what Harvey (2008), following Marx, terms "accumulation by dispossession," the thesis reflects on the impact of the January 25, 2011 revolution on the aspirations and hopes of my interlocutors.

Literature Review

Davis (2004) characterizes neoliberal urbanism -- capital absorption through urban redevelopment (Harvey, 2008) -- as having produced a bifurcation of the world divided into gated communities and slums. The rise of neoliberalism, which is set by market ideologies and capitalist redevelopment of cities, generates an ongoing process of “accumulation by dispossession” whereby the urban poor become displaced. Hence, the contemporary city lies at the core of the urban process under neoliberalism; it is the site at which contemporary global capitalism is managed and controlled (Al Sayyad and Roy, 2006). Amidst the neoliberal turn, these cities are shifting from economies based on manufacturing and industry to that of trade, tourism, and finance; drawing in more people from rural settings, more than they can take, and hence, more capital than they can absorb (Appadurai, 2000).

These processes have also restored class power to elites. Harvey argues: “The results of this increasing polarization in the distribution of wealth and power are indelibly etched into spatial forms of our cities, which increasingly becomes cities of fortified fragmented gated communities and privatized public spaces kept under surveillance” (Harvey, 2008, p. 15). In this process of dispossession and displacement, the urban poor are denied the “right to the city;” (ibid, 2008) which does not only entail the right to retain and obtain urban spaces, it also includes the right to participate in the city (Mitchel, 2003). The rich in these cities seek to gate as much of their lives as possible, while the poor try to carve out precarious lives on the margins. Marcello Balbo argues that

The city is splitting into different separated parts, with the apparent formation of many “microstates.” Wealthy neighborhoods provided with all kinds of services, such as exclusive schools, golf courses, tennis courts and private police patrolling the area around the clock intertwine with illegal settlements where water is available only at public fountains, no sanitation system exists, electricity is pirated by a privileged few, the roads become mud streams whenever it rains, and where house-sharing

is the norm. Each fragment appears to live and function autonomously, sticking firmly to what it has been able to grab in the daily fight for survival.
(cited in Harvey, 2008, p. 32)

In other words, the contemporary city, under the guise of neoliberalism, has gone through major urban restructuring whereby an ongoing process of displacement of squatter settlements, informal communities, and working class neighborhoods have rendered the lives of those displaced precarious. This ongoing process of urban restructuring has also led to a fragmented city with wealthy gated communities placed side by side with dispossessed communities; see also Candan and Kolluoglu 2008.

Consistent with the above argument regarding the contemporary city, in the segregated compounds urban governance is “increasingly private, non-rationally with the city, seclusion into domestic sphere and the family, urban fear and the need for security, and social and spatial insulation become the markers of a new urbanity” (Candan and Kolluoglu, 2008, p. 6). While in the public housing project, “involuntary isolation and insulation as well as non-rationally with the city, imposed through the reproduction of poverty, create a new form of urban marginality” (ibid, 7).

An integral part of the gated-ness of the contemporary city and the justification for displacement and urban restructuring is the fear of the poor through discourses of violence and crime. Appadurai (2000) describes present day Mumbai as a city that is at the loci of the practices of global capital, along with cities like Hong Kong, Sao Paulo, Los Angeles, Mexico City, London and Singapore, whereby the rich gate their lives as the poor suffer from dispossession and where “talk of crime” and fear of the poor is gradually increasing. In a more elaborated study on “talk of crime” and fear of the poor, Caldeira (2000) conceptualizes violence and fear as entangled in a process of social change in contemporary cities. These narratives of violence and fear generate new forms of spatial segregation and social discrimination

where, as Caldeira notes, different social groups especially from the upper class “have used the fear of violence and crime to justify new techniques of exclusion and their withdrawal from traditional quarter of the cities” (ibid, p 1). She continues by explaining that groups that feel threatened by the “social order-taking place” build gated communities for their residence, work, leisure, and consumption. Caldeira argues that the discourse of crime, fear of violence and hence disrespect of citizenship rights are intertwined with urban transformation producing new patterns of urban segregation, hence an apparent pattern of gated-ness, not just in Sao Paulo but in cities such as Los Angeles, Johannesburg, Buenos Aires, and Mexico City, comes into existence as a byproduct of what has been conceptualized as neoliberal urbanism around the world.

Neoliberal urbanism has generated renewed interest in urban ethnography and established a rich library over the past two decades. While the study of “gatedness” and “slums” (or informal neighborhoods) have received attention in the making of neoliberal Cairo over the past few years, few studies, especially ethnographic work, have been conducted in the new neighborhoods in Greater Cairo as these are state planned, gridded and hence outside the current interest in informal communities. Two recent works mention Nahda, Sims’s (2012) *Understanding Cairo: The Logic of a City out of Control*, and Benedict’s (2012) essay “Banished by the Quake: Urban Cairenes Displaced from Historic Center to the Desert Periphery.” While Sim’s focuses on population pressures and the state’s strategies to build social housing in outlying areas, including Nahda, Benedict’s essay describes the 1992 earthquake and the resulting displacement of working class populations and the insecurities experienced by displaced populations in forging new communities in unfamiliar spaces. The focus of this thesis, Nahda, was built as a state sponsored social housing project. According to the official webpage of the Cairo Governorate, Nahda initially

was part of Salam City¹. Salam City was built in 1977 as part of President Sadat's social housing projects for newlyweds. Nahda is located on the northeastern periphery of Cairo surrounded by well to do gated communities. It is approximately 50 km from the city center.

Escobar (2003) notes that modernity and development is always a displacement producing process and everyone is a potential target. Hence, he argues that emplacement practices are part and parcel of modern life. In neoliberal urbanism, the working poor have been targets for endless relocation with a particular intensity over the past two decades. The struggle for secure housing hence is a core anxiety of everyday life among the working poor, be it in informal communities, squatter settlements or planned formal neighborhoods in which the poor encounter the law in their everyday life. In the lives of my interlocutors, the struggle for secure housing started when their homes were deemed to demolition and foregrounding this struggle is a process of waiting for resettlement. Datta (2012) argues that the process of waiting to be resettled by the state occupies the space between the rule of law and its enforcement. Waiting, she emphasizes, becomes an unsettling experience because it is lived as a threat, producing anxiety, fear and insecurity about housing. Datta observes that these anxieties provoke a need by the squatters to “be seen as ‘legal,’ and hence shape participation in local politics, a desire to seize control of particular spaces and places of social power, and a need to reinforce ideological notions of home and family in their everyday life” (Datta, 2012, p. 11). Similarly Auyero (2012) explains how the urban poor, in their encounters with the state, learn to be what he terms “patients of the state by waiting in endless lines, which shows the workings of political domination among the urban poor and its subjective effects (Auyero, 2012, p. 6). While my interlocutors are not squatters, they encountered the same anxieties and

¹<http://www.cairo.gov.eg/areas/DistDetails.aspx?DID=%D8%AD%D9%89%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%20%D8%AB%D8%A7%D9%86>

fears in their wait. Whether waiting to be resettled or to be assigned an apartment, they become “patients of the state.”

Finding themselves eligible for resettlement by the state (due to being victims of the earthquake), my interlocutors expressed their expectations of housing (free of rent and charge) as a right and a promise from the state. Das (2011) examines how the notion of rights is evoked amongst the urban poor where most think that the state has promised them certain rights and that they have the standing (*haq*) to claim these rights. She explains that the notion of *haq* is a conflation and the mutual absorption of the biological and political understanding of the politics of life in which those who are living in illegal settlements have the standing claim to call on the state (Das, 2011).

I use Das’s notion of *haq* to explain how and why my interlocutors felt betrayed or fooled by the state for being required to pay rent (installments) for the units they were given in Nahda. I examine how my interlocutors used the language of rights in their narratives to explain their claim to the right to secure housing without payment through the discursive performance of law in their everyday life. Through the struggle to secure their homes, they started encountering aspects of law in their everyday lives in which they had to deal with lawyers, paper work, and bureaucratic offices. “Citizens encounter the state through their relationships with legal processes at the local level- proceduralism, bureaucracy, rule following, precedent setting and embodied encounters with state institutions and officials within particular spaces produces the idea of “law” in everyday life (Datta, 2012, p. 10). However, this is not the only way law is encountered in the lives of my interlocutors. Through their claim to a right to life (the biological and political in Das’s sense), I borrow Das’s explanation of law in the everyday in which it becomes through my thesis, the everyday life of law in their struggle to secure their housing.

“Though we might recognize and name something as law when the context make it stand out (e.g. in a court of law or in a legal

document), we need to put that particular moment of recognition within the flux in which notions of life and notions of law unnoticeably and continually pass from one to another. This is the flux we might name as the everyday... law as that which impinges from the outside and law that not only constitutes the social world by its power to name but also draws from the everyday concepts embedded in life—are neither stable nor impermeable.”
(Das 2011, p. 322)

Hence, as emphasized by Das, that which is defined by the state as a law is different from the everyday encounters of law in the lives of my interlocutors and what they define as law and legal.

Relocation and resettlement from inner city neighborhoods to neighborhoods on the peripheries generate new forms of relationships with the city and with the people in the new neighborhoods. Separated from their families and their inner city networks, and social life, the residents of Nahda were required to establish new strategies and networks to secure their livelihoods. These networks contributed to the establishment of spaces of economic operation in their everyday lives within which new sites and means of labor were created and in which productive relationships were generated. Simon (2004) explains that in areas that lack infrastructure or facilities, there is always a highly urbanized social infrastructure that is “capable of facilitating the intersection of socialities so that expanded spaces of economic and cultural operation become available to its residents (Simon, 2004, p. 407). Hence, the poor find ways of securing their livelihoods through social collaboration, which in turn open ways for economic and cultural gain. Thus, those networks or intersections of socialites become productive relations.

Drawing on similar ideas of networks and labor, Elyachar (2010) explores the effects of Egyptian women’s practices of sociality. Those practices of sociality, she argues, create a social infrastructure of communicative channels that contribute to the creation of an economic infrastructure. Elyachar terms this form of labor “phatic labor,” where in their social visits, ones that are not based on the intention of

generating benefit but just visits of being sociable, opportunities of unpaid labor and economic collaboration are created. Elyachar does not look at networks as “an interlocking web of individuals, individual interests or as a framework for action” instead she analyzes how communicative channels are an outcome of practices of sociality (ibid, p. 455).

Methodology and Conceptual Framework

Figure 1.1



On the walls of the worn-out blocks of Nahda, printed in black and red, a message appeared disguised in the register of a request but in effect it was a threat from the Cairo Governorate to the residents in March 2015: “Important notice, failure to pay the requested amount will result in lien or eviction.” Since the resettlement of my interlocutors to Nahda, one of the main struggles that they have been facing is that of securing their homes without being threatened. This overwhelming threat to their everyday life (loss of their right to housing) is “that which produces particular subjective encounters with practices, institution, and agents of the state in ways that are not necessarily resistant modes of action; rather these stimulate exchanges between public identities and a multitude of subjectivities in their personal and everyday lives” (Datta 2012, p. 12). Hence, my interlocutors are constantly engaging in multiple discourses on law in which they aim to gain visibility through their right to

housing, they differentiate themselves from others whom they label as “illegal” and they discursively perform law in their everyday life to secure their social domain. Datta (2012) emphasizes in her work, that while settlers seek to present themselves as ‘legal’ at all costs, at the same time they maintained a disdainful attitude towards the rule of law, its agents, and the possibilities of a fair deal within procedural justice. That is precisely where I want to draw on Das’s discussion of the workings of law in the everyday life, or the everyday life of law in the lives of my interlocutors. While they do try to present themselves as ‘legal’ (in their own definition of legal) at all costs, there are moments whereby ways to achieve rights and promises such as secure housing by the state are achieved in everyday flows and through local actors rather than through formal legal procedures. In these moments, my interlocutors found ways to attain certain rights by using the same means/powers that refuse them those rights. At the same time in the details and movement of everyday life, there is always a possibility for new ways of challenging or subverting routines and systems inherent in the workings of the law and state practices. Hence, attention to details in everyday life allows for a presentation of complex agencies at play in the claim to citizenship (Das 2011).

If we were to look at the everyday as the site on which we can track the movement of the State, performance of citizenship, and constitutive power of law, then the everyday cannot be treated as simply the secure site of routines and habits; rather it is the space on which we can see how underlying these routines and habits there is struggle to bring about newness in which we can track the working of the law for better and for worse. (Das 2011, p. 329)

She argues that the notion of law in the everyday “illuminates aspects of citizenship forged through the struggles waged by the poor for their needs” through the possibilities that emerge in their everyday lives (Das 2011, p. 319).

Amid the struggle for insecure housing, everyday life in Nahda is a struggle to secure a livelihood. My interlocutors sustain their livelihoods and their families

within an informal economic structure. I draw on Simone's (2004) notion of people as infrastructure to trace how my interlocutors created networks in their new neighborhoods as part of their everyday strategies to secure their livelihoods. Simone extends the notion of physical infrastructure directly to people's activities in the city whereby they engage a complex combination of objects, spaces, persons, and practices that become an infrastructure, a platform that provides and reproduces life in the city. Through these newly created social networks, the urban poor procure basic services and goods. To further explain his notion of people as infrastructure, Simone explicates how African cities survive through a "conjunction of heterogeneous activities bought to bear on and elaborated through flexibly configured landscapes" (ibid, p. 409). These conjunctions of heterogeneous activities, where people improvise in their interactions with one another and in which they utilize resources (bodies, objects, commodities in alternative ways) become the platform for social interaction and livelihood. "This process of conjunction, which is capable of generating social compositions across a range of singular capacities and needs both (enacted and virtual) and which attempt to derive maximal outcomes from a minimal set of elements, is what I call people as infrastructure" (ibid, p. 411).

Through these newly created social networks, my interlocutors visited one another, chatted and gossiped almost every evening. Those visits were mostly part of their practices of sociality and they were of disinterested nature. However, these disinterested visits have particular economic and productive outcomes. I draw on Elychar's (2010) notion of phatic labor to look at how my interlocutors created "communicative channels as outcome of practices of sociality" (ibid, p. 455); an infrastructure that might not be established intentionally to create forms of labor but that in its creation generates forms of unpaid labor. Phatic labor, as Elychar explains produces communicative channels that can potentially transmit not only language but also all kinds of semiotic meaning and economic value. These communicative

channels (which are created through phatic labor) become visible as social infrastructure on which other projects oriented around the pursuit of profit could be constructed. They allow for the transfer for the flow of reputation, information, and emotion as well as a realization of other, more classic forms of economic value. “The cultivation of the channels of communication through which resources could potentially flow was not economically motivated. Women’s practices of sociality operated to one kind of scale of value and then later was hooked up to a monetary scale of value” (Elychar 2010, p. 458).

This ethnographic study was largely based on interpretive fieldwork methods such as open-ended interviews and participant observation. Due to the limitations in doing research in Nahda and accessibility to interlocutors, I mostly interviewed a small circle of friends, families, and networks of my main informant, Ahlam. My field work took place primarily in one square/ compound (*morab’a*). I spent most of my time meeting interlocutors in the evenings in an informal setting, usually after open-ended interviews with my main interlocutors.

Fieldwork

This research project began as a comparative study of young divorced women without children across the socio-economic divide in Cairo. While I had easy access to women from well-to-do parts of the city, I was struggling with access to women in working class communities. The only person I knew and whose life I was familiar with was Ahlam, my main informant. She has been working on and off for my family as a cook for almost 11 years. Ahlam, who became part of our household through the years, is 55 years old but looks slightly older than her age, always dressed in dark, plain *galabeyas* and *abayas*. In our household she occupies a very specific place. Ahlam entered our lives in a way that to our family identified as “unconventional”, in the sense that she did not come to us through an employment office or through

recommendations from family or friends or from recommendations from relatives who work on my family's land. Ahlam came to us by coincidence, a moment which she identifies as the turning point in her life, when my mother found her crying alone on the deserted road of Game'yat Ahmed Orabi, a well-to do gated community close to Nahda. That day Ahlam was looking for a job in a retirement home suggested by her friends in Nahda where she has lived since 1992. She never thought of working as a cook or in a private house. When Ahlam came to work with my family, we were instructed by my mother to always be careful when Ahlam is on the phone with her family so as not to expose that she works as a cook and we were always instructed to be extra sensitive. Eventually and gradually we became involved in Ahlam's world as much as she got involved in ours. However, we became involved from afar while she was part of our everyday and so were her stories. However, she never described to us her home or Nahda.

One morning I talked to her about my research and found myself asking her if she knew anyone who fit the criteria I was looking for (young, working class, divorced women without children). Hesitant, Ahlam said she would help me yet she looked very worried. We had agreed that I would follow her lead and not go beyond the limits she set for me. She kept reiterating how she feared my father's rage if anything would ever happen to me. Back then Nahda was not yet on my mind but I could not help but wonder who lives in Nahda and why Ahlam was so scared of taking me with her.

It took Ahlam almost two weeks of asking around to find interlocutors in Nahda willing to speak to me. My first visit to Nahda was with women who were from Ahlam's extended network. Given our agreement, which was based on not exposing the nature of my relationship with Ahlam, I introduced myself to my new interlocutors as a person working on a research project and one who knew Ahlam from her pretend job in a retirement home off of Ismailia Road. By my third visit to

Nahda, a space that I hardly knew existed though it is only fifteen minutes away from where I have been living for half of my adult life, I knew that I wanted to move beyond the limited framework of childless divorced women and extend my research to everyday life in Nahda. Due to the nature of my relationship with Ahlam, that despite our closeness is laden with power relationships, one that makes her anxious and fearful for my safety and one that exposes her life to me, I was limited to research in her neighborhood and amongst her very trusted and chosen network of women.

In her description of Nahda and her life, Ahlam not only acted as my informant, she consistently acted as my translator. For example, when Ahlam and I walked around her neighborhood she called it “compound Delta.” She used the English word “compound” to explain her neighborhood to me according to her knowledge and experience of my life and my own surroundings. Only weeks into my fieldwork did I discover and understand that she had substituted compound for *morba'a* or square. Knowing and experiencing my gated surroundings and lifestyle, Ahlam chose the word she thought would facilitate my comprehension of the design of her neighborhood. Similarly in my interviews with her neighbors and friends, there were moments where my interlocutors asked her to translate what they meant when they threw in jokes or references to places or proverbs that they assumed I would not be familiar with. As my fieldwork progressed, I realized that Ahlam was not even aware that she was in a constant state of translating to me her world based on her knowledge and assumptions of mine. Towards the end of my fieldwork Ahlam teased me that she had become my teacher in life, and I her student.

My fieldwork took place in a specific square/ compound in Nahda called Delta. I conducted interviews with Ahlam’s friends, family and neighbors. The only times I went beyond those limitations was at the very beginning of my research project where I went to visit one of Ahlam’s friends who moved out of Nahda to Sherouk. Being a resident of Game’yat Ahmed Orabi, a female, and one who drives

into Nahda, Ahlam made it clear, so did everyone else who knows of Nahda, that I cannot conduct fieldwork without her or beyond her premises.²

Nahda, as a new neighborhood, has a strategic location. It overlooks the transportation infrastructure that defines the expansion of the northeastern Cairo periphery: the Ismailia Dessert Road, the Ring Road, and Cairo Airport Road. It is situated next to Obour City in which Cairo's main wholesale vegetable market and industrial zone are located. Nahda became one of the major sites for displaced communities in Egypt over the last twenty years and by 2009 it became formally by ministerial decree, an independent entity. Nahda is wedged between Obour City to the north and an international school complex (Nerfertari) to the south, and is about 15 km away from the 19,000 acre reclamation land project of Gameya't Ahmed Orabi. Most of the residents of Nahda originally came from working class districts in central Cairo such as Rod Al Farag Shoubra, Bulaq Abou Al Ela, Sharabeya, Sayeda Zeinab, Mattareya, Kal'a, and Darb Al Ahmar. Women in Nahda who work outside the neighborhood do so primarily in the factories of the Obour Industrial Zone, in the Carrefour Mall in Obour, or work as bus monitors and cleaners in the Nefertari International School, and as cooks and maids for upper class families in Gameya't Ahmed Orabi. Today Nahda remains one of the major neighborhoods in Cairo that hosts relocated/displaced populations.

Chapter Overview

Chapter two explores ways in which Nahda gets discursively produced through the narratives of my interlocutors around place of origin, othering of different communities, clusters, mobility and housing. It also examines the making and

² Sherouk City, which is located off Ismailia Desert Road 20 kilometers away from the gates of Gamyet Ahmed Orabi, and about 35 kilometers away from Nahda. Sherouk City was built in 1994 as part of the government's urban plan for social housing. Sherouk extends over 11,000 acres, of which 9.5 acres are residential. Currently, Sherouk is divided into an upper class gated community of compounds with villas, a middle-income community of public employees, and a large area at the back that houses lower income communities from downtown Cairo.

remaking of Nahda over the last 22 years through constant change and mobility in and out of Nahda and within Nahda. I look at ways in which the residents narrate a complex web of networks and affective relations in their everyday mapping of the blocks and squares/ compounds (*morab'at*) that constitute the neighborhood. Nahda is divided into *moraba'at* (squares or compounds) with four entrances. Each square has 25 blocks (buildings), and each block has 20 apartments. I draw on Escobar's notion of emplacement practices, Latour's reassembling the social and Caldeira's insights into "talk of crime" to explore how discourses of differences get mapped onto blocks and compounds, how fear, danger and friendship are navigated through these maps spatial discourses and practices.

Chapter three examines the role labor plays in the everyday emplacement practices of my interlocutors. I trace the flexibility around production in the navigation of Nahda's residents' precarious life conditions. Drawing on Elychar's notion of phatic labor and Simone's concept of people as infrastructure, I analyze the possibilities and limitations that my interlocutors articulate regarding their sites of labor for themselves and for their standing within the block/compound and community.

Chapter 4 explores how women in particular relate their everyday lives to the larger turbulent past four years in Cairo at large. In this chapter, I focus on the conceptual and physical space of *mohtallah* and the role it plays in the lives of my interlocutors. Through their perpetual fear of relocation and dispossession, I argue that *mohtallah* symbolizes a possibility in their lives that emerges materially after the January 25, 2011 revolution. I explore not only the effects of the past few years on the neighborhood, but of equal significance the relationships between precarity and "the event" (January 25, 2011 revolution) and the dreams of my interlocutors in envisioning better and other futures.

Chapter Two

The Making of the Social in Nahda

We were all bunched together like a big trash bag and thrown here. Nahda is a big garbage can! The government created one of the worst garbage cans in Egypt. As the popular proverb states ‘from every town a shit.’³
(Ahlam, Personal Interview October 2014)

This chapter introduces Nahda through the narratives of five of my main interlocutors. In particular through this chapter, I aim to juxtapose the narratives of my interlocutors who were relocated in 1992 and the way in which they reconfigure their social domain, with my other interlocutors who spent most of their lives in Nahda. I explore how the social gets reassembled through the narratives and practices of my interlocutors through the establishment of new networks and socialities (Latour, 2005). In doing so I trace how Nahda gets discursively produced through these different narratives (between different generations) around mobility, housing, power, kinship ties, and productive networks.

Finding Nahda

Driving down the Ismailia Desert Road just 15 km away from the gates of the upscale Game'yat Ahmed Orabi where I live, I took a right turn by the Nefertari International Schools complex. Driving for 5 km past the American, British, German and French schools, I ended up at the end of that long road where I parked by a newly

³*Lamoona Kolena Keda zay ma-benlem el zabala wa ramoona kolena fe kees zebala wahed. El Nahda deh safeehet zebala kebeera. El hokoma khala'et awsakh safeehet zebala fe Masr. A'la ra'ey el masal 'Men Kol karya kharya.'*

built but run down building. I tried to look for any signs for Nahda but there was nothing but big walls surrounding a long road with only one building on my right and a wall with barbed wire ahead of me. Finally I found on the side of that building spray-painted in black a notice for Al Rahma for Orphans. The building looked like it was deserted with heaps of sand surrounding it. Less than a kilometer away, around the corner, the deserted road poured into a busy space with several different side streets with over 50-parked minibuses. I found Ahlam, my main interlocutor and informant, walking in haste by a street on my right hand side. I drove up to her and she climbed in. “Welcome to Nahda!” cried Ahlam.

Before I first visited Nahda, I tried to locate it on a map to be able to understand its parameters. I assumed it was placed under Salam City, yet no entry for Nahda could be found. Even though by 2009 Nahda had become an independent city (*madina*) by ministerial decree, hardly anyone I talked to in Nahda differentiates it from Salam City. There are about half a dozen webpages including the Egyptian governorate’s official page that mention Nahda, none of which however exceed a few lines and all provide inconsistent information. Locating Nahda by car and through maps was consistently challenging, as if it does not exist or only exists in relation to its neighboring areas. Through my fieldwork I learned that Nahda was officially assigned to Salam City 2, yet amongst my interlocutors who have been relocated to Nahda as adults, and in the beginning of my fieldwork, they described Nahda as the poor, working class, and run down part of Salam City. Officially Salam City, extending over an area of 12 km with a population of 120,000 (official webpage), consists of two distinct areas. Salam City 1 is a residential area housing predominantly police officers (*zobat*) while Salam City 2 is divided into three neighborhoods, Iskenderia, Esbeeko, and Nahda. Describing Nahda as the run down part of Salam City, by my main informant and her close friends who shared similar

experiences with her, was partially due to my relationship to Ahlam which I will further discuss in the sections below.

Even though I spent most of my adult life commuting and living close to Nahda, I only learned of its existence from women I met who live in Nahda and work as maids around Obour and Gam'eyat Ahmed Orabi. The closest "developed area" to Gam'yat Ahmed Orabi is Obour, where most of the people from Gam'yat Ahmed Orabi do their shopping. Obour is a lively city that extends over 16 thousand acres. Obour hosts the city's main industrial zone and wholesale markets, affluent gated communities, residential compounds for government employees and military officers as well as an array of youth housing settlement schemes. Obour, to my neighbors and me, is where some of our friends live, visit Carrefour Mall, and the Obour Golf Club. For my interlocutors, on the other hand, "Obour is where most of our women work as maids. It is where our thugs (*baltageya*) steal" (Ahlam, Personal Interview November 2014). Until I visited Nahda, I had never set foot in Salam City 1 or 2. Among the well to do residents of Ahmed Orabi, Salam City is considered "unsafe." To my interlocutors, Salam City is where they live, where they work and where they go out. As noted by Caldeira, different social groups especially from the upper class "have used the fear of violence and crime to justify new techniques of exclusion and their withdrawal from traditional quarters of the cities" (Caldiera 2000, p.1). This fear of crime is manifested in their "talk of crime," through which they gate themselves further from adjacent residential areas. Hence, it is not surprising that my friends and I have been warned to stay away from Salam 2 and Nahda.

My first visit to Nahda was nothing short of exploring a world that exists in the desert beyond the gates and well-built roads of the Nefertari International Schools complex. Contrary to my expectations, there was not a single sign that marks the path to Nahda. I thought I would find a sign that says "Welcome to Medinat Nahda," or even a wall that separates it from Salam City, but there was nothing. Given where I

live and the way in which the contemporary city is reconstructed, I assumed that Nahda would be marked and defined just like my own-gated community. Even after numerous visits to my field site, finding Nahda remained a challenge.

There are three main entry points to Nahda; one through the road to the Nefertari School, another through the Obour market/industrial zone, and the third through Salam City 1. There is no indicator or wall that marks the beginning or the borders of Nahda, instead deserted roads eventually and unexpectedly pour into a lively community. Driving in Nahda with my interlocutor Ahlam through the Obour City entry point, I saw from a distance unoccupied buildings under construction. I asked Ahlam if they were part of Nahda, she explained that these buildings are new private investment real-estate projects for upper class families and are not part of Nahda. She added, “like the families in Obour, Game’yat Ahmed Orabi, and some in Salam, Nahda residents will end up serving and working for those who will occupy those buildings.” The unbounded space of Nahda is wedged between gated communities where most of the women in Nahda work.

Inside Nahda:

If finding Nahda is a challenge, the question of “Who lives there?” is equally so. Visiting a hair salon in my neighborhood, one of the employees, Gigi, informed me that she recently visited Nahda as she just had become engaged to a man from there. Although she lives in a popular neighborhood in Ain Shams in downtown Cairo and commutes to work, she noted, “I have never seen anything like Nahda. A city run by women, the toughest women I have ever encountered.” Descriptions of Nahda and how it gets discursively produced throughout my fieldwork differed amongst different generations/age groups of my interlocutors and at different moments of my fieldwork. Amongst the older group of women, in particular Ahlam and her friends, who spent at least half of their lives in different neighborhoods in inner city Cairo, there was a large emphasis on their experience of the relocation process and the early stages and

life in Nahda. A lot of these descriptions and discourses revolved around how Nahda consists primarily of female-headed households and is run by women. I was left with this impression for at least half of my fieldwork. Similarly, throughout my fieldwork there was a huge absence of the existence of men in the narratives of my older interlocutors which equally left me with the impression that Nahda was just run by women while men were either absent or sitting at home. Later, throughout my fieldwork, I came to realize that this is largely due to the fact that most of the first group of people who arrived to Nahda—women—had to spend weeks and months alone in their new neighborhoods while their husbands went to work in the City, or were away looking for new jobs, or were abandoned by their husbands who were unable to provide for their families after the move with the absence of employment and job opportunities around Nahda. Hence, in my earlier interviews, older interlocutors hardly spoke of men in their narratives. However, the reference to a city run by tough women or run by women is not only one premised on the above explanation; a lot of the talk that is produced within Nahda and about Nahda from the neighboring communities, revolves around the idea that Nahda is a place away from the city where lots of practices can take place and go unnoticed or unmonitored, especially amidst the constantly changing and moving life, space, and population residing in it. Practices that they deem as illegal, bad, or associated with crime like prostitution, theft, and drug selling. In this particular case, my interlocutors explained that sex labor is found easier to navigate and practice around Nahda and hence with the absence of labor opportunities at different moments in the making of Nahda as a space, especially for men, talk within Nahda and around Nahda revolved around how women supported their households through sex labor. This will be further elaborated in the next sections and chapters.

Gigi's comment relates to the above explanation because she was describing in particular her experience with her fiancée's mother in law and the older women in

his family who were some of the first movers to Nahda and who practiced power over her marriage and her fiancée. She similarly emphasized that women in Nahda performed and dressed in an excessive manner; in the words of Gigi “there was something different about the women. They seemed so tough and seemed like they did not care what anyone thought. They wore *abayas* that were too tight and too flashy with too much make up and walked like there was no care in the world” (Gigi, personal interview, April 2015).

Nahda is comprised mostly of relocated populations, most of the residents of Nahda have come from working class districts in central Cairo such as Rod Al Farag Shubra, Bulaq Abou Al Ela, Sharabeya, Sayeda Zeinab, Al Mattareya, Al Qal’a, and Darb Al Ahmar over the past twenty years in different waves and for different reasons. Aside from the relocated communities beginning with the 1992 earthquake, others bought cheap apartments when Nahda was first established as a housing project for youth and newlyweds, still others moved to Nahda in conjunction with the move of Cairo’s main food wholesale market from Rod al Farag to Obour and some bought apartments in Nahda and turned them into shops or clinics to serve the population in Nahda while they resided in neighboring communities. Until today Nahda continues to receive newly relocated populations. In the words of Ahlam: “It is the throw away place in the desert that receives the city’s left overs” (Ahlam, Personal Interview, December 2014). Hence, the continuous influx of new communities in and out of Nahda becomes a way in which my interlocutors discursively produce Nahda and how the social gets made and remade in their community.

Similar to the undefined external boundaries of Nahda, on the inside Nahda is a confusing and unmarked area to strangers like myself. The first major building or sign of life coming through the Neftertari School road entry is Nahda’s police station, a medium sized nondescript building with beat up barbed wired walls, and a few old black police cars surrounding it. The two entry points into Nahda are equally devoid

of signs. Given that Nahda abuts places such as Salam and Obour which are both advertised with large signs off of the Ismailia road and are both carefully mapped out with sign posts, street names and numbered gates, I assumed that Nahda would not be any different.

Upon entry into Nahda proper on that first visit the road got busier and busier as we drove along. I had to drive very slowly as there was hardly a boundary between the space the pedestrians occupied and the road. Everywhere I looked there were white minibuses, but hardly any privately owned cars in sight. As we drove slowly around busy minibuses and busier pedestrians, I realized that everyone who saw us was staring. I asked Ahlam for the reason and she laughed and said, “There are no women drivers in our side of the world” (Ahlam, Personal Interview, December 2014). As mentioned in chapter 1, Ahlam is constantly trying to translate her life and social domain to me based on her knowledge and experience of my life. Hence, a lot of the information she shared with me at the beginning of my fieldwork was focused mainly on Nahda as a place that housed relocated communities after the earthquake and their experiences with the move. She assumed my interest in Nahda did not surpass that point and hardly elaborated on Nahda and her life at the present until later on when I frequently visited her home and her friends.

In the late 1970s Nahda was initiated and presented as part of an urban development project. Public real estate companies were assigned to plan and develop this area. Each section of Nahda was marked and named according to the real estate company that first constructed it. These sections are divided into squares/ compounds (*morab'at*). Compounds have four entrances, with 25 blocks (buildings) and each block has 20 apartments. All of Nahda was designed in identical blocks with identical 70 sq. meter apartments until later when the residents started changing their apartments by turning them into shops, or building an extra balcony or joining two apartments together. Delta compound is named after the Delta real estate company.

About five years ago the Delta Company built another compound at the edge of Nahda called Delta A, with the same design for newly relocated communities. Today, Delta A was renamed as mohtallah (See Chapter 4). In my earlier visits to Nahda, my interlocutors explained to me how it was divided especially during the early days of Nahda. As a stranger to the neighborhood I kept assuming that compounds were gated neighborhoods, each with their specific market place and gathering area until I walked around Delta compound, my main field site and where all my interlocutors live.

Unlike my fenced in farm, the market gates at Obour or Salam City's income defined neighborhoods, Delta compound has no beginning and no end. No matter how much I walked around, I could not tell when I was stepping outside Delta and into other neighboring compounds. While Nahda, and hence Delta was initially a state planned and gridded space, documented and assigned with residential units, what remains of this gridded space today, is just the number of blocks within a compound. Names of particular areas were altered and associated with different moments in the making and remaking of that space and of the residents of those spaces. Spaces, bodies, and buildings are constantly changing and moving. While there are no physical markers defining the Delta compound, borders and boundaries are negotiated and navigated by the community through their narratives and practices. Those borders and boundaries differed in the way they were constructed over the last twenty-two years. This is best articulated in the differences in narratives between the different sets of generations amongst my interlocutors and how they talked and how they performed about and in Nahda and their compounds today compared to when they first were relocated. For example, Delta compound was primarily inhabited by relocated communities from Bulaq and Ter'at Al Selah. According to my interlocutors these downtown neighborhoods were popularly known for drug selling, hence, the Delta compound in the 1990s was known for its openly sold drugs. Cairo compound, on the other hand, with most residents relocated from Rod Al Farag (the historical site of the city's

wholesale vegetable market), during those same early years was known for its fruit and vegetable stands. Hence, amongst my group of interlocutors who were from the older generation, in their description of compounds differences, borders and boundaries were especially articulated through the discursive framework of the place of origin. However, amongst my group of interlocutors who have spent most of their life in Nahda and who were born in Nahda, those borders, boundaries and differences were articulated through different discourses; ones that have to do with types of labor, kinship ties, meanings of friendship, mobility and at times housing (apartment location). For example, while, my interlocutors reconfigured their social domain 22 years ago through the discourse of place of origin as the only border between one compound and the other, today one of the ways in which these borders and boundaries are configured is through the locations of these compounds. Take for example the Cairo and Alexandria compounds which are located at the entrance of Nahda around the main streets where the market place and the main shops are located. Amongst my interlocutors these compounds are always referred to today as the more upscale compounds with the richer community and specifically that they are the entrance of Nahda (not as the Rod Al Farag compound anymore). Living in the front row facing the main street is significant to the residents of Nahda. According to Ahlam, there are several advantages to living in the front row by the main street, advantages that I did not understand until I walked around Delta compound several times. Flats by the main-street in the front row have open space, sunlight, and paved roads compared to the rows at the back. Blocks that are situated in the back row are surrounded by rubble, with unmonitored sewage and garbage, and with no access to open space or sunlight. To people such as Ahlam, who used to sit on her balcony in Rod al Farag communicating with her sisters and mother across the balconies, the attributes of front row flats are highly valued as also the higher rent prices attest. Those who live by the main streets at the edge of Nahda are considered wealthier than those who live in the

streets at the back of neighborhood. At the very entrance of Nahda and even at the edge of Delta compound, the paved roads are somewhat even, with sidewalks filled with stationary shops, hairdressers, clothes stores, butchers, and sweet shops.

Hence, the Cairo and Alexandria compounds were no different in value than the Delta when people were first relocated to Nahda, however, when areas around Nahda like Salam 1 started being developed and occupied due to Nahda's growing population and with the Obour Market move, compounds like Cairo and Alexandria increased in value especially that people who were assigned these flats started renting them or selling them to people who lived in Salam or who moved due to the Obour market. These apartments were either turned into shops, clinics, and facilities or were increased in size by adjoining two apartments together. Similarly, with the establishment of the Nahda police station at the entrance of Cairo and Alexandria blocks, these spaces gained more value and were hence considered in the cleaner part of Nahda and at the edge. Hence, they became associated with a more developed and affluent side of Nahda. They became the "richer" compounds with the more powerful and upscale residents and the safest place to be in Nahda.

At the beginning of my fieldwork Nahda's main street looked familiar, similar to working class neighborhoods in downtown Cairo with first floor apartments turned into stores, and balconies closed to make space for another bedroom. Very quickly though I began to see the differences as I wandered beyond the front row. The more I walked into the back rows of the blocks, the stories and narratives took different shapes and forms with added layers of unspoken details. Each step into the back rows, revealed more cracks in the walls of the blocks, half constructed balconies, garbage, cats, and rubble, and for my interlocutors, confusion, fear, secrecy, and insecurity.

Figure 1.2: Ahlam's Network

Friends/First generation Nahda	Ahlam	Dalal	Aisha	Zeinab	Sabah
Daughters/Second Generation Nahda	Yasmine	Samar	Noosa		
Daughters/Second Generation Nahda	Dalia		Hend		
			Yasmine (daughter in law)		

First Generation: Broken Ties, "Place of Origin," New Networks

"I have only known these people for 22 years or so. This is the longest relationship that is possible in Nahda unless people knew each other from their original neighborhoods," Ahlam, with her humble *galabeya* looking older than her age with a slight limp from a previous car accident, comments in a low voice and a powerless tone. Using some English and some learned Modern Standard Arabic, she constantly performs educated-ness by the language she uses. Ahlam emphasizes that she comes from a *mabsoteen* (happy; connoting wealth in English) family background. Ahlam currently works as a maid in Gamey'at Ahmed Orabi. "I am originally from Rod Al Farag and that's where all my family and people were from and still are" were the first words that Ahlam chose to describe herself by. The place of origin becomes the way in which Ahlam situates and differentiates herself from others in the social space of Nahda especially in the beginning of my fieldwork. On the one hand, she constantly referred to her place of origin as a way of marking herself and her close circle of friends as different than the known reputation of Nahda and its women because of the fact that she has been working for my family for years.

On the other hand, the discourse of place of origin also marks the way in which she defines her sense of community, her networks, and friendships amid a very moveable community where she hardly has any friends left. It is also an expression of her broken ties and productive networks and social life in her old neighborhood.

Ahlam grew up in an apartment owned by her family amongst four siblings. Her father worked as a small communications liaison officer in the presidential office. Ahalm was planning to continue her education when her father suddenly died. Upon his death her family could not sustain their living expenses so she had to leave school with a technical high school diploma in commerce. Soon thereafter Ahlam married her neighbor who subsequently volunteered to join the army..

Living in Rod Al Farag amongst her family and neighbors whom she has known all her life, Ahlam felt safe. Living with her father in law and husband across the street from her mother and siblings, Ahlam was not allowed to go out or visit her family without her husband's consent, however, she stressed on how she always felt that having her family around protected her. Ahlam's husband worked as an officer in the air force, which meant that he was more at work than at home. Safety to Ahlam meant that she had her family and her people (*nas-y*) to support her whenever she needed them. If at times she got into arguments with her husband, she felt assured that "he won't exceed his limits because he has an image to preserve amongst their neighbors and family." It was hard for Ahlam's father in law to share his space with the growing family, so eventually he built them a floor above his flat. Following the 1992 earthquake, their apartment was condemned to demolition and Ahlam, her husband and their five children were relocated to Nahda. Her mother and siblings remained in Rod Al Farag. The earthquake did not affect her mother's house, and her siblings, who were more affluent than her, were able to move to newer buildings in Rod Al Farag.

Ahlam describes the move to Nahda as one of isolation (*ghorba*) and alienation (*'ozla*) from her family and friends, accompanied by a deep sense of insecurity and fear. Although she was happy to receive an apartment of her own she felt insecure in her new surroundings:

I was moved with my husband and kids and since I did not claim my apartment at the time my Rod El Farag neighbors did, I was placed in a block dominated by residents from Bulaq. I had no idea what type of neighbors I was getting. Nahda to almost all of its first residents was considered a scary place where those who were fittest or those who kept to themselves survived. It started out like a jungle, animals fighting over nothing but as a means to display their strengths. Each family was trying to protect itself and situate itself in a space that lacked everything but mostly trust and safety. (Ahlam, Personal Interview, December 2014)

While Ahlam describes the relocation process and the move to Nahda as one that is associated with fear, lack of security and the severing of kinship and social ties, there was an assumption and an expectation that since the government is providing an apartment to replace the one that was condemned to demolition, that they would live in a place that had at least basic facilities. There was also the dream of being assigned an apartment that she would own. To Ahlam living in Rod Al Farag in an old rent apartment meant that she would never move from her space; and that space meant social networks, friendships and kin connections which also translated into security, social, financial and emotional support.⁴ However, moving to Nahda was also a possibility of being assigned an apartment that she imagined she could own (based on the talk about relocation in her old neighborhood) and hence, a set of new possibilities about housing and security in her new social domain. (See Chapter 4.) However, as

⁴ Old rent law was established during former President Gamal Abd El Nasser's rule right after the 1952 Revolution. It was written to enable poor and middle class housing without giving the owner the right to modify or increase the value of the lease while also allowing the tenant the right of inheritance of the property for unlimited number of years.

soon as she was relocated, Ahlam, who assumed she would be moving to a space that would be planned and organized and with which she would be able to feel secure by being surrounded by her neighbors from her original neighborhood, realized that the place was precarious and that she was surrounded by people she had never seen from different neighborhoods. Ahlam explained to me that Nahda as a space and the relocation and what it entailed was something that she never imagined. Even though Nahda is about 50 km away from Rod Al Farag, 22 years ago there was only one bus that transported the residents of Nahda to Ismailia Road. From there they had to take and pay for at least four different means of transportation to their previous neighborhoods in inner city Cairo. The commute was costly and work was precarious. A truck delivered water once daily; there was no electricity, no markets. The distance, the costs, the energy necessary to procure life's necessities limited their ability to access their networks and families in their old neighborhoods. While in her old neighborhood Ahlam felt safe and secure by being surrounded by her friends and family, in her new space she quickly realized that her new neighbors asserted power over the space in the first two weeks to establish relations and domination.

In an argument or dispute 22 years ago, Ahlam recalls that nuclear families assigned flats in Nahda would summon extended families and networks from their 'original neighborhoods' throughout Cairo in a show of power and strength. Her greatest sense of insecurity came from the fact that she did not know what and when to expect a sudden outburst or argument. Disputes varied from children fighting over a toy to extra space claimed in the stairwell of a block.

It was very difficult for Ahlam to adapt to the new space and her new neighbors but she emphasized that she would not have been able to survive the first years of Nahda and Delta if it were not for Aisha, her neighbor. At first Ahlam was overwhelmed and intimidated by Aisha's loud voice, her ability to talk to everyone and the way in which she interfered in all the arguments and in everyone's life. Aisha

was relocated from Sharabeya and was assigned to the apartment next to Ahlam in Delta. Not long after her arrival, Aisha befriended Ahlam and started taking her around Nahda. Aisha, unlike Ahlam, used to work as a maid in apartments downtown and her husband Ibrahim was a truck driver who left her for weeks alone in Nahda to work. While Ibrahim was gone, Aisha was busy getting to know her new neighbors, helping out with pregnancies, the ill, weddings, and supporting people she hardly knew with all the money she had. In the meanwhile, Ahlam followed her everywhere. “Aisha always told me, get yourself up and let’s visit this lady or that, people have to learn to get to know one another in order for us to exist. Whenever I ran out of money, Aisha was always there to help me and whenever anyone asked her for money, she would lend him or her and when she did not have it, she would take money from me and lend it to him or her. Everyone soon trusted Aisha” (Ahlam, Personal Interview, May 2015). Through Ahlam’s relationship with Aisha, she slowly learned her way around the neighborhood and as Aisha’s networks grew along with her popularity she gained more trust amongst her new community as well as Ahlam. Years later, those visits and newly established networks became Ahlam’s clients throughout several different experiences of selling products in Nahda. Through phatic labor, Ahlam was able to secure her livelihood and her family’s livelihood for years in the absence of her husband. (See Chapter 3). Aisha was Ahlam’s only friend until Sabah moved in. While Sabah and Aisha never got along, Sabah, like Aisha, used to work as a maid downtown but never spoke of what she did until later in her relationship with Ahlam. Sabah was a loud, outspoken and ambitious woman who used to teach Ahlam new dishes to cook which was knowledge that Ahlam always wondered how Sabah attained. The relationship between Sabah and Aisha improved when Zeinab appeared in their lives. I will elaborate on Zeinab and her presence in Ahlam’s life in the next chapter. With the presence of Aisha, Zeinab and Sabah in her life, Ahlam was able to gain new networks, trust and a good reputation amongst her

new neighbors and community. Hence, years later when Ahlam got into a conflict in her new neighborhood, she was able to summon her networks from her original neighborhood and the support of her friends from her new neighborhood.

For instance, one week she saw a young child crying everyday looking out of her window hushed away by a barely clad woman. One day the six-year-old girl rushed into Ahlam's flat, and begged Ahlam to hide her. Ahlam kept her but rumors spread and shortly thereafter the woman came to her flat demanding to have the child back. Ahlam denied that the girl was there, and refused to let the woman enter the flat. The latter returned a second time with a man and the process repeated itself. By that time Aisha, Hend and Noussa's mother and neighbor of Ahlam's observed that 'thugs' were beginning to circle the Delta compound. Not wanting to give up the girl who clearly had been abused, Aisha suggested that they hide her in an empty flat to which she had the key for the night. When the woman returned for a third time Ahlam let her search the flat. Increasingly anxious, Ahlam and Aisha took the girl to the police station the next day. It eventually turned out that the girl had been sold to the woman by her natal family to act as a servant in a makeshift brothel. While at the police station Ahlam called her "Rod Al-Farag" community in Nahda, the brothel manager her "Bulaq" community, both assembled in defense of "their women" as Ahlam, Aisha and the woman left the police station to return to the Delta compound.

To Ahlam, people's show of strength through their "place of origin" and networks from their original neighborhoods were always part and parcel of the resolution of conflicts during the early years of Nahda. Hence, Ahlam's description of her relocation to Nahda marked by a sense of isolation, alienation, and fear is due to the loss of rich productive socialities. Ahlam links power and strength in Nahda to the ability to summon extended families and networks from the original neighborhood.

However, years later in her description of her block and her new neighbors, Ahlam described how she identified her neighbors, "the type of neighbors" in her

compound and their wealth, through the type of furniture and the type of floors and machines they installed in their apartments which she was able to see through their open balconies and windows. For instance, when she first moved, a lot of the people who were assigned apartments went back to the city and locked their apartments after failing to find employment opportunities around Nahda and after being unable to survive the precarious lifestyle. As soon as people started moving back to Nahda, after the Obour Market move for example, the selling and renting of apartments in Nahda began and hence began the constant movement in and out of Nahda of new people. "Nahda became a market of renting and selling apartments, only a few people I knew remained in my life. I saw new faces every day and most of the people I knew either moved to different compounds or left," emphasized Ahlam (Ahlam, Personal Interview, February 2015). Aisha died, Zeinab moved in and out of Nahda according to her marriages, and Sabah moved to several different compounds until she finally left Nahda after getting married to an old, retired rich man. Due to the constant movement of populations in and out of Nahda, Ahlam constantly felt a sense of insecurity, marked by constant movement in her community, which was much less in her stable social life in her original neighborhood. This heightened her need to practice a sense of policing and protection over her close friendships and networks. For instance, a drug selling community of young men largely occupied Delta compound. While Ahlam felt threatened by their existence, she did not try to stop them until one day one of the boys verbally harassed her daughter twice. After fighting with the boy and getting support from neighbors in her block, she secretly wrote a letter to the police and copied it to several authoritative entities. Within a few days, a sudden presence of a police convoy in the neighborhood picked up the boys. Ahlam never spoke of this incident or her action to anyone in her neighborhood fearing their reaction, but she was very happy and proud to express to me that since Nahda is a place that gathers trash from all over the city, she at least wanted to make

sure that around her area (block), her family and she can feel secure. Ahlam always took pride in the fact that her father and husband both worked for the government or army. Even though they were both in low ranking positions, she often either used their positions or talked about their positions as a way of differentiating herself even from her own friends and networks in Nahda. In instances, (which will be demonstrated later) she would use her husband's job to gain credibility or to even intimidate people who threatened her sense of security in her new neighborhood. This in particular took place when she was in dispute with her neighbor from Bulaq over the abused child. She first scared her away by bringing up her husband's position and she was able to get the police officer to sympathize with her case by bringing up again her husband's employment. Hence, to Ahlam, her family's labor within the formal sector gave her a sense of security, strength and even at times made her feel that it adds value to her social capital. This was always present in the way in which she spoke of herself in comparison to others especially within discourses of law and legality in her everyday life, where at times she often tried to police her social domain. She also made sure to highlight to me that while she is known in her compound, she calls only a few people friends, specifically those whom she has known since she was relocated. While today, Ahlam and her friends joke about Delta as a place known for drugs—due to its history—it is considered however, one of the more expensive areas in Nahda and the drug selling reputation it used to attain was passed on, especially after the inauguration of the Nahda police station in 2004, to areas such as mohtallah and areas that are less developed in Nahda. Mohtallah (the occupied) are areas in which vacant flats were occupied or squatted after the 2011 popular uprising. This will be further explained in the sections below.

Dalal, originally from Bulaq, was also relocated following the earthquake to the Delta compound in Nahda. In Bulaq, Dalal used to live with her family in an apartment building and according to her, her family was financially stable; her father

owned a grocery shop. At the age of 16 Dalal married her neighbor and soon thereafter acquired a diploma in nursing. Less than two years later, she got divorced and moved back with her family. Even though Dalal also described her family as wealthy (*mabsoteen*), soon after meeting she talked of how after her divorce she needed to support herself and her child Samar by buying and selling clothes. Through friends in Bulaq, Dalal met her second husband, a truck driver. A few years later they too were affected by the earthquake, initially living in temporary shelter in a tent in the Bulaq Club, until they were relocated to Nahda.

I would rather not speak of how life was in the tents. Those are memories that I have long buried. I could tell you though, to imagine being in your twenties with young children thrown away in a place where you know no one in a desert away from everything and everyone you know, with no food supply except for those Red Cross visits, no water, no electricity.... It was very hard. For weeks after we moved in, we had to build everything from scratch at home. I had nothing. I used to not leave home when Abou Ahmed was away at work. I would not let my son play with the kids around. I did not know who their parents were and I did not want to get into problems. Everywhere I walked I would find needles on the floor from young men doing drugs from the night before. I did not want my son to be like them or to be used. (Dalal, Personal Interview, November 2014)

In her description of early life in Delta, Dalal recalls her fear of communicating with her neighbors because she knew no one, she would spend days in her apartment because she did not feel safe. When her ceiling was leaking from her upstairs neighbors, she chose not to bring it up fearing their reactions. Similar to Ahlam, for Dalal, Nahda was like a vacuum cleaner, sweeping everyone from everywhere into this space. “I did not know where they came from or what their origins were and I was alone. I couldn’t possibly trust them to be good with my kids” (Dalal, Personal Interview, November 2014).

Consistent with Ahlam's narrative, Dalal links her sense of security and safety with her original neighborhood and her previous social life and networks. She was able to support her daughter by selling clothes to her neighbors, and also met her second husband within the Bulaq community. The relocation process required that she build new networks, yet her fear and her move away from her kin left her insecure and immobile. My interlocutors' emphasis on the place of origin addresses the emotional and monetary loss that accompanied relocation. Even though Dalal consistently talked about her original neighborhood and her struggles in her early years in Nahda, today she speaks of Delta as her home. Dalal married off all of her four daughters to men whom she witnessed grow up in the Delta compound. Although she emphasized in our casual talks and settings that she would not agree to have any of her daughters work away from the Delta, Alexandria, and Cairo compounds, she did not speak of Nahda as the throw away place as Ahlam did. On the contrary, she finds that Nahda today is her comfort zone as long as it is limited within the people she knew since she first moved. To Dalal, making new close friends outside of family and relatives and her old neighbors is out of question. Hence, I understood from our meetings that her networks and relations lie within a very limited number of people and a limited parameter; that of a few compounds. Since Dalal is more financially affluent than Ahlam, she made sure that all of her family (consisting of her brothers, sisters, brothers in law, and daughters) live and occupy three blocks in Delta that are close to each other. "I did not want to risk getting new neighbors every week. I just wanted my family close to me." While, Dalal remains skeptical of new neighbors, her daughters seemed extremely comfortable and uninterested in going to the city and spoke of Nahda as their home and where their friends are. They also got excited about new neighbors because for them it is a chance to meet new suitors. However, all my interlocutors agreed that beyond certain parameters in Nahda the community is not "safe" or like them.

Second Generation: Friendships, Trust, and Secrecy

I climbed up five floors from Ahlam's apartment in the Delta compound. The cement staircase was unpainted and rundown. Breathless, Ahlam and I reached the top of the fifth floor to be greeted by several young children running around. There were two open doors with carpets lining the front entrance to both apartments. Noosa was in her velvet *galabeya* with curly black hair tied back in a bun. Her hands were filled with gold jewelry, which rattled as she led us into her living area. Unlike Ahlam's apartment, Noosa's had big fluffy couches with maroon and gold lining. Inside the main bedroom right in front of where I sat, was a 12-inch flat screen TV. Her bathroom was newly refurbished, clean with ceramic floors and a shower. Noosa sat beside me on the couch full of excitement as Hend, her sister, walked in. Hend, was wearing a plain *galabeya* with no make up and no jewelry. She greeted me quickly before she asked me what I wanted to drink. I was offered regular tea, green tea, cinnamon, and/or a soft drink. Right before we started talking, Yasmine, their sister in law, who was wearing an *ezdal* (prayer outfit) walked in and greeted me. Between Hend and Yasmine, there were six children running around as we started our conversation.

Unlike Dalal and Ahlam, the sisters Noosa and Hend spent most of their lives in Nahda and were the daughters of Aisha. Being so close to Ahlam, Noosa and Hend were keen on greeting me in a very warm welcoming manner. They were also previously informed of my visit and were guided by Ahlam on what to talk to me about. Hence, Noosa and Hend immediately introduced themselves as originally from Sharabeya. In Sharabeya they shared a small two bedroom flat with three other siblings. Noosa went to primary school until she became sick and dropped out. Both of her brothers also dropped out from school and started working as assistants to neighborhood car mechanics. Noosa and Hend's family lost their home in Sharabeya after the earthquake; they stayed in a tent in the neighborhood's main public garden

until they were moved to Nahda. They received the apartment right next to Ahlam. Noosa, then 16 years of age, dropped out of school while 14 year old Hend continued her education in Sharabeya. “When we first moved in, there was no school in Nahda and the school year had already started. I did not want to waste time so my father dropped me off in Sharabeya to go to school on his way to work. It was a long way from home,” explained the now 36-year-old Hend.

Spending their teenage years in Nahda was not a pleasant experience for neither Noosa nor Hend. They were not allowed to leave the house unless they were with their mother, and they had no friends. Noosa, who had dropped out of school and spent her time at home recalls the dark streets, the drug dealers surrounding the block and the ongoing fights between neighbors. After two years in Nahda, Noosa married a truck driver her father knew from Sharabeya. Although the marriage did not last for even a year, Noosa notes that she could not get married to anyone from Nahda because she did not trust that her neighbors were good people and she did not know their place of origin.

Hend, unlike her sister, is dedicated to her job as nurse. She married one of her father’s fellow truck drivers from Sharabeya. Although her husband would like her to stop working and take care of their three children, she commutes every day from Nahda to Mattareya Hospital in downtown Cairo to her job, a 90-minute journey one way. Although she spent more than half of her adult life in Nahda, Hend insists to work as a nurse close to Sharabeya. For her Nahda is full of unemployed (*seya’a*) drug dealers and “bad women” (*wehsheen*). Allowing new people into her life in Nahda is something that Hend finds undesirable. “There is no need to involve new people in my life. They are not people I have known from my original neighborhood, nor are they people I witnessed growing up here. Plus, so many people go and come. Movement is a daily process in our lives so there is no point.” Noosa adds: “Even though Nahda is our home now, we consider ourselves from Sharabeya and that’s

how we identify ourselves. The first question we ask people and the first question we are asked was where are you originally from?” Ironically, Henda later told me that they hardly knew anyone in Sharabeya except one old neighbor and that they would now not find their way around Sharabeya. At the same time though completely cut off from Sharabeya, they married two men citing the importance of their place of origin in their choice. The significance here lies in the fact that their father relied on his productive networks in Sharabeya to choose husbands for his daughters because through his networks and kinship ties he could gather as much information about the suitors and exercise power in the relationships given that both husbands worked in the same profession. Today, Noosa has much stronger relationships and networks in Nahda as a non-working mother to her sister’s children. She has a right of passage amongst the older community in Delta (ones who did not move) due to her deceased mother’s reputation and networks. Noosa emphasized to me, that because of her mother’s popularity and consistent support to all her neighbors, she and her family get special treatment till this day. For example, her brothers, who currently own their own car repair workshops, were trained and given opportunities to work as assistants in the most affluent car repair shops for years due to Aisha’s support and reputation in Nahda. Noosa, at times, sends her nephews to pick up school supplies without payments until she has the time to pay herself. Hence, as an outcome of her practices of sociality, Aisha was able to create a communicative channel and social infrastructure that benefited her sons in their economic spaces. Aisha was constantly performing “phatic labor.” As both women talked to me about how much they were not interested in making new friends in Nahda because of the constant movement of people, they emphasized that they loved their sister in law because she grew up in the block adjacent to them, and hence they were able to trust her and consider her part of the family. While Noosa knows almost everyone who lives around her block (not her compound) she only closely communicates with Ahlam and a few other women and

their children who were her mother's friends. Hend, on the other hand, chose to remain engaged with the city, foregrounding her education and employment as a way to mark herself as different from the unemployed and bad women of Nahda.

Samar was busy attending to her customers when I first walked into her shop. When she was done, Samar sat down behind her desk and greeted me with a formal handshake (unlike all my other interlocutors who exchanged warm hugs and exchanged kisses with me even before we were introduced). Samar was dressed in a long black cotton dress with a matching veil that is styled carefully on top of a very elaborate hair bun lying beneath her scarf, it is elevated giving some volume to the shape of her head. Her black henna dyed fingernails complimented the chain covering her hands down to her wrist. She was beautiful and held herself with poise. In her neighborhood she is known as the "princess." Meeting me she was reserved and spoke formally, sprinkling her conversations with words such as "development," (*tanmeya*) "progress" (*takadom*), and "modernization" (*tahdeeth*).

Unlike all my other interlocutors, Samar did not introduce herself by invoking her previous neighborhood nor did she speak of Nahda and the Delta compound the way the other women did. Samar is 28 years old, holds a technical high school diploma in commerce, and is divorced with two children. Samar currently sells children's clothes and a few *abayas* in her rented shop. She was born in Bulaq but lived with her paternal grandmother close to Helwan after her parents got divorced. After finishing her diploma Samar chose to go live with her mother and stepfather in Nahda. She spent at least four years in Nahda when she met her ex-husband at a neighbor's engagement party. Samar moved out of Nahda with her husband into a small rented apartment in Khosoos (a neighborhood near the Ring Road, 30 km away from Nahda). Towards the end of her marriage Samar decided to start working from home. She started selling clothes while her husband was at work and her children were at school. When Samar felt that she needed to end the marriage, she moved back

to Nahda into an apartment that she rented in Ahlam's block. Later she moved two blocks away above Dalal's (her mother's) apartment.

To Samar, moving to Nahda as a teenager was moving to an open and fun space. Getting away from kinship ties and her previous neighborhood for her translated into fun and new experiences where there is room for new possibilities. She described Nahda, as a place of possibilities where there is room for progression, change, and a chance for women to create projects to support themselves. Given that Nahda is one of the few spaces in Great Cairo without a significant NGO presence, she hopes that NGOs will eventually discover Nahda and support women through development programs. Samar presents herself as an educated progressive woman who aspires to become a lawyer. A performance that contributed to her being labeled "the princess" and one she capitalizes on to secure her networks in a competitive environment. Selling clothes in Nahda is among the most popular forms of labor. In an economy of scarcity, there is a competitive nature amongst women over who procures the best garments and tastes. Samar capitalizes on that performance and the way in which her networks constitute her and her image to sell clothes. Although Samar is a successful example of the possibilities of creating productive networks in Nahda, she does, however, take part in the policing of her community similar to her friends Noosa, Hend, and Ahlam.

There are things we share of course, like how we feel and what we do and some of our problems but not to anyone. There are a trusted few amongst us and usually it's within our parameters but that trust does not come easy or over night. To live in Nahda, you need to learn to keep your private issues to yourself. People here talk a lot and they don't say good things about you
(Samar, Personal Interview November 2014).

Secrecy is part of the social in the Delta community. When I met Samar, we talked about her personal life and, even though she is very close to Ahlam, it was the first time for Ahlam to hear certain details about Samar's life. Because of the age

difference between Samar and Ahlam and the relationship between Ahlam and Dalal, Samar did not feel intimidated by Ahlam's presence. However, on different occasions both women commented on this particular event (Samar sharing her stories and the details that were never told before). This was not the first time I encountered the issue of secrecy in the lives of my interlocutors; for example, even though Ahlam has been working with my parents for over 10 years, she never told anyone except Sabah that she works as a cook and a maid. The only reason she told Sabah is because she confided in her first. Hence, even though Ahlam has only a few very close people that she calls friends, she has not revealed to anyone what she does for a living fearing that her friends would by mistake expose her. This type of exposure to Ahlam is considered risky for her status amongst her community and threatening to her daughter's marriages. While Ahlam expresses that exposure of the type of paid labor she performs is threatening to her status, Aisha and Sabah did not talk of their paid labor for different reasons. However, what remained a constant in their narratives is the need for secrecy even amongst friends. Samar on the other hand expressed that she chooses not to probe about what her friends do for a living because she does not like embarrassing them. In the words of Samar, "houses are full of secrets and making a living is hard. Once women leave Nahda to work, I hardly probe about what they do because we can never tell what happens outside of our parameters. But I can personally tell the good women from the bad women. It shows you know" (Samar, Personal Interview, December 2014).

Delta women and the "other:"

Samar only socializes within her compound, "because other areas in Nahda host 'different' types of people who are dangerous to deal with and who are not like us." Similar to Ahlam, Samar refers to other areas not as other compounds but "up there" "around in the isolated areas" "the dangerous areas" as if these areas are not

part of the compounds or part of Nahda, let alone their lives. Because Samar spent most of her life in Nahda and specifically amongst her family in Delta, to her, relocated populations that are placed at the outskirts of Nahda are associated with slums. From her perspective, her family was relocated to Nahda due to the earthquake but those who were recently relocated by the state are associated with life in the slum or life in illegal shelters. Hence, to her, they are dangerous thugs *baltageya* or *seya'a* (unemployed- as she defined it) clusters of people who moved together as a whole. She differentiates herself as a woman who is capable of paying rent for her apartment and shop in the more affluent side of Nahda. It is important to mention that there is a difference in value and procedure between paying rent to the state and rent to a landlord. For example, Samar pays at least 600 pounds a month for her apartment to her landlord, while people who live at the outskirts of Nahda pay 40 pounds and not consistently to the municipality. Hence, while Samar lives in a space that is a 5 minute walk away from the market place, shops, and closer to the Nahda police station, those new relocated populations live at least 15 minutes away by car where there is no market, shops or facilities.

When I asked Dalal if she feels safer today after spending 22 years in Nahda, she commented that she feels safe within the proximity of the five blocks nearest to her especially that now she has more family around her (her son, his wife, her husband's brothers and their children and wives), but that beyond those parameters Nahda to her remains unsafe. Lack of safety is among others attributed to the ongoing process of new people moving in and out of Nahda, people end up occupying spaces in Nahda that she would never set foot in and considers "dangerous." Similarly, Henda describes Nahda as a place known for "bad people" who steal, do drugs, and engage in promiscuous behavior; a place unsafe for strangers. She juxtaposes the more financially stable Alexandria and Cairo compounds with the edges of Nahda, spaces of heavy recent influx of newcomers whose residents she faults for the bad reputation

of Nahda. “ Not all of the women of Nahda are bad (*wehsheen*) like everyone thinks, its only because Nahda is like a *salata balady*, a mix of everyone and everything, open to whoever goes and comes, does it acquire this reputation” (Hend, Personal Interview, December 2014).

The discourse on the place of origin, fear and insecurity was reiterated by my interlocutors when describing people who have been relocated within the last ten years. In describing their fear and sense of insecurity from newly relocated communities, one of the main points they emphasized is that these newcomers were relocated in clusters and by that they meant that they came with their kin and already established networks and socialities from their previous neighborhoods. Hence, they are viewed as stronger, more dangerous because they were “supportive of one another and backed each other.” Within my two groups of interlocutors developing and maintaining networks and friendships amidst a constantly moving interchangeable community was very difficult. Hence, all my interlocutors felt threatened by the idea of an influx of populations in clusters because to them these new relocated populations have solid established networks that they have either lost with the move to Nahda or never had due to the constant movement of people in and out of Nahda in their social domain. Hence, this sense of solidarity and already established socialities and networks at the outskirts of Nahda is something that is increasingly threatening for my interlocutors.

Those “families” according to my interlocutors were placed at the outskirts of Nahda, where the apartments are lower rent and the space is abandoned, run down and hazardous. In the words of Samar: “Those are the people we don’t talk to. They are thugs (*baltageya*) originally from Madbah, Sakakini, and Ezbet Abu Hashish. The government placed them here after they took down their homes. They were thugs in their original neighborhoods and now they came here and continue to be thugs.”

Ahlam, Noosa, Hend, and Dalal, along with their friends and neighbors, echo these sentiments about “the new families.”

Conclusion: Discourses of Difference

This chapter traced the making and remaking of the social in the lives of my interlocutors in their everyday life in Nahda. I show how my interlocutors narrated a complex web of networks and practices through discourses of difference in their mapping of the blocks and compounds that constitute their neighborhood and how they established new networks and socialities as part of their everyday making of their lives in Nahda. My interlocutors’ reconfiguration of their social domain was premised on the idea of place of origin, and the constant reiteration of “we are from here and they are from there.” The sense of insecurity and fear that was expressed when describing their early years in Nahda was due to the severing of their kinship ties and networks from their old neighborhoods and the struggle to establish a new community in a space that was precarious. However, throughout the last 22 years, Nahda and in particular Delta and its residents were not static; they were in constant change and movement and hence the social was constantly being made and remade in the lives of my interlocutors. Due to the constant reshuffling of the community in Nahda (through renting and selling) and the influx of newly relocated communities, my interlocutors marked themselves as different through discourses of difference of which new meanings of friendships and community were established. For example, friendship and the sharing of secrets is limited to particular years and of certain shared experiences. Hence, similar to my experience of walking around Delta compound where I could not see any borders between Delta and Alexandria compounds, these boundaries are invisible. They are negotiated and navigated by members of the community whereby a form of gated-ness is created that does not have a materiality. It gets constructed through their narratives, a politics of naming those whom they do not consider part of their community as dangerous, thugs, unemployed and bad. This

form of policing of their social domain is based on a particular discourse whereby educational status, labor, wealth and location within Nahda figure largely in the process of inclusion and exclusion. This policing of community is partially due to the idea of being lumped together and thrown away from the city like excess baggage. The policing of community is a way of protecting their established productive networks and practices of sociality, especially against the reputation that Nahda holds as a space of thugs and prostitutes within northeastern Greater Cairo. Hence, my interlocutors were constantly explaining to me that they are not like the ‘others’ in Nahda. In their making of place and community they have also created outsiders, the bad neighborhoods, on the edge, in the peripheries. In their community they are trusted because they contribute to the creation and maintenance of this “good” community against the “bad community” through labor and *gameyat* savings associations (see chapter 3). Under those conditions hence, there are places in Nahda that are rendered dangerous and not to be visited, a creation of an imagined space where they can talk about the other (Simone 2004).

This sense of gated-ness and insecurity (inclusion and exclusion) was heightened in their narratives when referring to relocated communities and people who live in this imagined space, that which they have constructed as homogenous, on the edges, dangerous and scary is what becomes of the unstable fluid space(s) of mohtallah in the heart of Nahda. For the longest time during my fieldwork, I thought that my interlocutors were talking about the same people because in marking themselves as different from “others” in Nahda and its dominant reputation, they named both groups as thugs, *seya’a*, bad women who live in the hazardous areas in Nahda. One group was relocated by the state and the other is of squatters following the popular uprising. They also talked about both groups in reference to their threatening existence in clusters and their place of origin. However, towards the end of my fieldwork I realized that they talk of both communities as one and associating

with them the same attributes of the “bad” community; that of crime. Here it is useful to quote Caldiera regarding the “talk of crime” in contemporary societies:

The talk of crime works its symbolic reordering of the world by elaborating prejudices and creating categories that naturalize some groups as dangerous. It simplistically divides the works into good and evil and criminalizes certain social categories. This symbolic criminalization is a widespread and dominant social process reproduced even by its victims (the poor, for example) although in ambiguous ways. Indeed, the universe of crime (or of transgression or of accusations of misbehavior) offers a fertile context in which stereotypes circulate and social discrimination is shaped. (Caldiera, 2000, p.2)

Only towards the end of my fieldwork did I realize the very thin difference between these two groups in their descriptions of them through their narratives and this difference took form in the multiple discourses of law and legality in terms of housing. In elaboration, my interlocutors categorized those who live in mohtallah as the thieves, thugs and hence threatening because they dwelled in unoccupied spaces in Nahda. They marked themselves as different because they were assigned apartments in Nahda by the state hence, they find their presence as legal compared to those who live in Mohtallah. They did not only find them threatening or “bad” because they claimed those spaces “illegally,” but in doing so and in maintaining those spaces, they moved in clusters and summoned their friends and relatives to live in those spaces. Thus, blocks were renamed in Mohtallah from Delta A to names of people who took them over. Blocks, to Ahlam, “are owned by those smart thieves and thugs that took them over and run them like a business. For example, blocks 1, 2 and 3 in Delta are called the Sharabeya blocks and Cairo block 1, 2 and 3 are owned by Abu Matar. And across from those blocks is another thug Abu Ahmed who owns 3-4 blocks on his own. It is a business.” In Nahda’s main square where all means of transportation gather, there are specific cars that go to Mohtallah and the areas at the peripheries of Nahda. Even the cars are marked by Nahda cars and Mohtallah cars; cars going to mohtallah are worn out, beat up and have their own segregated parking space in the square.

Chapter Three

Laboring Machines

I was massaging his back all night.... until I fell asleep. Zeinab he called out. I woke up and continued rubbing his back... but what kept me going is the thought of installing new tiles in my kitchen the next morning. (Zeinab, Personal Interview, March 2015)

Life as Labor

It is a Sunday, 5 a.m., Ahlam lies on her bed with her eyes wide open. She's awake. No alarm. She has gotten used to waking up every day at the same time. She gets up, fixes herself tea with three spoons of sugar. She looks around the kitchen for bread but there is none left. After getting dressed, Ahlam wakes her eldest son Ihab, before she leaves and places him in charge of waking his children for school. On the bedside table, Ahlam leaves 20 pounds for her youngest son Hassan (unemployed and fired from his job as a security officer in Carrefour Mall because of a chronic skin disease) for household and transportation expenses. She leaves to start her day.

Its 6:30 am, just about time to catch the baker before the line for bread gets busy. Ahlam walks for about two minutes to find a long line of her neighbors in front of the bakery. She stands in line anxiously checking for the time on her cell phone. It's already 7 a.m. and Ahlam has not yet reached the front of the line. She needs to catch the 8 a.m. bus out of Nahda as buses get very busy after 7 a.m. Ahlam needs to be at the 10th station at 8:45 a.m. to catch the next stop before 9:15, when she is expected to be at her employer's house in upscale Heliopolis. She finally reaches the front of the line at the baker buys 10 loafs of *baladi* bread for 3 pounds and hurries

back home to drop them off. As soon as she reaches home, both her sons are already out of the house and she finds her daughter in law very ill. Left with no choice and time, Ahlam helps her daughter in law up and rushes to the small neighborhood clinic only to find another long line. When Ahlam reaches the front window, she pays 5 pounds to get a doctor to check on her daughter in law. After the examination, Ahlam pays another 5 pounds for the prescribed medication. They both hurry home and Ahlam finally rushes to the bus. It is one-minute to 8 and the buses are hardly visible amidst the heavy Nahda commuter crowd. One by one the buses start moving as people run to catch a place to stand in one of the over-crowded buses. Ahlam starts running, pushing and shoving until she finally jolts her way up and into the last bus. Ahlam pays the usual one-pound bus fee. Upon reaching her first destination, she leaves the bus in search for a microbus heading to Heliopolis. It's the busiest hour of the day, buses are offloading people and mini buses are quickly filling up with more bodies heading towards different parts of the city. Transferring from one microbus to the other, fighting her way through crowds of people, on and off vehicles, listening out for the call to the Alf Masakan stop, Ahlam finally finds a crowded but not full microbus and a seat. Its 8:45, Ahlam finally makes it to her final destination. She pays the driver 3 pounds and starts to head towards work. Ahlam makes it on time, enters her employer's apartment, removes her *abaya* and puts on a *galabeya* that she leaves behind to cook and clean, and starts her day. At 5 p.m. it is time for the journey back. She heads out of the apartment of her employer for that day, walks to the bus stop and finds it as crowded as she left it in the morning. "My friends," Ahlam laughs as she explains the crowds surrounding her at the station, women who in her opinion work as maids and live in different parts of Nahda. "They are not my friends, of course, but they are all like me leaving their neighborhoods to work somewhere far away and God knows what exactly they do at work or where they work, but it is just far away." She finally makes it home to catch the bus inside of Nahda. Walking back

to her place, she checks her wallet to find 5 pounds left from her day's journey and just enough to get her in and out of Nahda to another employer's home in Game'yat Ahmed Orabi the next day.

I chose to reflect on one of Ahlam's normal days. A day that just cost her 17 pounds for transportation, equivalent to buying lunch for two days for a family and a household of six persons and a bag of sugar. She started working the moment she woke up at 5:00 am until she went to sleep. Life is labor. "All the women of Nahda work," Ahlam observes in one of our early conversations. This statement left me wondering if Nahda was a place of female-headed households. However, as I delved more into my fieldwork and into the histories and narratives of my interlocutors, I realized that whether married, single, divorced or widowed, monetized labor was a necessity in Nahda to be able to survive. Forms of paid labor for women also varied at different moments, linked to particular developments around Nahda and its surrounding neighborhoods like Salam, Obour, Nefertari School, and Gamey'at Ahamed Orabi.

Like most of my interlocutors Ahlam used to depend on her husband for household expenses. When she lived in Rod Al Farag she did not perform paid labor. When her husband was away for days or weeks at a time, she was able to borrow money from her family and networks or even have lunch at her family's flat if she ran out of money. In the first few months as people started settling into their Nahda compounds and familiarizing themselves with their new neighbors, women that did work were forced to rely on their new neighbors to take care of their children while they commuted to their old jobs in downtown Cairo, which is more than 50 km away. This was not a long-term option however. Feeling helpless and stranded without money while their husbands were at work or trying to make money was a consistent narrative amongst all my interlocutors reflecting on their early years in Nahda. This situation forced them to become active in forging new networks of social support,

pool resources, and support each other in finding ways to get paid for their labor. Increasingly women succeeded in financially supporting their households, irrespective of their husbands' presence or absence. The absence of services (one plumber, no markets, and few nurses) provided women with opportunities to find new and alternative ways of managing their everyday survival. In this chapter, I will juxtapose the everyday lives, labor and networks of Ahlam and Zeinab inside and outside of Nahda. Through their narratives and histories I show how they have both dealt with marriage as part of a productive economy and livelihood strategy. I also present their flexibility around production, sociality and the development of networks.

Zeinab grew up in a low-income neighborhood in Rod Al Farag in central Cairo sharing a small rooftop flat with her parents and six siblings. When she was 16 her parents agreed to marry her to a foreigner, a Palestinian man, who saw her on the street during a brief visit to Cairo. Upon arrival in Jordan she realized that her husband lives with his entire family, brothers, sisters in law, mother in law and their children, and that she was expected to serve and clean for the family. She was a stranger and was treated as such. She was excluded from family discussions and was never told what her husband did for a living. Zeinab took it upon herself to find out what her husband's job was and right after giving birth to her first son, she discovered that the women of the family worked as belly dancers and the men as drummers. In violation of the marriage agreement Zeinab was not permitted to visit her family in Cairo. After four years, angered by her poor treatment on the part of her husband's family, she insisted on visiting her family in Cairo. Her mother in law threatened her that if she left to visit her family she would be considered divorced and would have to leave her child behind. Irrespective, Zeinab left for Cairo without clothes, jewelry, or money, and most of all, without her first-born child.

While they still lived in Rod Al Farag, Ahlam's husband, who worked for the military, was assigned an apartment in Salam City. For years they paid monthly

installments for that apartment. With the earthquake in 1992 'free' apartments became available in Nahda for earthquake-damaged households. They made use of that opportunity, were reimbursed for the installments already paid for the Salam City apartment, and moved to Nahda. Due to his work Ahlam's husband was gone 21 days out of the month and left 300 LE for the month for household expenses for his wife and five children. In Nahda, devoid of her social networks, Ahlam, like her neighbors, was unable to sustain the household and her children's expenses with the money her husband left her for the month. However, with the help of Aisha she was able to at least to survive.

Upon her return to Rod El Farag from Jordan the now 20 year old Zeinab went back to living in the small rooftop flat with her mother and siblings and worked in numerous odd jobs to help with the household expenses. Eventually Atef, the owner of a small car repair shop in the neighborhood, approached her. Reflecting on her second marriage to an already married man with two grown children Zeinab observes, "I did not love Atef nor was I really attracted to him but he had a workshop and he promised me a flat of my own in Nahda." Marriage for Zeinab and many women in Nahda is a productive relationship, one that acts as a means to provide a livelihood, that is, a space to live in and food to eat.

In 1993 Ahlam, during a visit to her mother in Rod Al Farag with her two youngest children (leaving the three older children behind in Nahda due to the expense of the bus fare for the 50 km journey), came up with the idea of purchasing goods not available in Nahda at the Rod al Farag market (at that time the largest wholesale market in the city before it moved to Obour), and reselling these back home in Nahda. Her first purchase was one basket of chicken, 12 bottles of detergent, and one basket of eggplants. She soon joined the petty traders on the sidewalk on the edges of her block selling an array of goods with her Rod al Farag purchases. On days in which no neighbors were available to tend to her children she would advertise

her goods by calling out to her neighbors from her balcony. Today Ahlam does not consider this labor of her early days work, yet it enabled her to create new networks, customers that learned to trust her products and her prices. This activity allowed her to survive each month during her husband's absences and pay for food, her children's needs, installments on missing items for her new apartment and the lawyer to negotiate the 'free' flat fees (rent) with the state. She also came to lend her new friends money when they needed it until their husbands came back. This was a reciprocal process. The more she sold, the more her networks expanded and consolidated. This is the period in which Zeinab and Ahlam met; Zeinab buying vegetables from Ahlam. By 1994 more people started moving to Nahda, and first floors were quickly turned into formal shops. That year Ahlam's husband also bought an apartment in Nahda for 4,000 LE. He had promised Ahlam that this apartment would be a shop where she can sell items to support her family during the three weeks each month when he was at work. However, due to the deterioration of their relationship following the move to Nahda, he eventually opened a vegetable shop that he ran himself.

Moving Markets

The move of Cairo's wholesale vegetable and fruit market from Rod Al Farag and the wholesale fish market from Zawiyya Al Hamra, both in downtown Cairo, to Obour, in 1994 was a turning point for the residents of Nahda. Close to the Nile River and Ramses Station, Cairo's main train station, Egypt's wholesale vegetable and fruit market, was the hub of the nation's agrarian markets. The Rod Al Farag market drew in regional farmers and traders of large agrarian families from the Delta and Upper Egypt, an important site for the circulation of agrarian capital in central Cairo. It was also the main source of employment for the residents of Rod Al Farag. In an interview with Mohamed, a 56 year old sales and marketing manager whose

brother-in-law was a merchant in the Rod Al Farg Market, he explained that most of the merchants were from Upper Egypt, especially Qena, Asyut and Sohag, who moved to Cairo to open up shops in Rod Al Farag Market. For them, as he explained, the market's location was not just their business, it was also very important as it was close to the Nile and the train station where it was easy to maintain strong familial ties to the rest of Egypt. Hence, the move to Obour was not just about losing access to the "dock"; it was also threatening strong familial connections for the merchants.

However, more drastically, the move affected the residents of Rod Al Farag who depended on the market for their livelihoods. In 1994 the state formally announced the move, offering the following deal to the merchants: for every shop rented in Rod Al Farag they could buy an equivalent space in Obour and were promised the same monopoly over the fruits and vegetable markets around Egypt. As the deadline came closer, the big merchants bought out the shops of smaller sellers in Rod Al Farag market who would not be able to move, hoping for a larger allocation of space in Obour. By the third and fourth government announcement of an imminent move the large merchants secured spaces in Obour but refused to leave their very strategic location in central Cairo. Therefore, by the fourth government announcement the merchants called for a meeting and decided to summon their family members from Upper Egypt and the Delta, assembled weapons and squatted in their market. The day the police entered to move the market, the merchants refused to leave. For three consecutive days, the merchants, their family members, and the small sellers stayed in the market refusing to leave. However, while the big merchants had already secured their spaces in Obour, small traders, squatters, day laborers around the market did not and hence, they squatted in the market along with the big merchants for it was their only hope for maintaining their livelihoods. The state reacted by sending the police and military to Rod Al Farag barricading the entrance to the market. Tanks blocked the entrance to Rod Al Farag market from Imbaba Bridge, which is the only access

for cars carrying produce from the barrages to the market. This was the first time in a generation to witness the appearance of tanks in central Cairo. The blockade lasted for three days, ending when high-ranking governmental officials met with the biggest merchants in the market sealing an undisclosed deal (Gertel 1994).

The move of the country's main wholesale food market from Rod Al Farag to Obour affected the city's economy in a multitude of ways. The big merchants discovered that the deal they made with the government was not upheld, extra spaces in Obour market had already been sold to new capital groups in Egypt's important agrarian economy. It changed the livelihoods in the neighborhood of Rod Al Farag whereby unlicensed vegetable peddlers who used to depend on selling their produce in the market's exterior on the main street, along with squatters and day laborers who provided services for the market and its merchants as a means of making a day's wage, were rendered jobless⁵. The larger community surrounding the market was hugely affected by the move. For my interlocutors, such as Ahlam, it dried up her business of transporting goods from Rod Al Farag for resale 50 km away in Nahda. The more immediate impact for Nahda though was the rise of real estate prices. While most of the big Rod El Farag merchants did not move out of the city, they did buy flats and houses in Obour and the surrounding area. Ahlam recalls:

I will never forget that time. It was in June, right before my birthday, and Essam [Ahlam's husband] who had just bought the extra apartment, decided to sell it. He wouldn't tell me why except that he told me that he no longer could afford our lifestyle. The broker knocked on my door and told me that he found someone to buy my apartment for 4,000 pounds. Can you imagine how much money that was back then? Anyway I sold it on the spot and gave the broker 200 LE. The next day, one of my neighbors called on to me from the window, and told me 'Ahlam didn't you want to sell your apartment?! The prices are skyrocketing! They are moving the markets to Obour and everyone is buying

⁵ http://articles.philly.com/1994-07-05/news/25845770_1_big-traders-peddlers-squatters

apartments for 6,000 pounds!’ I collapsed to the ground, slapped my face and told her in sorrow that I just sold my apartment the day before. (Ahlam, Personal Interview, March 2015)

The move of the Rod El Farag market to Obour significantly changed life in Nahda according to my interlocutors. For some, the increase in the value of real estate provided an opportunity to sell their apartments for a profit in which they bought cheaper apartments in other areas in Nahda and saved the rest of the money. For others, new possibilities for work emerged in the growing middle and upper middle class residential areas surrounding Nahda. Hence due to changes around Nahda, mobility inside of Nahda plays a significant role in the constant remaking of the social in the lives of my interlocutors. It affects not only their labor but movement also affects their networks, socialities, their relationships with their friends and family.

Take for instance Zeinab. Two years after moving to Nahda she was divorced from Atef and was left with no source of income with two children. Zeinab decided to buy fruits from wholesale fruit and vegetable sellers in Obour market and sold these goods on the roadside as parents drove by dropping off their children at the Neferterti International School. For others, the heavy truck traffic in and out of Obour market opened opportunities for more creative endeavors. Almost every morning lines of trucks leave the gates of Obour market loaded with baskets of fruits to be distributed around Cairo. Young men from Nahda watch and track as the trucks leave the gates. When the trucks are far enough from the gates, young men jump onto the back of the trucks and start offloading one basket at a time. One after the other the baskets form almost a straight trail between the Obour gates and the exit to Ismailia Road. Working in pairs, the partner starts collecting the baskets dropped from the truck. When at least ten baskets are offloaded and collected, the men take off and head to Nahda. Back in Nahda, the men sell the fruits baskets to one of the kiosks around the corner from Ahlam’s house, on a sidewalk that was once empty and now is fully occupied with

kiosks and booths selling fruits, clothes and vegetables. As Simone puts it, the working poor “improvise in their interactions with one another and in which they utilize resources (bodies, objects, commodities in alternative ways) that become the platform for social interaction and livelihood” (Simon 2004, p. 412).

The Marriage Economy

The move of the market adversely affected Ahlam’s business. Given her friendship with Zeinab, and her expanding social networks, Ahlam was able to ask her for help. Zeinab at that point was selling clothes she bought from wholesale shops in Rod El Farag for the wives of merchants in Obour Market and to teachers who work and live in Salam City. Zeinab introduced Ahlam to a clothes shop owner in Rod Al Farag who gave Ahlam stocks of clothes worth 2000 LE in the 1995-1999 period. Equipped with a box of clothes and a notebook, Ahlam visited her neighbor’s homes in the Delta compound, presented them with her products and recorded their purchases and payments. Based on referrals from her first clients/neighbors, ones she dealt with and trusted, she started selling in neighboring compounds. Whatever money she made partially went to her and partially to pay back her supplier. Up until that point Ahlam did not consider the type of paid labor she was performing a “job.” As her networks expanded, Ahlam was able to borrow and lend money from her neighbors when it was time to cover her monthly payments to her supplier or when she would fall short of selling her monthly quota. This continued until her husband quit his job in the military and came home demanding that Ahlam not leave the house for work. Hence, Ahlam was not able to pay back her debts to her clothes supplier in Rod El Farag. Momentarily immobile she found out that the supplier’s wife loved eating rabbit, so she bought and raised rabbits on her balcony and paid a portion of her monthly debts with rabbits. In the meantime, Essam, her husband, decided to rent a shop and open a grocery store around the corner from where they lived. It was one

of the few grocery stores in the compound. Ahlam started working with her husband and even though she lost her right of working and making her own income—something that she never desired or appreciated before moving to Nahda—her networks and relationships within her compound were strengthened. When Essam was not around, and even though he did not approve, Ahlam would provide her neighbors with their needs and would allow them to pay in installments. Ahlam's practice of phatic labor throughout the years and through her relationship with Aisha and Zeinab, enabled her to secure her livelihood in the absence of her husband.

Zeinab too decided to abandon the business when she met her third husband Ali, a taxi driver. "I met Ali on one of my visits to Rod Al Farag to get clothes. He drove me all the way to Nahda and wouldn't take a penny. We listened to Umm Kalthoum the whole ride home," Zeinab recalls. With Ali dividing his time between his first wife and children in Rod Al Farag and Zeinab in Nahda, Zeinab still had to generate an income to support her two children from Atef. With her mother having moved to a flat above Ahlam's in Nahda, and her brother to nearby Sherouk City, Zeinab was able to rely on her family for childcare to explore new ways for generating money. Back then, Sherouk City was largely uninhabited except for a few apartment buildings. On the construction sites there were no markets or venues for workers to buy food or eat. Leaving at 6 a.m. to Sherouk and returning at 6 p.m. to Nahda, Zeinab started cooking and selling food for the workers in the neighborhood. This lasted until the workers were moved to another construction site. Soon after, Ali divorced Zeinab as his first wife found out about the marriage. Back in Nahda, Zeinab went back to selling clothes, but this time she started buying men's underwear and slippers and selling them to her neighbors who were shop owners. Through her new job she met her fourth husband Saeed, rumored to be one of the richest men in Nahda. Saeed owned construction material shops around Nahda. Even though he was married, he proposed to Zeinab on the one condition that they would marry in secret.

This marriage was a perfect investment for Zeinab, even though it entailed the risk of ruining her reputation among her well-established networks in Nahda. Once married Saeed would sneak behind his first wife's back to Zeinab's apartment in a distant compound in Nahda. Yet, with both being known in the community it was not long before people started talking. With her children spending most of the time at her mother's Zeinab stopped all forms of paid labor and relied on her new husband Saeed to sustain her household. Less than a year into the marriage, Zeinab's neighbors started accusing her of being a prostitute who hosts rich men in her home, referring to Saeed. Angered and fearful for her children's reputation, she informed her neighbors that she was married to Saeed. Threatened by this act, Saeed convinced Zeinab to sell her apartment in Nahda, and rented her an apartment in Sherouk City. After selling her apartment and spending all the money on the new flat in Sherouk, Saeed, who had promised her a fresh start, divorced her. Zeinab was left with no income in a new place without her established networks. Her life was as precarious as her marriages.

Ahlam continued her pursuit of paid labor even with the presence of her husband and his grocery shop. According to her narrative, Essam was an inconsistent provider. On his trips around the city he made sure to lock the grocery store, their main source of income, before he left. Not allowed to work for money outside of home, and kept too busy with the grocery shop and maintaining her household, Ahlam only sold bed sheets and linen from home when her husband was on one of his trips. Zeinab, who was divorced for the fourth time, moved back to Nahda to live with her mother and her children when she failed to pay the rent for the Sherouk apartment. Living above Ahlam, the women grew closer and almost split everything by half including food. Zeinab was constantly looking for things to sell to sustain her household. Shortly after her return to Nahda, Ahlam's husband started pursuing Zeinab behind Ahlam's back. Being in a relationship with Essam meant daily groceries and food on Zeinab's table. The relationship did not go unnoticed by Ahlam

who chose to watch and not confront them until she was sure. The more unpaid groceries were sent to Zeinab the more Ahlam became convinced of their relationship. After a few months, Ahlam confronted her husband who denied it and left the house. Soon thereafter Ahlam and Zeinab had a confrontation. They both decided that their friendship was more important than the men in their lives. “Put between a choice of losing Zeinab over my husband, I chose Zeinab. Friendships mean to me more than men,” admitted Ahlam. Both women did not share with me this story except at the end of my fieldwork and they shared it on different occasions. “I knew what I was doing was wrong. I love Ahlam but I needed to feed my kids and I was never going to marry him. He was an awful person to her and would be to anyone but I needed to feed the children until I found an alternative,” reflected Zeinab. Zeinab then went back to selling linen and bed sheets. She used to help Ahlam by supplying her with the bed sheets and linen as they both sold in different areas to different networks. “During those days, my little notebook was my life. When Essam and I were on good terms, the pages of that little book were abandoned for days, just days. But as soon as we fought, I would visit those pages again recording everything I owed and everything that was owed to me. Every month carried its own story and its own battle and nothing felt better than crossing out the last number on the page”, reflected Ahlam. This lasted for a few years until Essam decided to close down the grocery store and live off of his retirement money. In Ahlam’s words:

The holder of the safe’s key is the one who controls what you will eat and you won’t eat daily. The kids grew older and so did their needs and life did not become any better when he closed that shop. My neighbors thought I was living a comfortable life but no one knew that I barely covered the monthly expenses and no one knew that it all depended on what Essam decided to give me or not. We fought more after he closed the shop as he was almost not present and used to leave us a lot without money and when I used to complain, each fight ended with a threat to divorce me. (Ahlam, Personal Interview, April 2015)

By 2004 Yasmine, Ahlam's eldest daughter, was studying to be a nurse and had a suitor. Ihab, her eldest son, had graduated from law school, but because Ahlam could not afford to pay the LE 900 for the syndicate so that he could practice law, he ended up working as a security guard at a factory in Obour. Another daughter Dalia was also studying to become a nurse, and the second youngest son Moemen entered the policy academy. Ahlam was eager to get Yasmine married. Even though Yasmine had many suitors, most were turned away until mother and daughter agreed on a suitor who was divorced with children. I could not understand why Ahlam chose this particular suitor for a young woman until Ahlam explained:

When Yasmine was young, she dropped a hot pot of water on her chest while I was away one day selling clothes. By the time I came back home, her skin was burned. I took her to the hospital in Salam but they told me that she needed immediate reconstructive surgery of which I had no money to pay for. I told myself, I will save up and when she is old enough to get married I will try to fix that scar. A couple of years ago, I finally took her to a doctor, who gave me a reasonable price for the operation but he told me since I did not attend to this scar right when it happened, chances of Yasmin having a normal looking chest and skin are very low. After enduring a long operation, Yasmine came out with a patched chest that was almost flattened. We both knew that to get married, she had to compromise. A man who's divorced with kids won't be as hard to please as a man who has never been married before and that was my daughter's fate. I didn't want her to be rejected by suitors once they found out. (Ahlam, Personal Interview, April 2015)

Yet again marriage for Yasmine was not about choice or love. It was an investment and in her case, given her life in Nahda and her scar, marriage at least would provide an apartment and space irrespective of who the suitor was. Marriage needed money and Essam, the father, was not willing to pay for the bridal furniture. Ahlam started buying Yasmine's bridal furniture in installments and borrowing money from her neighbors. Ahlam followed through with the wedding even though Essam did not

attend. Angered by his move, Ahlam and Essam fought and he pronounced his divorce from Ahlam. A few weeks earlier, Ahlam had heard a speech by the popular Sheikh Sharawy that if a husband pronounces divorce more than three times, it is considered a divorce and he is forbidden to touch his wife. Haunted by this information Ahlam informed her husband that by this declaration he forfeited his right to be her husband according to *shari'a*. Angered by her words, Essam left Ahlam, stopped sending her money, and would only visit occasionally to see his children. They never formally divorced, as Ahlam feared losing her apartment to Essam after her children married.

Left with absolutely no source of income except for the linens and sheets she sells and drowning in debt, Ahlam started to ask her neighbors and friends if they could help her find a job. Zeinab in the meantime began cleaning the staircases of the residential blocks in Nahda for a total monthly salary of LE 10 per apartment and offered that Ahlam work with her but Ahlam refused fearing for her social standing within her community. While Ahlam lived on loans and some support from her son Ihab, Zeinab started cleaning apartments as well as staircases increasing her income and her social networks. Ahlam took Doaa out of school as she could not afford paying for her training and Doaa started working as a nurse in a small health office in Nahda that accepted her without the technical completion of her nursing certificate. “For weeks, I was frightened every time I would hear a knock on my door. It was always someone asking for money I owed. I had to go live at my mother’s for a week with my kids and not sending Hassan to school because I did not have enough money to live on my own,” Ahlam recalls.

One day Zeinab was approached by one of her neighbors who asked her if she would be willing to tutor two young children in an apartment in Mohandeseen. Not having completed secondary school, Zeinab declined the job, but her neighbor insisted that if she can read and write, that would be enough to get her to work.

Fearing that she would be exposed, Zeinab asked Ahlam to join her in the job as long as Ahlam would agree to keep it a secret. Hence, this was the first time Ahlam left to work outside of Nahda. The owner of the apartment in Mohandiseen was a Saudi Arabian businessman married to two women who lived in the same building. Zeinab, who was dressed in a suit was immediately approached by her new employer and was offered to be a tutor for his children. Ahlam on the other hand was offered a job as a maid while Zeinab was given a tutor's job because she was "well dressed." She became *Abla Zeinab* while I became the maid! I had a technical high school diploma and she had three years of schooling and I was the maid! Just because she knew how to present herself," Ahlam shrieked as she laughed out loud.

"Fooling the system," (*tahayal*) to find ways to survive or even to fund moments of leisure is how Ahlam described their life to me. A few years later Zeinab and Ahlam put together a plan to take Zeinab's sick mother out. Both women were laughing hysterically as they recounted the story of Umm Zeinab's day out after six years of being stuck at home due to her inability to walk. Zeinab's mother wanted to go out and aside from being unable to walk, she lived on the fifth floor so it was very difficult to carry her down the stairs. Putting their minds to work, Zeinab and Ahlam came up with what they considered a workable plan and what I consider the most creative idea of making do with whatever possible means. They decided to call the ambulance, on the false claim of Umm Zeinab going through a health emergency. They coached Umm Zeinab on what to say and how to act. The ambulance arrived and Umm Zeinab followed the instructions and was successfully moved to the car. All three women were in the ambulance celebrating their success with laughter and singing, as they headed towards the hospital. Upon their arrival, Umm Zeinab was moved to a wheel chair and while Zeinab distracted the doctor with false information, Ahlam walked away with Umm Zeinab and the wheel chair. "I told Umm Zeinab, so where do you want to start your fun day visit? Should we go to the diabetes section or

the heart section?” narrated Ahlam in an excited tone. Both women laughed and I was stunned (Ahlam, Personal Interview March 2015).

One day, Zeinab well dressed for her tutoring job, was approached by one of her brother’s neighbors in Sherouk, who offered her a marriage proposal to a 70-year-old, financially stable retired man who needed company. Without hesitation Zeinab agreed and moved to Sherouk into a new apartment written in her name. ⁶ A week later, Sabah, a friend of theirs, told Ahlam that there was an old people’s home in a place called Game’yat Ahmed Orabi, where she could apply. Ahlam decided to go. Sabah and Ahlam agreed that she would go but they would keep it a secret. Ahlam knew that to go outside Nahda as a cleaning person in a retirement home risked her standing in the community.

From Itinerant Vendor to Maid

It was early 2007 when Ahlam decided to take the bus out of Nahda to head into a completely different direction than the one she was used to when going to her mother’s in Rod Al Farag. As there are no micro buses heading to Game’yat Ahmed Orabi, she took one that heads towards 10th of Ramadan City and was dropped by the first gate of Game’yat Ahmed Orabi where she waited for an hour by the security guards in front of the gate for a bus to take her inside. To Ahlam, this world in the middle of the desert, one that has security guards and almost no one in sight for kilometers, did not exist before she entered the gates of Dar Fouad, the retirement home for her interview. Overwhelmed by her surroundings and her ability to step out into a world that she considers “the unknown,” Ahlam was scared. While she fit the job description, she was unable to take the job because it required her to sleep over night. Not being able to leave her children alone or explain to her neighbors the

reason behind her absence, Ahlam was left with no choice but to exit Dar El Fouad with shattered hopes.

I walked outside the building into a never-ending desert space with hardly anyone in sight but a small building that looked like a school. There were no cars, no people, nothing but a desert. I had no hope, no one to take me home, and I had no idea where I was. I felt that my chest was about to explode. I started imagining the looks on my children's faces watching me being dragged into a police car for not paying my debts. I started thinking of what they would do without me and I found myself screaming and wailing in sobs of hopeless desperation, until a big black car stopped beside me. I took a step back in fear and confusion until the windows rolled down and I saw a veiled woman waving at me to approach her car. I hesitated. I paused. I took a step back but she insisted. I approached the window as she gently asked me why I was crying. (Ahlam, Personal Interview, March 2015)

Exhausted, scared and hopeless Ahlam told the woman that she needed a ride out of Game'yat Ahmed Orabi. The woman offered her a lift and as they started their journey out of the long desert road, skeptical Ahlam kept her silence as Manal started questioning her. Much to her own surprise, Ahlam found herself telling Manal her story. When Manal was about to drop Ahlam off, she offered her to come to her house a few times a week to cook and gave her her cell phone number. Then she took out her wallet emptied it right in front of Ahlam and gave her all the money she had. First Ahlam refused but Manal insisted. Ahlam stepped out of the car in a state of happiness, confusion, and shock. "I didn't know what to think or feel. I couldn't even make sense of that whole experience. I kept looking at the money. It was the first time I was ever given money for free. Should I pass by Obour to buy fruits for the children? Should I get them some meat? Should I save the money? I just couldn't believe myself," reflected Ahlam with tears in her eyes.

Weeks had passed and Ahlam still had found no job. She was staying with her mother, away from Nahda and the debts. She tried calling her husband to ask him for money but he refused to give her any. Every day she would wake up and dial Manal's number but as soon as she would answer, Ahlam would quickly hang up. This lasted for ten days until one time right before Ahlam hung up, Manal asked, "is this Ahlam?" and that moment marked the beginning of Ahlam's journey into Gamey'at Ahmed Orabi. Ahlam knew that she could not tell a soul about Manal and this new offer. Ahlam's decision to take up Manal's offer after weeks of hesitancy was a risk that she decided to take and one that required hiding the nature of her work and her movement even among those closest to her. Going to a place and a house she knows nothing about and working, as a cook or a maid was unthinkable. However, the thought of settling her debts and living without the threat of being imprisoned encouraged her.

It was a Sunday morning when Ahlam woke up, got dressed and headed to the bus. Throughout the ride from Nahda to the gates of Game'yat Ahmad Orabi, she was questioning herself and her decision, which she considered to be a great risk. As she waited by the gates for Manal's driver to pick her up, Ahlam considered more than once walking away but found herself getting into the car. "As the driver drove deeper into the desert, I looked around me in shock. I had no idea that this world existed only fifteen minutes away from our homes. Between every huge castle and the other are tons of empty lands. Who are these people I wondered and where is this driver taking me?" narrated Ahlam. Fifteen kilometers into the desert, the car stopped at a gate with a signpost that read, "Ahmed Kamel's Farm." The driver honked the horn several times until a man in a *galabeya* opened the gates to land with white fences surrounded by trees. Ahlam looked around as the car went deeper into the land with no house in sight yet, just palm trees and a fence. Then the driver parked in the allocated parking space with several cars and asked her to follow him to the villa. "I walked behind the

driver surprised and shocked. Again I couldn't stop thinking who are these people? I walked up a few steps leading to a huge building. The driver then led me around the corner where I saw a big pool surrounded by greenery. Out in the desert a pool and greenery! My heart skipped a beat and I panicked. I thought to myself, Manal must be either a belly dancer or married to a rich Saudi Arabian prince. What have I gotten myself into!" reflected Ahlam as we both laughed out loud.

Since that day to the present Ahlam works as a cook in Manal's house. To her neighbors and family, (except for her daughters) she leaves every morning at 7 a.m. and returns at 6 p.m. sharp from her job in a factory in Obour or from a retirement home off of Ismailia Desert Road. She lost track of who she told what over the years. She would never have the driver drop her off in Nahda fearing exposure in front of her neighbors because she believes that if they found out where she really goes, they will lose respect for her and it will affect the stability of her children's marriages. Working as a cook, Ahlam was able to settle her debts, buy Dahlia's bridal furniture, pay for Ihab's syndicate ID, and pay for Hassan's private lessons. Amongst her neighbors, she became known to be a person who can follow through with the local savings associations and occasionally help out with loans. She gained social capital in her compound, one that she fears losing. When I asked how she maintained her secret for that long she told me, "We all work. Whether in or out of Nahda. Everyone knows that there are bills to pay because we live in the same place just with different issues. We would rather not know what happens outside the boundaries of Nahda" (Ahlam, Personal Interview, March 2015). Even though Ahlam refuses to share with her friends the nature of her labor, she finds it the most liberating and financially rewarding experience she has ever had and does not wish to work in a factory. She explained to me that working as a cook, she is able to negotiate her working hours and vacations. She also makes extra money when Manal has a big dinner party, where her guests tip her each 50 pounds, which amounts to almost 30 percent of her monthly

salary. She also is able to get loans from Manal when an unexpected crisis takes place. Ahlam is now perceived amongst her community as an educated person with inventive dishes and ideas. Even though Ahlam's quality of life, according to her, improved, she still wakes up every morning at 5 a.m. to start her life of labor. She still supports her unemployed son whose wife is expecting a child. She is also housing her divorced son and supports her grandchildren. When Dalia, her second daughter wanted to get divorced and left home to stay with Ahlam, she was the one who sent her back to her husband as she could not afford to support Dalia and her children or even baby sit them as Dalia went to work.

With Ahlam working outside of Nahda and Zeinab living full time in Sherouk, they see each other less. However, they occasionally visit or talk. Zeinab lived for five years with her fourth husband who was hoping she would give him a son. Having a child with her older husband, she secured not only a pension after his death but also an inheritance. Zeinab gave birth to her last son soon after her husband died. A couple of years after her husband's death, Zeinab used the money to buy her oldest son a microbus and sent both her younger sons to a good school in Sherouk. Soon thereafter she informally re-married Saeed, the construction merchant. Refusing to support her sons, Saeed divorced Zeinab a second time. A few years later they re-married and got divorced again. While Zeinab admitted that she had a soft spot for Saeed, his repeated refusal to pay for her household was the overriding factor in Zeinab's decision regarding their relationship.

Taking insight from Simone's (2008) notion of the creation of networks in this chapter, I compared Ahlam and Zeinab's lives to show how their networks enabled them to creatively secure their livelihoods in their precarious everyday lives. Zeinab and Ahlam "hedged bets" (ibid) or took risks evaluating what is worth investing in, be it men, clothes, tomatoes, or even having a child. Marriage, in their lives, acted at times as a productive relationship and at other times as a livelihood strategy but also

one that is as precarious as their selling of vegetables around the corner from one of the largest fruit and vegetable markets in Egypt. Both Ahlam and Zeinab experienced marriage as a way of survival and one in which they could secure a house. For Ahlam, Essam's importance was in keeping the apartment, if she divorces him she loses the only place that she has to live in, a place which she is already in constant threat of losing by the state. Even though Ahlam and Essam could lose the house at any given moment because in actuality they have not been paying rent and because the unit they are living in is not in their name, Ahlam's understanding of the law in her everyday life revolves around securing her house through having an electric bill in her name, which renders her legal and visible, and by being married to Essam, she can stay in the house for the children. For Zeinab, marriage was introduced to her as a livelihood strategy when she was 16 years old and it continues to be her first resort as a means of survival. It is always a risky choice, a gamble, just like all of her other laboring activities that she took on, however, it was the one she does the best. It was also the only way she could secure a house for her children.

Living in Nahda both women found ways to engage with their spaces, objects, and surroundings in conventional and unconventional ways to secure a livelihood. It is a constant act of improvising and one that relies heavily on productive networks and socialities. Through phatic labor (Elychar 2010) Zeinab and Ahlam were able to forge connections and networks that unintentionally became a platform of economic value that was vital for the preservation of their livelihoods. After all, they were both able to procure ways to sustain a livelihood and their families within an informal economic infrastructure. While Zeinab's deceased husband's inheritance at least covers her day-to-day expenses, Ahlam's current employer similarly acts as a form of secure coverage for unexpected expenses.

Hedging bets and taking risks allowed these women to survive. Over the years, though, the consolidation of reputations within the community had a price, or

rather was an investment that also curtailed their options. Ahlam, for instance, through her successful performance of an educated middle class woman succeeded in becoming a well-established, powerful member of the Delta block. Walking in the streets of Nahda with her, buying goods in shops, Um Ihab as she is respectfully called, is always treated with courtesy, offered a chair and tea, and always puts her purchases on credit. She displays this power to her family and her community. Today she heads the savings association; the cultural capital that she has accumulated requires careful maintenance and limits some of her options. For instance, unlike her friends she remains legally married to Essam despite his failure as a husband on any conceivable level, and still lives in the same Delta block that she first moved into twenty-two years ago. Concerned with her moral reputation, for instance, she continues to let Manal's driver drop her off at the edges of Nahda to not invite gossip and keep the secret of her employment. Growing up her daughters were never permitted to go on beach trips with my family as this would have required an overnight stay, and hence threatened her secret. Her main fear was that if anyone found out that she works as a maid she would never be able to marry her daughters to men in Nahda.

Zeinab likewise hedged her bets through her marriage strategies. A survival strategy that gave her some stability, but always only temporarily. Today she is back in Nahda. Their friend Sabah, another early Nahda arrival was luckier. Sabah always worked as a maid, she did not advertise it, as the market in Nahda is a competitive one. The only person that she ever shared her maid resources with was her friend Ahlam. At the same time Sabah allows her employer's Orabi driver to drop her off after work in front of her house unlike Ahlam. This has prompted Ahlam's eldest son to suggest that his mother stay away from Sabah as he is convinced that Sabah is having an affair with the driver. Sabah's first husband was very ill. Unable to afford a hospital, on her way to work she abandoned him in his wheelchair in the early

morning hours in the front of the hospital gate. She went to work. He died that day in the hospital, producing a huge scandal in Nahda. However, one week thereafter a neighbor asked her if she would be interested in marrying an 80-year-old man who wants company. She immediately agreed. Today she lives in the well to do Zeitun area with her elderly husband, forbidden to visit Nahda. However this marriage allowed her to marry her two daughters, both having previously gotten scandalously divorced after one week of marriage, to middle class men far away from Nahda. Given her husband's age, and his adult children from previous marriages, he has agreed to give her property in her name. At present the once voluptuous, fun loving, woman is on a slimming diet, barely recognizable, sharing stories of her new life and property on the phone with her friends in Nahda.

Chapter Four

The Every Day Life of War: Imagined Rights, Unfulfilled Promises

The government dominates us but we teach them
lessons in life.
(Ahlam, Personal Conversation, May 27, 2015)

“It was like World War II in the streets of Nahda,” on Friday January 28, 2011, reflected one of my interlocutors. Known as the Day of Rage, the third day of the revolution was the bloodiest according to my interlocutors as people from all over Egypt took to the streets in response to police and state brutality. “Gunfire filled the air and everyone was going crazy at the cross roads,” Noosa recalled when I asked her about the January 25 revolution (Noosa, Personal Interview, January 2015). Noosa, Hend, Yasmine, Ahlam and I were sitting together talking about the revolution over tea on one of our evening visits. For Noosa, Hend, and Yasmine, the revolution left them with a sense of loss of orientation and insecurity. This sense of loss and insecurity was linked to memories of looting, gunfire, and violence in Nahda. The most significant day for all three women during the popular uprising was Friday January 28, the day the Macro Supermarket in nearby Salam City was looted and people from Nahda attacked the Nahda police station. “One of my neighbors from a few blocks behind me, saw me in the street on the night of the 28th when everyone was going crazy. He yelled at me ‘Ahlam! Ahlam!’ and as I turned to look at him I realized he was carrying a door he stole from the police station. Then he told me, ‘come and fetch yourself a desk! There is so much you can take home with you.’ I was surprised,” Ahlam recounts theatrically as all the three women started laughing (Ahlam, Personal Interview, January 2015). The women were arguing with excitement over who’s going to tell me the most intriguing story from that night.

The morning of January 28 all four women were going to a funeral of a neighbor who had fallen off his balcony the day before while trying to fetch one of his son's t-shirts from his downstairs neighbor's extended sunroof. "Following the funeral, we were planning to purchase some things at Macro Market, as it was a Friday and it's our fun day out together and we needed a change of air. On our way, we ran into my brothers who were just coming from the market and they told us that Macro Market was in the process of being looted by thugs and thieves. We then saw people running with boxes of cell phones, TV sets, and everything, everything you can imagine," said Noosa (Noosa, Personal Interview, January 2015). More narratives of trucks parking in the middle of the night offloading boxes of stolen goods to be sold the next day and lots of tales of different neighbors stealing items and Macro Market being emptied to the ground, were shared amongst us as the women *both* laughed and condemned the acts of robbery. The more I asked them about who they thought were the people who committed theft that day, the more their accounts differed. Initially the answer I received was that these were thugs (*baltageya*), thieves (*harameya*), and the unemployed (*seya 'a*) of Nahda. As the conversations unfolded narratives began to emerge concerning neighbors and friends. The initial obligatory condemnation of looting quickly gave way to an unspoken sense of understanding manifested through laughter. "That neighbor of mine who stole the door, was a carpenter. He probably needed the door, although its wrong and I was shocked, but he hardly makes any money," explained Ahlam. "I knew some of the people who took electronic devices. Young men wanting to get married and found a chance to make easy money. Of course I don't talk to them but I know them," said Yasmine (Yasmine, Personal Interview, January 2015). The women made sure to let me know that they found this act extremely unacceptable to their moral values and made sure to explain to me that they had no direct affiliation with such people. However, they were also not entirely consistent regarding the act itself. There was an

unspoken sense of an unjust world in which people living in Nada had the right to have those items in order to establish tolerable lives.

This tension between what is appropriate in conversation with an outsider, their own sense of moral norms, and their complex everyday lives emerged throughout our conversations regarding life in Nahda during the popular uprising. This is consistent with the multiple discourses of law and legality that they use to differentiate themselves from others. I understood that the reference to the thugs and the thieves was always and consistently linked to those who live in *mohtallah* and on the peripheries of Nahda. After all, in this transitional political climate, discourses of differences and legality emerged as a way to protect themselves from any sudden police or state raids on Nahda. Even before the popular uprising, Nahda had a particular reputation that could be threatening to the labor and livelihood of some of its residents who work outside of Nahda. After the popular uprising and the violence that took place, this sense of threat and even attention to Nahda as a place that houses “thugs” (given the connotation it holds precisely after the uprising) increased my interlocutors’ sense of insecurity and hence heightened their need to differentiate themselves from those people and any “illegal” acts. However, illegality takes on a different meaning and performance in the everyday lives of my interlocutors. In moments when they are not carefully trying to prove that they are not from the “bad” community of Nahda is when their explanations to me as to why those acts of burglary or violence took place are closer to how they really feel. While the loss of order due to the absence of the police and the resulting insecurity featured significantly in my interlocutors narratives, at the same time given that working class communities such as Nahda are at the forefront of police repression in the everyday, their stories as they unfolded featured a much more complex memory of the uprising in Nahda. For instance, their stories of confrontations between neighborhood men and police were justified due to police brutality and corruption, while at the same time

neighborhood men involved in these struggles were always called thugs. After the uprising, all my interlocutors pooled their resources to install expensive metal doors in front of their wooden apartment doors because they felt more threatened by the acts that took place en masse during the days of the popular uprising. However, when I asked them whether or not they felt safe before the revolution, they all told me that they always feared being robbed or killed. They also mentioned how they stayed at home for days, especially after the curfew. In their narratives, they explained that their brothers, cousins, fathers, husbands and sons created popular committees to protect their compounds but on the edges of Nahda and in areas which are considered conflict zones, the areas bordering Obour Industrial Zone, and Obour Market, thugs were lined up in their own popular committees with weapons, stopping cars and minibuses entering Nahda to check for policemen to kidnap and torture. This will be further explained in the conclusion.

Towards the end of our discussion about the police, safety and vengeance between the police and residents of Nahda, Yasmine casually asked the other women if they remember when the police went around Nahda with a decapitated head of a drug dealer displayed outside the car window. “No! It wasn’t one of the men from Nahda, it was one of the Arabs who live behind Nahda,” corrected Hend. Surprised and struck by the fact that two hours into our conversation this event happened to just be mentioned casually just when I am about to leave, I insisted that they tell me what happened. The women explained to me that during and right after the popular uprising anger, hatred, and vengeance dominated the air between the police and the people around the whole of Nahda whereby, as they described it, the police force was “broken” and their power and grasp over the community and the whole of Egypt was questioned. Two years after the onset of the revolution, and after the fall of President Morsi in July 2013, the police started coming back with force and aggression in certain areas around Nahda, especially at the edges of Nahda abutting Arab Bedouin

land. I asked the women who are the Arabs and why do they live there, and Ahlam explained the following: “The Arabs belong here more than us! They used to live in all those lands until the government started pushing them back deeper into the desert to build housing projects. When we first moved to Nahda, there were problems between some of the people of Nahda and the Arabs, but eventually we got used to one another.” “They don’t come to Nahda much except to the market place, added Hend. “A lot of them are involved with drug dealing and sometimes they steal our clothes at night,” Noosa added. The women proceeded to tell me the story of the decapitated man adding missing parts and pieces of one another’s narratives in order to give me a full picture of how the event took place. According to them, a popular Arab drug lord was stopped by the Nahda police at a random checkpoint at the upper end of Nahda close to Obour, Cairo’s most important industrial zone. When the police were checking the car, the drug lord stepped out and gunned down the police officer. Less than a week later, the police raided the Arab tents and set their places on fire after arresting that drug lord, killing him and decapitating him. That night, police cars roamed through Nahda, one of which displayed the Arab drug lord’s decapitated head. It was the most intense challenge of the police that the residents of Nahda witnessed since the revolution, and it is one that echoed through the lives of its residents. The women proceeded narrating the story of the decapitated drug lord by adding the involvement of the Nahda residents in the story. When the Arab tents were set on fire, their sheep roamed around the edges of Nahda in frenzy. Some of the residents of Nahda “stole” these sheep, as narrated by the women. The next day, the Arabs sent a warning call to the residents, threatening them if they do not return the sheep, they will lose a man for every stolen sheep. The women laughed hysterically as they ended the story by telling me that all the sheep were returned.

Even though, my interlocutors seemed to present in their narratives moments of conflicts between Nahda and its surrounding spaces, like Salam City, and Obour

through the popular uprising and the preceding years, these conflicts between Salam City, Nahda, and Obour are sites for social struggles that take place in their everyday lives. These social struggles did not exist just before, during and after the popular uprising, they continue to exist through the current military regime.

For three of the women (except for Ahlam) the popular uprising was centered on the significance of January 28th, the Day of Rage, and its aftermath. Their articulations revolved around how life was more stable, safer, and there were more jobs before January 25. Yasmine, an unemployed housewife and Hend and Noosa's sister in law, was at first confused when I mentioned the revolution. To her, those days reminded her of how she was locked up at home afraid to set foot outside of the house because of the constant gun fire and the tanks she saw on that Friday. For Yasmine, life went back to its usual order except that her husband is having problems finding clients for his car spare repair shop in Herafeyeen. For Noosa, the revolution was a sense of loss, chaos, and fear for her sister's children. As we were sitting sipping our tea and after we stopped talking about the revolution, Hend's oldest son, Hamada walked in. Noosa introduced him to me and only then she remembered to tell me about what happened to him and their most traumatic event during the days of the revolution. All four women started telling me the story of how Hamada, 14 years old, got shot.

It was around 6:30 pm, when Hamada asked Noosa if he could go visit his paternal grandmother a few blocks away. After he finished visiting his grandmother, Hamada decided to pass by the cyber café before going home. As he was about getting ready to leave, Hamada heard gunshots. Scared, Hamada, hid in one of the corners of the room. Suddenly he was attacked and shot. Noosa, Hend, and Yasmine were sitting at home waiting for Hamada to arrive. When he was late, Noosa and Hend went to look for him. As soon as they started walking in around their compound they heard that Hamada was shot. Shocked and in a frenzy, the women got into a taxi

and rushed to the nearest hospital where Hamada was taken. When they arrived they found him lying on the side on a table drenched in blood and left without attention. To get a doctor to see him, the women had to pay first. Hamada was in a coma for almost two weeks and when he regained consciousness he could hardly recognize anyone for another couple of weeks. “My grandson Youssef is one of Hamada’s best friends. When he found out that Hamada couldn’t recognize anyone, he came to me and told me in a manly attitude, ‘just let me be with my buddy and I know what I will tell him to help him remember,’ giggled Ahlam as the other three women laughed. I wanted to share the laughter but I was left traumatized and horrified by the story. Hend took notice of the tears in my eyes and the look of horror drawn on my face as I stared at Hamada (who never fully recovered) and told me, “we laugh about it now because come on, there is nothing we could do about it, but those were definitely hard days.” Like the story of the decapitated man, Hamada’s story was not at the forefront of our discussion. His illness, after being shot, was a traumatic event in the lives of his family members but one that was told in the middle of our discussion. Hamada’s, who is not mentally fully recovered, story is now part of the everyday. What becomes of Hamada and his future given his life and options in Nahda?

For Hend, the revolution revolved around fear for her children as an added hardship to her already hectic life. She talked less of theft and violence and talked more about her fears for her children especially after what Hamada went through and of the changes she endured in her everyday life. Hend’s husband started spending more time at home during those days. Less work was available as he feared transporting goods with his truck, fearing he would be held accountable if he was raided or stopped. Hend used to use three different sets of transportation to get to work, one of which is a specific microbus sent by the hospital. For months after January 25th, Hend had to walk for 20 km daily when she was five months pregnant with twins in order to reach the first available transportation to her work place.

Staying at home was not an option. The trip back to Nahda, for Hend was even more difficult as fewer and fewer forms of transportation were available to take her back before nighttime.

During the popular uprising in 2011 the residents of Nahda rebelled against the state and what they perceived as social injustice. At 6 pm on Friday 28 January 2011 men from around Nahda and Salam City met outside police stations at exactly the same time and lit up car tires in an act of protest and rage. Throughout the night people from both sides were injured and died in large numbers. I was expecting my interlocutors to talk to me about their roles, ideas, and even dreams, aspirations that these events unleashed. Irrespective of the oppressive political climate in Egypt during my fieldwork in 2015, and the anxieties on the part of my interlocutors not to stray from the official state discourse regarding 2011, the fact remains that for the residents of Nahda nothing has changed in their daily lives. On the contrary, things got worse as they variously commented.

To the women, my background, and overall appearance does not go unnoticed. This is also ever present in my relationship with Ahlam. Given the fact that Ahlam works for my family, there is an already existing and default power relationship between me and her. Introducing me to her world renders her vulnerable as she worries for my safety in her neighborhood and also the impressions I get about her life, friends, and social space makes her anxious because both dynamics threaten her main source of income: her job with my family. Similarly, due to the power relationship manifested in the form of wealth and class differences between us, my presence in her space could possibly represent the state or a power that is of the same threatening nature. Even though Ahlam's friends do not know the real nature of my relationship with Ahlam, being in their presence as an outsider of Nahda from a completely different class background, one that represents power, had an effect on our communications, choice of narratives and language they used when talking about the

popular uprising. This is exemplified through their choice of talking about the popular uprising through only one lens, that of the looting of Macro market and the looting and burning of the police station and in the way in which they chose to describe those events. The contradictory feedback about the looting and burning of the police station and Macro market, between terming those who were involved as thugs and simultaneously justifying those acts, indicates how my interlocutors policed their narratives around me again adhering to the hegemonic moral order and the way in which those events are being represented and reproduced in the popular discourse on the revolution. Similarly, Ahlam describes those who looted Macro market, as *saye'a*, which she defines as the unemployed, and hence commit acts of vandalism because they have nothing better to do. Ironically, Ahlam's son is currently unemployed and living with her because he cannot find a job that would accept him with his physical/skin condition, yet when she wanted to describe to me what she means by *saye'a* she brought up unemployment.

However Ahlam, right after the popular uprising in 2011, told me how she despised the police and how she was shocked at the type of brutality and inhumanity that they possessed. Back then, she clearly spoke to me of police corruption, their involvement in drug distribution in the neighborhood, their humiliating and threatening techniques and how she considered them inept for their role in society. She did not find them to be agents of safety and security. In our discussion on the role of the police in the lives of my interlocutors during and after the popular uprising, their narratives were inconsistent. During the 18 days following the uprising, the police, especially in Nahda were termed and dealt with as oppressors and the violent agents of the state. However, with the unfolding of events over the last four years, the discourse on police brutality shifted to that of police offering safety and security and restoring order to the country. Currently, any critiques of the police or demonstrations are deemed an act of treachery against the state. Given the precarious life conditions

of my interlocutors and their sense of insecurity towards the state whether through their rent situation or even through their daily lives, their accounts on the role of the police are censored and consistent with that of the popular discourse. Speaking about the police openly in my presence or even publicly could render their already vulnerable existence weaker and puts them at risk. Hence, they policed their narratives to a large extent, especially with me, because of the inherent power relation between us. Given the unfolding of events after the popular uprising and the current military regime, and with my presence as an outsider, there is inherent tension in the narratives of my interlocutors as they talk about the popular uprising and the police. Not only is there tension in the narratives, but also the memories of my interlocutors are reworked, presenting police as the symbols of safety and security and the popular uprising as that of failure and hardship not one of promise and change.

Even though Ahlam talked a lot about the day Macro market was robbed and the moment when police stations were burned down and robbed, she spoke more of her space and surroundings that changed after the uprising. Ahlam lives three rows to the back of the front street. Her apartment does not get exposed to sunlight but she used to have a small empty space that she enjoyed right outside of her window. To Ahlam, the revolution was a hope for her to fight for her rights, to be heard, to have an easier life and that she expressed to me in a series of different aspirations, one of which was to have the right to keep that space outside her window free of any buildings. However, a few weeks after the revolution Ahlam was confronted with a group of people building a small mosque (prayer area/*zawya*) with a public bathroom right in the small space outside her window between her block and the next block. Ahlam felt like she could not protect her space and there was no one to go to report such encroachment. According to her, the Muslim Brotherhood backed them. “Mafeesh hokomma, mafeesh hay, ihna mohamasheen! (There is no government, no municipality, we are marginalized!)” yelled Ahlam as she complained to me (Ahlam,

Personal Interview, January 2015). Walking around Ahlam's block and into the market place, we walked along a huge sidewalk along a street that led to main streets of Delta block. The sidewalk was populated with randomly installed booths and kiosks of fruits, vegetables, clothes, accessories, furniture, and sweets. The place was lively but was not to be compared to the shops, which were neatly lined up and installed on the main street. *Sha'aby* music was booming through loud speakers connected to intertwined wires of electricity running haphazardly between the booths. Shop sellers were shouting and presenting their products and prices in one synchronized shout as the crowd of neighborhood pedestrians strolled by.

“Look, all these booths were not here before the revolution. No one dared to occupy this sidewalk. It used to be so easy to walk to the main street across those sidewalks but now I have to walk all the way around and through these shops to get to the main street. After the revolution, all those people found an opportunity to take the space and the land without any papers or legality. All those wires of electricity is stolen from the government,” pointed out Ahlam in disgust. Moments later she told me that she likes to take her grandson out as a reward for studying in this area. Ironically, Ahlam disapproved the act of taking this sidewalk without proper procedures and papers, yet its where she goes to shop and where she takes her grandson for an outing, and, around 20 years ago (as mentioned in chapter 3) when she needed to find ways to support her family, she used those same sidewalks, without papers and procedures to sell chicken and vegetables that she bought from Rod Al Farag market. Again, in this instance, Alham is describing to me her space and expressing her thoughts to me about changes in Nahda, in a way that she believes would help me understand her world and in a way that she assumes would be agreeable to my politics given the power relation between us. It is also the way in which law gets discursively produced in the everyday lives of my interlocutors. What Ahlam is describing is the establishment of informal booths and shops in areas of

Nahda. Those booths and shops are again for her, more of a reason why at any moment the municipality could raid the neighborhood asking for proper contracts of which she does not acquire for her own apartment and of which she finds ways to escape so she does not end up paying rent. To Ahlam, thugs similarly took over an empty piece of land, which was turned into a small amusement park with a café that is opened for lovers and promiscuous behavior. She explained how no one dared to speak against the shady café because the owners were thugs and they threatened anyone who tried to threaten the existence of the space. It seemed to me by the end of my fieldwork, that anyone who squatted or took over space without any sort of payment or paperwork is considered “illegal” or a thug because she defines being legal and hence having rights through paper work such as an electric bill.

It was on my first visits to Nahda that I stumbled upon what residents term *mohtallah* (the occupied), areas in which vacant flats were occupied or squatted after the 2011 popular uprising. Ahlam, my primary interlocutor, and I had just parked outside her friend Gameela’s shop on the ground floor of a four-story building located on the corner of a busy intersection. As soon as Gameela got into the car she started giving me directions to her niece’s place. We drove for about 5 minutes on busy crossroads, navigating a flow of pedestrians, traversing beaten up roads until we turned onto an unpaved ramp. We drove higher and higher into a quiet seemingly deserted area with hardly any cars in sight. Driving very slowly on stones and rubble we eventually stopped on an empty street with broken down unpainted buildings. “Where are we?! Ahlam questioned Gameela in a frightened tone. “In *mohtallah*”, Gameela replied casually.

For the first few weeks of my fieldwork I thought of *mohtallah* as a fixed place beyond the paved roads of Nahda proper consisting of unoccupied, unfinished state owned housing units that were squatted during 2011. However, as I came to

quickly learn, *mohtallah* refers to clusters of squatted flats that are spread throughout abandoned and deserted areas in Nahda.

From the first day I started my fieldwork in Nahda, my interlocutors constantly referred to spaces on the edge of Nahda as dangerous hosting mostly thugs. In the narratives of my interlocutors, *mohtallah* sometimes is depicted as a specific place that they condemn and distance themselves from. At other times, *mohtallah* emerges as part and parcel of their place-making practices dispersed throughout the planned community where friends and family reside. In their everyday lives and relationships with the state, my interlocutors and those who live in *mohtallah* are implicated in the same dynamics and historical moment defined by precarity and insecurity. Their everyday lives on the one hand, consist of ongoing processes of waiting and endless paper work to secure legal housing, and on the other hand, everyday life consists of different possibilities whereby they are always part of this struggle of emplacement that can take forms of 'illegal' practices. While *mohtallah*, can be read as political resistance following the January 25, 2011 revolution, I show how *mohtallah* conceptually symbolizes the everyday lives of my interlocutors and their relationship with the state through the discursive performance of law in their everyday lives and in their struggle to secure housing. This is manifested specifically through the condition of being perpetually under threat of relocation and potential dispossession. *Mohtallah* physically and conceptually is a space that my interlocutors both fear and revere. It is hence, a materialized manifestation of their fears and dreams.

During the popular uprising, perhaps, the creation of *mohtallah*, the movement, was celebrated, as all my interlocutors at one point considered moving or sending a son, cousin, or a relative there for free space. Four years later, *mohtallah* and its residents are described in the narratives of my interlocutors as thieves and a small percentage of very poor populations. Not only is their memory reconstructed to

adhere to the hegemonic moral order in the current political climate, that which renders them more vulnerable, celebrating such a movement especially in my presence is too risky. In addition amidst their current struggle to keep their apartments, in light of nonpayment of accumulated back rent makes them extremely insecure and fearful, hence criminalizing those who live in free of rent spaces is not surprising.

Everyday Life of War

“We live a life of war...every day is a life of war,” Ahlam comments. The move to Nahda from inner city neighborhoods for my interlocutors is a narrative over determined by a sense of loss and dispossession. The state’s promise of a 70 square meter apartment in Nahda was to compensate for the loss of social networks, feelings of safety and a sense of belonging. The dream of owning an apartment, one that was not in danger of collapsing, an apartment from which they could claim as their own, was what made their initial relocation bearable. The promises to start a new life with secure housing was a risk they took despite the loss of social and financial networks, the loss of jobs (due to the distance) and the struggle to develop new livelihood strategies. Yet, shortly after they moved into their new apartments in 1992, my interlocutors discovered that they would not own their apartments without payments and rent.

My interlocutors encounter with the law (state) and their claim for rights is a consistent and present theme in the narratives of my interlocutors that is often negotiated and navigated through their everyday lives and choices. From the moment her inner city apartment was subjected to the demolition decree, to the moment when she first arrived in Nahda to receive the keys to her apartment, Ahlam today speaks of how she thought the government was looking after her and those like her. Tensions in this belief started surfacing when she entered the new apartment to find that the

promises given to her about a place ready to be inhabited were not fulfilled. The challenges started as they entered their new place 22 years ago to find that all of the appliances needed repair. With only one plumber in the whole of Nahda to fix the supposedly new equipment, Ahlam and her family paid him 50 pounds to get him to attend to their new place. Between having to pay for the transportation of their furniture, and securing their food, Ahlam and her husband barely had enough money to support their family for the rest of the month. Having barely survived the first month in Nahda, the couple had to face another unfulfilled promise, the demand to pay rent for their apartment which foregrounded their relationship with the law and multiple discourses of legality in their everyday lives.

Twenty-two years later Ahlam notes how the government fooled them (*el hekooma dehkhet aleynaand*). In the same breath, however, Ahlam also deploys the state's language in describing the fractures in the social domain of Nahda, sorting the various compounds between those abiding by the rules of the state (the deserving poor) and 'the thugs' (drug sellers and the unemployed). Hence, their everyday life is conceptually and physically a *mohtallah*. This sense of abiding by the rules of the state and desiring to maintain this relationship, I argue, is driven by their own sense of insecurity, vulnerability and fear. Hence, they are constantly in a state of negotiation whereby on the one hand, they want to gain recognition and visibility by the state by claiming they are 'legal' through electric bills, for example, and on the other hand, by considering squatting in an apartment.

"Threat to everyday life [that of losing their homes] produces particular subjective encounters with the practices, institutions, and agents of the state in ways that are not resistant modes of action; rather these stimulate exchanges between public identities and a multitude of subjectivities in personal and everyday lives. This can take shape through a range of methods that attempt to reinforce, subvert or challenge the force of law in everyday life." (Datta 2012, p. 4)

Hence, while my interlocutors constantly differentiate themselves from those in *mohtallah* through multiple discourses of law and legality (that acquire a different meaning to them than that of state law), in practice the way in which they secure their housing is 'illegal' (according to the state) and hence they are subject to eviction.

When my interlocutors first arrived in Nahda, it lacked a market, streetlights, water, a school, and had only sporadic informal modes of transport. While Ahlam and her friends thought they would be moving to a place where they could carry on their everyday lives with their only challenge being away from their networks, instead they had to find new ways to secure food, live off a water supply that was offered only once a day, and endure days without electricity. While eventually basic infrastructure was established, incomplete services lasted long enough for them to be forced to find new ways of securing their everyday livelihoods by whatever possible means. It was not uncommon for husbands to leave for days either to work or to look for new jobs. It was also not uncommon for husbands to be at home after losing their jobs due to Nahda's distance from their previous sites of employment and the difficult and costly commute back to the inner city. The cost of food, and not having their families and networks to rely on for financial support, such as for instance *gameya* savings associations, brought tensions to the familial relationships. Some husbands, in a state of desperation, abandoned their families, divorced their wives, or agreed to allow their wives to look for work. The dream of having a secure space, an apartment of their own much bigger than what they used to live in, for most of my interlocutors was crushed by the reality of their everyday struggles of survival in Nahda and most of all the latest threat of dispossession.

We were required to pay over time and sometimes we were told that we don't have to pay anymore but months later after not paying we would receive a letter asking us to pay, leave or be imprisoned. This went on for months until we were finally told not to pay and it remained like that

for 15 years. Today, I just received a letter asking me to pay for 22 thousand pounds in late payments! I endured a lot to keep this place and I am always feeling threatened by the idea of losing it. (Ahlam, Personal Interview May 2015)

While my interlocutors constantly differentiated between themselves and those who lived in *mohtallah*, in essence they both struggle for visibility and secure housing and they both call on the state through their claim of the right to housing (in the case of my interlocutors, without rent or, in the case of those in *mohtallah*, the struggle is over having even the right to claim those spaces).

Borrowing from Das:

Practices of law are then not necessarily found in spaces, objects, and rules that can be identified unambiguously as belonging to the domain of law such as courtrooms and legal documents. Just as we might observe the force of law in legal contracts, we might also track it in the everyday practices of promising- so we might see how affective force that particular legal concepts acquire might be traced to the notion of life, not only as a social construct or an entity to be managed by the State, but also in the insistence by inhabitants living in illegal shanty settlement, that they have moral standing to call upon the State. (Das 2011 p. 322)

Mohtallah is a label with powerful potentialities. In a place where communities were relocated by the state and cramped in apartments while overlooking empty spaces owned by the state, the move to occupy those spaces and naming them *mohtallah*, signifies a form of power, the power to claim a space that they feel is their right. The people in Nahda are living in precarious housing conditions whereby they are always under threat of dispossession. Whether it is through being unable to pay back rent, and/or being unable to pay current rent due to unemployment, the people of Nahda were promised a place to own after their relocation but that promise was not carried through by the state.

Relocated communities in Nahda were not given contracts to their apartments. The process of relocation was managed through a multiplicity of governmental offices. They learned, in the words of Auyero (2012), “to be patients of the state.” First a committee was sent by the municipality that informed residents, whose flats were condemned following the earthquake, that they would be relocated. Then a survey committee sent by the corresponding municipality determined how many persons would be living in a residential unit. Following that process, residents were given a paper with a serial number of a residential unit in their new neighborhood which they took to the corresponding municipal office to collect the key. Throughout that process residents were promised ownership of the apartment, however, they were never given a contract nor were they ever given the chance to review the terms of a contract. Hence, the often-repeated discourse in their narrative is that of the unfulfilled promise by the state. Even though, they do not have contracts, over the years apartments were sold, bought, and rented using electric bills. Hence the only way my interlocutors could claim their rights was through the law and techniques of subverting the same laws that could lead to their eviction.

Ahlam’s journey for securing a house since the 1992 earthquake was nothing short of a long struggle of waiting, of navigating and negotiating ways of being seen as legal while finding ways to subvert that same law to achieve what she perceives as her “legal” right (*haq*) to housing. Insecure housing thus becomes a threat to Ahlam’s everyday life.

Violence is produced and reproduced in the everyday lives of those waiting to be resettled, or those waiting for legitimate tenure, or even for those waiting to gain accessibility to housing. Ahlam’s struggle for housing started, after she discovered a large crack in the walls of her apartment post the 1992 earthquake. Following her neighbors’ suggestions and advice, she went and reported it in the Rod Al Farag police station. A week later, a representative team from the air force inspected the

neighborhood and recorded the buildings that were damaged or destroyed by the earthquake. Following this visit, the Ministry of Housing sent a survey committee to Ahlam's place to document how many persons were living in her apartment. On that same day, she was asked to pack and was given the option to temporarily stay in a tent in Rod Al Farag's club until she received her residential unit in her new neighborhood. The process took a week in October of 1992. Ahlam refused to stay in a tent with her family and decided to live with her children between her mother's place and her father in law's apartment. On June 5, 1993, Ahlam finally received her paper with her residential unit in *Masaken Al Zelzal* in Mokattam. It took six months for those papers to arrive, six months of living between two different places and caring for four children who were in school. The wait produced a lot of anxiety, insecurity, instability in the lives of Ahlam and her family. Most of her friends and neighbors from Rod Al Farag and those she later got to know in Nahda had endured the same wait, some even worse, living in tents in public gardens through the winter and summer. Ahlam and her friends were told that they had to wait because the government was not prepared to resettle all those that required housing after the earthquake, they ran out of apartments and had to build new ones for the remaining families.

By the time Ahlam went to Mokattam, she had already heard of Nahda and she knew people who had moved there. Upon arrival to Mokattam, she feared for her children's safety commuting to school in Rod Al Farag. Back then there was one main road to Mokattam and she found it hazardous. She preferred moving her children to a school near where she would live in Nahda. Of course, this was based on the assumption that Nahda was far more planned, ready and organized than Mokattam. Thus, in an informal agreement, which was set as an option by the housing office in Mokattam, Ahlam and a family who were given a residential in Nahda exchanged apartments. The exchange required a lawyer, by which each side would sign a waiver

to the other, whereby they could have authority over the apartment but the apartment would remain in the name of person who first claimed the residential unit. Even though Ahlam and the new family exchanged apartments, they did not go through the paperwork because, according to Ahlam, her husband was too lazy. After moving to Nahda, fixing her new apartment, which was lacking any proper facilities, re-painting the walls and installing ceramics, basically paying all they had in making their new space habitable, after seven years, the family from Mokattam approached Ahlam's husband and asked for their apartment back. According to Ahlam, she thought they wanted the apartment back because they have heard that the prices for selling apartments in Nahda were continuously increasing especially now that Obour Market was well functioning and bringing business into Nahda. Ahlam's husband agreed without consulting Ahlam, and went and signed the papers in the presence of a lawyer.

I was enraged when I found out. I lost control and I started threatening my husband with anything I could possibly intimidate him with to get my apartment back. He expected me to suddenly pack up and leave. He expected me to move my kids from their schools, to lose the money I paid in remodeling the apartment, to lose my friends and networks and the life I finally recreated and just move. I told him that I would kill myself before doing that and if he did not fix it I would take matters into my own hands. (Ahlam, Personal Interview, May 2015)

Alarmed and anxious by the insecurity of yet again being relocated and after being ignored by her husband, Ahlam first went to the lawyer's office. She threatened him as well. "I told him that if he does not find a way to contact those people and undo those papers that I would kill myself and my children before anyone steps near my apartment and before doing so I will scream and say that he kidnapped my husband and threatened him to sign the papers," expressed Ahlam in angry voice (Ahlam, Personal Interview, June 2015). I was shocked at Ahlam's words and her

performance. In eleven years and even throughout my entire fieldwork she had constantly presented herself to me as a broken weak woman who hardly fought for her rights. I always knew that this was just her performance in front of me because of the power dynamic inherent in our relationship. However, I was shocked when she finally decided to show a side of herself that she never displayed before. According to Ahlam, the lawyer decided to kick her out and was not threatened. Thus, she decided to go visit the family in Mokattam and try her threats there. Taking Sabah along, Ahlam confronted the man's wife. First, she discovered that they did not fix anything in the apartment, which further enraged her because the thought of giving up her place for another that was not remodeled was too much to bear. The women got into a huge fight which was finally put to a halt by the husband after Ahlam threatened that before they set foot in her place she will make sure to tear down everything she remodeled. Finally, they reached an agreement whereby the husband paid Ahlam money for the remodeling she did for her apartment and they signed the exchange/waiver papers. Right before her second move, Ahlam's neighbors in Delta started to ask around the compound for any available spaces for sale. They found her an unused apartment in the same block she used to live in and found a way to reach the owner (the person whose name is recorded down in the municipality for that residential unit). She then sold the Mokattam apartment through another waiver (power of attorney to sell to self or others) and bought the Delta apartment through another waiver. In this whole process of selling and buying, Ahlam and the others did not have a contract and by living in an apartment that was recorded in another person's name, they had no claim to it except through that waiver. While this process of paper work constantly made Ahlam anxious over possibly losing her apartment at any given moment, it also helped her in finding ways to subvert the law so that she would avoid paying back rent.

Until Ahlam moved into her new apartment eight years later, she was never notified that she had to pay rent. According to her, during the resettlement processes no information was given regarding payments for those apartments. Instead rumors circulated that because of the supposed amount of aid that was given to Egypt for the victims of the earthquake, those who were dislocated would not have to pay. Ahlam's language changed from that of a promise given by the state to that of a rumor of no payment throughout my fieldwork, but was constantly reiterated as a right. The promise however, was a consistent story from all my other interlocutors. She told me that it was agreed upon by her neighbors that no one would go ask about rent or payments so that the government would not remember them and ask them for anything. "We always said, even if they do, we will just refuse to pay or just stall the payments, after all they can't kick us all out, we are too much for them to handle," said Ahlam sarcastically (Ahlam, Personal Interview, June 2015). Soon after, the municipality sent warning letters to the residents of Nahda asking them to pay the back rent. They were required to pay 40 LE for each year missed since they were first resettled and for the present year. The warning was alarming. There were those who went to pay, others who refused and others who found a way to subvert the system so as not to pay. Given the already precarious life conditions of the residents of Nahda, paying back rent was too much to handle and to a huge extent most people did not pay or just paid for a month and stopped. Ahlam for example, was able to get away with not paying rent for the moment. Even though in her own words she expressed how she constantly gets this nightmare of being kicked out of her apartment, she was able to hide beneath the fact that the residential unit is another person's name. Hence, when the municipality did not receive payments, they randomly picked out names from their records and went to the chosen families door to door. The families were threatened either to pay or to leave. When that did not work they were threatened with imprisonment. Those who were chosen and did not pay, would rush to the offices and

pay a down payment just to prove that they were obeying the rules as evidence for the court. However, months later, they would fail to follow the payment schedule. “I always felt threatened by the fact that I can’t pay the rent. It has reached almost 15,000 pounds but if they ever found out I could always pay the person 500 LE to buy me time. I wonder however, if there is a suit filed against me or my husband in Mokattam that we are not aware of,” reflected Ahlam.

This discussion with Ahlam left me with a need to ask a question regarding the tension in Ahlam’s narrative regarding the residents of *mohtallah*, which I find important to quote at length:

Me: I want to understand what is the difference between you and the people who live in *mohtallah*?

Ahlam: They took something that was not their right (their *haq*).

Me: So you find that you have a right and they don’t? How come? You have dealt with the apartment and rent by subverting the law. You said it yourself that you are not following the law.

Ahlam: I was placed in Nahda by the government. And I have legal rights. I am legal because I inserted a gas line with a receipt that I pay for. That I can use to prove that I have rights. They don’t.

Me: But you are paying for gas under another person’s name and that’s how you get away with not paying rent.

Ahlam: Through the waiver, she allowed me to have the right to install the gas line. This way I am legal. If those who live in *mohtallah*, went to apply for gas or electricity, they won’t be able to because they are no one. They don’t exist. They don’t have papers. I have papers. I have the papers from the former resident and the waiver. They just jumped into empty apartments.

Me: But I told you about what the lawyer said about those who first settled in *mohtallah* and I told you that the government placed them there.

Ahlam: I doubt it. I am sure that lawyer was paid money to say so to help these people get rights they don’t have. (*That was Ahlam’s experience with her lawyers, law, and bureaucratic agencies.*)

Me: No, he is a good lawyer and wasn’t paid.

Ahlam: Well, what he could say and would be fair, because I don't believe his story and I was there... what he could say is that these people live in a country that does not provide for the poor. They live in a country where it is so hard to find a place to sleep. Where they don't have enough money to pay for an apartment. Because truth be told, not all of those who live and lived in *mohtallah* are bad. Some are just simply trying to find a way to live and a place to live. And can't afford otherwise. So this would be a good defense for them to be legal like us. But I assure you no one was kicked out and was placed in *mohtallah*. Those who protested outside the ministry after the revolution were people who paid installments for years to get housing and were given none by the government.

Me: What makes you so sure?

Ahlam: Because I know! All of the Nahda is rented! Everyone rents in Nahda and everyone lives with those waivers. You know what? If the government made *mohtallah* legal the next day, all those living there will sell the apartments for double the price and they will buy elsewhere and make really good money! This is not just about legality! This is about gaining the best deal out of what is available and making the best out of it. I will prove it to you when it happens! This is a market! And this is the way in which we sell and survive. By the way Marwa, the government takes lessons from the people not just the other way around! They dominate us but we teach them lessons in life. Let me give you an example: When we first moved to Nahda, all the people who received units on the first floors, turned those units into shops. Some even sold those shops later to bigger traders from downtown Cairo and made so much money. A few years later, guess what the government did? They assigned all the first floor apartments to shops not for housing. We teach the government how to be resourceful. These units were worth 20,000 pounds but when they were sold by the owners they were sold for 100,000. We do what we need to do no matter where they throw us. The government felt that they deserved this money so that's why, after learning from us they turned those units into shops with higher value. Those in *mohtallah* once they gain rights, they will use those rights and they will sell the units for a lot of money. They didn't even have a right to be there and yet they squatted and sold the walls! Thieves!

Me: You still find them thieves? Weren't you just saying that you all find ways to survive and make do with what you were given from opportunities? Didn't you find a way not to pay rent?

Ahlam: Yes! But I am not paying because Egypt was given a lot of grants for those units and yet they still required me, who barely makes enough money to go through the week, to pay back rent!

Me: Then can't you see that those living in *mohtallah* have their justifications, too?

Ahlam paused. Bit her lips. "However, if the government came to my door and found me I will pay whatever I have, even if I had to sell my clothes to keep my unit."

Me: Didn't you say, you would shut them up with 500 pounds earlier?

Ahlam: Yes, I did but I still believe that I have the right to be there and those who squatted don't have the same right. Most of them are thieves and *baltageya*.

Me: And when your son wanted to have an apartment and waited for years and was given none, if he would have not listened to you and went to squat in one of those apartments would you call him a thief?

Another pause.

Ahlam: I am suddenly regretting my choice of not squatting and of forbidding my sons from taking this chance. I just feared that the tanks would come and kick them out but aren't we all in the same boat? I don't know. But come to think about it, I could pay 2,000 pounds for a unit there now and rent it until the tanks come. At least it would cover some of my expenses. Until the tanks come.

Me: Maybe you should (Ahlam, Personal Interview, June 2015).

According to Mohamed Abd El Azim, a lawyer at the Egyptian Center for Civil and Legislation reforms (ECCLR), a rumor spread around Nahda following the January 25, 2011 revolution regarding rents and housing whereby the owners of the apartments believed that they will lose their apartments to their tenants. A rumor that was based on a discourse of social justice that circulated around particular neighborhoods in Cairo. In a state of frenzy, the landlords kicked the tenants out which ended in the displacement of 1,600 families. Those families rallied outside the governorate office asking for their rights. It is important to mention that these families were from relocated communities, who have expanded and rented in Nahda to live closer to their nuclear families and social networks. For weeks they waited but they were left unattended. To get rid of the clusters of people waiting outside the governorate's office, they were promised temporary housing in a neighborhood called Hykstep (30 km from Nahda). After three months of temporary housing in a place that

Abd El Azim termed uninhabitable, the people demonstrated again. Finally they were resettled by the state to unoccupied spaces that became known later as the *mohtallah*. Unlike the 1992 recollection process, in 2011 these families were not given papers with a serial number to a residential unit, nor are these units connected to the electricity grid. From the view of the state these spaces and these people do not exist. As time passed more people moved into those spaces of unoccupied apartments in Nahda.

For years, people in Nahda attempted to create the conditions to generate resources to rent or own a place. Take, for instance, Ahlam's son Ihab. After getting married, Ihab wanted to move with his wife into an apartment close to Ahlam and his social networks. Currently Ihab works as a lawyer; he makes around 2,000 pounds a month. Rent alone varies from 300-700 pounds according to location of the apartment. Deciding to buy an apartment over monthly installments, instead of losing money by paying rent, Ihab applied for a residential unit in the municipal office. For five years he waited to be given a unit. He visited the office twice a week in the hope that they would give him an answer. Finally one day he was told that to secure a reservation for a unit he had to pay 20,000 Egyptian pounds and wait his turn. Ihab's dream of owning a space of his own, one with legal tenure, one that would offer a sense of security, was dashed. When his neighbors started moving into the free of rent unoccupied spaces in Nahda, they reserved a whole block for him. "I won't lie. I was about to move to *mohtallah*, at least I would be saving 500 pounds a month. But then I stopped because I can't risk my job or lose my place on the reservation list," admitted Ihab. Just like Ahlam and my interlocutors, Ihab deals with *mohtallah* as spaces that are under threat of being emptied by the state, yet he does not live any differently than those who reside in those illegible spaces.

By the time the walls of Nahda carried warning messages of eviction or lien, lawyers such as Abd El Azim approached residents of those squatter settlements. Abd

El Azim explained to me that even though their chances of winning the law suit is very thin, “we decided to file those suits to prove to the state and everyone that if the people of *mohtallah* were truly *baltageya*, they would not be referring to the law to gain access to their rights to a place.” In our last conversation I had with Ahlam in May 2015, I shared Abd El Azim’s initiative to help residents of the *mohtallah* with her. She smiled and said, “No matter what they do, no law will help them. The tanks are coming and they will soon be all wiped out of there.”

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The neoliberal city has the perpetual need to free up space for new capital investment whereby an ongoing process of displacement of squatter settlements, informal communities and working class neighborhoods have rendered the lives of those displaced or relocated ever more precarious. In the last two decades, neoliberal Cairo has gone through major urban restructuring of which increasingly more communities have been displaced or relocated to the Cairo Northeastern corridor. Academic research has focused on informal neighborhoods in Cairo, with few studies examining the constant relocation of communities to Cairo's desert peripheries. Of these recent spaces, is Nahda, which is arguably becoming one of the most targeted neighborhoods for relocated communities in the last two decades.

Given the state's plans to eliminate the bulk of informal communities in Cairo proper over the next two years (by 2017) attention to the costs of resettlement are timely and important. To gain a fuller understanding of the impact of resettlement on the everyday lives of relocated communities, it is imperative to examine how the social gets reworked in the lives of those communities. In looking at the everyday lives of a group of women and their networks in Nahda, this thesis aimed to examine how these women reconfigured their social domain given their relocation. Nahda, is not just a space that hosts relocated communities, it is also a space that is constantly being made and remade through movement. It has become a transit site for populations seeking housing. The movement and fluidity of Nahda, has affected the

way in which the social gets configured in the lives of my interlocutors. This constant reshuffling of the social has generated tensions between different populations in Nahda and has as a result shed light on ways in which different generations have engaged different meanings of home, family, friendships, networks and labor in their everyday lives and in the way in which they configure their social spaces.

With the constant rearrangement of the social amongst different generations new meanings of fear and insecurity pertaining to housing emerge. For example, amongst the generation of women who first moved to Nahda, two decades ago, their understanding of housing and security—born in the Nasser period and raised during Sadat’s rule—is that of which is provided by the state, whereby their expectations of the state is to provide housing or alternative housing when a crisis such as an earthquake takes place. Movement, to large extent did not configure in their understanding of home and social community for a large portion of their lives. Hence, relocation to Nahda and the way in which the social is constantly reshuffled due to constant movement of populations in and out of Nahda gets shaped into different forms and meanings. These reconfigurations get presented in their narratives through discourses of fear and difference and they get translated into practices in the form of policing their communities. In comparison, the younger generation in Nahda—who grew up mostly during the Mubarak era and amid the political unrest following the January 25th, 2011 popular uprising—movement and the influx of populations in and out of Nahda at different moments presented new possibilities of labor, interaction with different populations and a different understanding of housing and their relationship with the state. For example, while, Ahlam, my main interlocutor constantly found ways to subvert the law and the system to secure her housing, Ihab her son, was willing to squat in an apartment in *mohtallah*, after failing to get assigned an apartment by the municipality. While, technically they would be both found by the state as “illegally” occupying government owned spaces, Ahlam’s

insistence on her right to be given an apartment by the state was completely different than Ihab's approach which was a realization that in either case they are both under threat of dispossession and relocation. The only reason Ihab chose not to squat is because he did not want to be disbarred from his job as a lawyer. In the process of resettlement multiple discourses of law and legality, hence play a huge role in the everyday life of my interlocutors. Even though, Nahda is considered a formal neighborhood, the way in which everyday life is lived in this space, is based on an informal economic structure and an endless process of informal housing contracts. I would go as far as argue, that part of the neoliberal urban restructuring of Cairo and its relocated communities relies heavily on ways in which relocated communities maneuver ways in which to secure their livelihoods and their housing, which mostly are carried through informal and local negotiations. By examining the way in which different populations and generations in Nahda reconfigured their social domain, this urban ethnography aimed to present how social categories are constantly changing, moving, and taking different forms and meanings. Hence, it would be very productive if more urban ethnography is conducted to examine the way in which the process of displacement and relocation affects the way in which the social is always changing and the way in which social space thus is constantly being reshaped.

Research on *mohtallah* itself would allow for pushing these questions regarding mobility further. As I argued in this thesis, my interlocutors have mostly discursively produced *mohtallah* as a single space with a homogenous population and one that is often criminalized. However, as I have discovered through the inconsistencies in their narratives and through further fieldwork, *mohtallah* is not a single space and one that holds people who live there for different reasons throughout particular moments. *Mohtallah* is part of Nahda and hence, is as fluid and constantly moving and changing like Nahda. Since those clusters of spaces were initially inhabited after the popular uprising, it would be interesting to examine how the

different communities who live in those clusters reconfigure their social domain and how they describe themselves and their social space in relation to the different communities around them and in relation to the residents of Nahda as a whole. Are they aware of how they are being described and named by others in Nahda? How do they justify, if they ever do, their presence in a space that is termed as “*mohtallah*?” How do they secure their livelihoods and how do they establish communicative channels and networks given their location in Nahda? What forms of paid labor are they involved in?

One of my last interviews in this thesis was with a lawyer who spoke to me about how he is at the moment filing a suit on behalf of some of the communities residing in *mohtallah* to try to make a claim to housing in *mohtallah*. Some of the squatter communities in *mohtallah* then, are trying to gain some form of a legal status or visibility in their pursuit to secure housing. This raises the following questions: Who and what are the different communities that take shape and dwell in *mohtallah*? How do discourses of law, legality, and housing figure into their everyday lives? Which communities are interested in filing suits and why? Given that living in *mohtallah* does not grant formal accessibility to services such as electricity and access to water, how do they then negotiate or maneuver to gain accessibility to those basic needs? How do relations of power over space play out in the everyday lives of the different communities in *mohtallah*? Finally, a comparison between the women living in Delta and women living in *mohtallah* would shed light on how the process of relocation and/or displacement factors in the everyday lives of women in *mohtallah* and how they hence reconfigure their social domain and how they navigate lives in insecure housing. In other words, if movement is part and parcel of the everyday in the neoliberal city, especially for the working poor, what challenges does this pose for the categories through which subjects, spaces, communities are made visible in contemporary Egypt?

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