

Tahrir's Youth

LEADERS OF A
LEADERLESS
REVOLUTION

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Encountering Revolution: Expectations and Reality

I was inspired to pursue this study during the revolution's early days, before fate determined that it would quickly come to a head, after two and a half weeks, and draw Mubarak's reign to a dramatic, unexpected close. In fact, the title of this book came to me when the final outcome of Egypt's turbulent uprising was still anyone's guess. When protests erupted in Egypt on January 25, something inside me was lit up. Along with observers around the world, I was captivated by the movement unfolding before us carrying the emblematic weight of history in the making. Obsessively, I followed the deluge of network news coverage, citizen journalism, and academic commentary on Facebook and Twitter. The gripping story Egyptians were telling in collectively speaking truth to power was the stuff of legends, complete with astonishing scenes of underdog heroism, cross-class camaraderie, religious coexistence, national pride, and beloved community. Taking in all of this from afar (namely, the small suburban town that was home to the University of California, Davis, where I was a student), I not only felt the stirrings of a longing, but also a beckoning. I knew I had to return to Egypt and make this movement the topic of my research. In this chapter, I explain why.

My Trajectory

I was born and raised in the United States, yet Egypt is the source I spring from. My parents were born and came of age in a small village in the Sharqiya governorate northeast of Cairo in the Nile Delta region. As adults, they studied, worked, and lived in Cairo and Alexandria before marrying and migrating to the United States in the late 1970s. Though I did not visit Egypt often growing up, nor did I know much about its history or culture, or even speak its language very well, I had an unwitting sense

that home was *there*, not so much *here*. It felt inaccurate to call myself an American. This of course had something to do with the fact that though I was not there, Egypt had managed to ground and shape my experience here through the cultural expressions and everyday practices of my parents, their language, food, dress, and religious observance. It also had something to do with my large, extended family being there, not here. But even more, my sense of belonging to Egypt was reinforced by my own exclusion in the United States.

Unlike my second-generation peers from other non-Arab immigrant backgrounds, my struggle negotiating my dual American and Egyptian identities was embedded in the larger world, a highly polarized geopolitical context in which my two worlds were often in conflict. My decision to wear the hijab as a young Muslim woman not only highlighted and emphasized my difference in my Western home but made the anonymity that eases a person's integration seem like an impossible feat. Because of my hijab, I was identified as a member of that place over there whose people were angry, violent, uncivilized, women-oppressing, freedom haters. The anti-Arab, anti-Muslim climate that emerged post 9/11 only made my feelings of exclusion more acute, as comments like "go back to where you came from" and the sudden appearance of confederate flags dislocated and alienated me further.

I visited Egypt with my family a few times growing up. I even lived and went to school there for a year when I was nine years old. However, I did not come to fully appreciate my country of origin until I ventured there alone in my early twenties and took up residence in Cairo from 2003 to 2007. I had just completed my undergraduate studies and wanted to learn formal Arabic, study my faith tradition, and reconnect with my family in the countryside, whom I had not seen in seven years. But this was not the only pull. On a subtle level, my return to Egypt was driven by a desire to make amends with a country and a region that I had never quite understood and had grown to view negatively for making my life in the US difficult. I wanted to give it a chance to redeem itself. I needed to understand it on its own terms and see it differently.

And I did see it differently, and by extension the larger Middle East, and I became empathetic. I saw that Egypt was not backward, but a country with a rich civilization and culture that had become suffocated by a corrupt government and a world order that would not let it develop and flourish. More poignantly, I also learned that my other country, the United States,

for its own selfish interests, was largely implicated in sustaining such an unjust world order. I understood that the anger misinterpreted as the natural, primordial disposition of Arabs actually stemmed from the intolerable socioeconomic conditions that had made their lives miserable and driven them to the brink—rising food and living costs, staggering unemployment rates, a disastrous lack of adequate public services, and the like. In reality, they had a great deal of warmth, good will, and tolerance, which, remarkably, they had managed to preserve despite their difficult circumstances.

During my stay in Egypt, my own day-to-day experiences and engagement with ordinary Egyptians led me to understand intuitively the deep socioeconomic frustrations that would later turn average Egyptians into revolutionaries. Ironically, it was this experience in Egypt that sparked my interest in positive social change and my desire to learn how I could play a role in it. This experience set me on an academic trajectory that, to my surprise, would eventually bring me back full circle, intellectually and emotionally, and in the most exhilarating and unexpected circumstances: my country's national reconstruction.

As a graduate student with a growing interest in social movements, I needed to understand how this happened. As a young person, I wanted to meet my peers who, for me, were the most compelling part of this movement. Like so many critics, I had assumed Egypt's youth were apathetic, and I wanted to know what I had missed and tell their story. As a long-lost Egyptian-American, I needed to find my story in theirs. So I set about planning my research.

Planning Research

I devised a straightforward plan for ethnographic data collection that I thought should be fairly easy to execute in the approximately three months I had allotted. My goal was to understand the role of youth in the movement.¹ In particular, I wanted to learn about their sociopolitical trajectories prior to their involvement on January 25 and over the course of the eighteen-day uprising, culminating in the momentous resignation of Hosni Mubarak on February 11. I knew I had to limit my inquiry to a clearly defined time frame because the revolutionary movement was far from over, and an attempt to research and analyze it as it was unfolding would epistemologically be a futile pursuit. Thus, with February 11 as my cutoff date, I would try to conduct in-depth interviews with at least ten activists who played an organizing role in the January 25 uprising and the

ensuing revolutionary process. These activists would ideally include men and women representing the diverse youth movements that I learned from my obsessive reading of the news and media commentary had coordinated this effort as it unfolded in Cairo's Tahrir Square. I also hoped to interview key informants like local scholars, journalists, and veteran political activists who could help me understand the landscape of youth activism at the start of the movement and how it had developed in the preceding years, specifically how the political, structural climate allowed youth to emerge as transformative political actors en masse.

I was confident in my ability to conduct this research and motivated by the advantages I perceived my mixed Egyptian and American origin gave me over other foreign researchers. Like them, I thought that my upbringing abroad meant that I could maintain the objective perspective that comes with an outsider's distance and detachment. Unlike them, however, I imagined my Egyptianness meant that I could penetrate the field and access knowledge as an insider in ways they likely could not. Not only was I conversant with the culture and proficient in both formal and colloquial Egyptian Arabic, but I had also been raised Muslim, which in my mind implied that to some extent at least I shared the values and sensibilities of most Egyptians, allowing me to better understand their experiences. It occurred to me that being a veiled woman was another advantage, as it might wash out some of the otherness of my American identity and make them feel more at ease with me. Further, as a seasoned Cairo dweller, I was familiar with the research setting. In fact, I had taken many courses at the American University in Cairo, situated at the corner of Tahrir Square, and was therefore already familiar with the field site. Moreover, I was aware of the challenges that came with trying to live in this dense metropolitan city with its crumbling infrastructure. Such familiarity, I thought, would speed up my fieldwork, as I would not have to waste valuable time learning Cairo's ropes and adjusting to the research site. Additionally, I already had connections who agreed to provide me with important contacts and help me network with activists. In sum, though I was intimidated by the gravity of this project and having to approach revolutionaries for interviews to conduct it, I felt comforted knowing that my position would facilitate my entry into the field and make building rapport with my potential research participants easier—or so I had imagined. In fact, to my surprise, my experiences in the field would challenge many of these assumptions.

Immersion in Revolutionary Cairo

I arrived in Cairo in late June 2011, five months after the start of the revolutionary movement. I got settled after the initial inescapable, almost ritual hassle that had been part of my experience traveling there over the years. Thereafter, I immediately turned my attention to the field. Before my departure, I had already collected the names of young activists who appeared frequently in English-language media outlets as well as those who were independently dispatching news updates from Tahrir on Twitter during the uprising. However, I had no sense of the extent of their activism, their political leanings, or affiliations. What was clear to me was their prominence, as documented by the media and their apparent use of social media.² I began activating my contacts upon my arrival in the hope that they could help me better understand the network of youth activists involved and lead me to key contacts among them. A meeting with the director of the Gerhardt Center at the American University in Cairo upon my arrival and a few conversations with some of her assistants provided me with the first useful contacts that would serve as entry points into what had until then still daunted me as an elusive web of revolutionaries.

At the time of my arrival, I was also fortunate that Tahrir Square was still a bustling protest site teeming with demonstrators. The square and its Downtown vicinity had continued to be the site of political ferment since SCAF seized the reins of power earlier that year, when Mubarak stepped down. The Council's unilateral decisions, as it charged itself with the task of managing the country's transition to democratic elections, fueled rather than dampened the revolutionary flames; it was a move that activist leaders saw as the beginning of a counterrevolution, and it signaled the next stage in their battle to bring down the old power structure.

I found myself in the middle of my first Tahrir protest shortly after my arrival. Little did I know that this would be just one of many to follow. Friday, July 8, was dubbed "The Friday of Determination." Thousands of protesters gathered in Tahrir and other city squares across the country to voice their frustration with SCAF and how little had changed five months after the uprising. In a move to press SCAF to institute immediate reforms and demand that former officials from the ousted regime be prosecuted without further delay, activists staged an open-ended sit-in in Tahrir Square that would continue for three weeks. This was an unexpected development that worked to my advantage. I was able to rely on my firsthand experiences and observations at these protests in the summer of 2011 to imagine what

had happened during the eighteen-day uprising at the start of that year. I was also able to meet the demonstrators and activists taking part in these current protests and learn about their wider experiences and the meanings of their participation in the movement.

***Middle-class, American, female, and veiled:
researcher positions in Tahrir***

Tahrir Square was unlike I had ever experienced it before. The atmosphere was at once serious and carnivalesque. Men, women, and children of all ages and from all walks of life stood shoulder to shoulder under the blazing sun, cheering and chanting, waving their flags, and pumping their fists in the air to the emotionally charged speeches, chants, and nationalist songs blasting from the towering stages erected at every corner of the square. “*Eed wabda! Eed wabda!*” (One hand! One hand!) they would shout in unison, egging each other on. Hundreds of colorful banners stretched across the streets and roundabout. Journalists and their camera crews peppered the balconies of surrounding high-rise apartment complexes. Protesters posed for photographs with their masterpiece posters, while rowdy food and souvenir vendors stubbornly forced their carts through the crowd. In the center of the square and around its periphery, hundreds of protesters took refuge from the sun in the tents pitched for the sit-in, some taking naps, others sharing meals, while others engaged in heated political debates. It was exciting, but also quite jarring, being in Tahrir participating for the first time in a revolutionary movement I had been eagerly following and cheering on from afar. It was then, during my first real engagement with the field, that I started to become aware of myself in ways I had not anticipated.

Along with the exhilaration I felt being at the center of this movement for the first time, I also felt a perplexing distance from it. I wanted to chant with my fellow Egyptians on that Friday, loudly and fervently, but I was restrained by a gnawing sense that my passionate display would be lacking in authenticity, and therefore inappropriate and disrespectful. This was because as an Egyptian whose upbringing as such was interrupted by the migration of her parents, I did not have access to the repertoire of shared experiences and frustrations that drove these protesters. Nor could I tap into the historical memory that animated my supposed compatriots for inspiration, for that, too, mostly eluded me. Though I sympathized with their cause, it was not really mine; I had not grown up with their struggle, nor would I feel the full implications should their movement fail. Ironically,

when I was in the United States planning this research, I identified closely as a member of this community; now in the field, I was becoming conscious of myself apart from those I had considered my people. There, I felt that I was an American, an outsider. This transformation in my own subjectivity was a result of my lived, sensorial experience as well as the way I perceived people reacting to me.

My subjective duality began to dawn on me earlier in my fieldwork, during my first excursions into the Tahrir sit-in camp area, where I hoped to gain official entrée into the leading activist circles. I imagined this task would be easy, given that the sit-in meant all the activists I might want to recruit as research participants were stationed in the square for at least the next few days, perfectly accessible. But in fact, it was not at all this simple; gaining access, I would soon learn, entailed so much more.

I spent several days walking about the encampment area, trying to orient myself in the dense maze of tents clustered into multiple sub-communities representing the various movements, political parties, organizations—even extended families and cities outside of Cairo involved in the protest—before I worked up the nerve to introduce myself to activists and start conversations with them about my research. My hesitation stemmed in great part from my increasing sensitivity to the nuances and implications of my own position and identity in this unfamiliar, radically heterogeneous and fluid environment. I wanted to smoothly insert myself in this bubbling universe, but I could not figure out how to place myself in it. Although I had been to Cairo many times before, occupied Tahrir brought me into an almost uncomfortable proximity with very different social groups I had never previously engaged with and would have never met had it not been for my research interest in their movement. Tahrir did not just introduce me to all these radically different groups, it confronted me with them all at once, stirring anxieties in me as it kicked up and forced me to negotiate the multiple intersections of my positionalities.

When I was planning my research, I did not think much about the extent to which my own positionality could affect my data collection in Egypt. I did not imagine my gender would have any significant impact on my fieldwork; I did not expect it to limit my access to male activists, for instance, as I understood these activists to be progressive when it came to non-romantic inter-gender interactions. Nor did I expect my religion to be a hindrance, since the majority of Egyptians are Muslim, though their religiosity might vary. Similarly, I gave virtually no thought to my class position,

understanding most of the activists to be members of the middle class like me. But together, all of these variables did have unexpected implications for my fieldwork, especially as they manifested in my attire, particularly my hijab, as well as my demeanor. For most people, the hijab symbolizes a Muslim woman's religious observance, which is usually associated with political conservatism. Now in the field, I started to see how the fact that I was veiled along with my socialization as an American Muslim would shape and to some extent delimit my interactions and access to knowledge.

At the Tahrir sit-in, for example, one of the groups I wanted to network with but was reluctant to approach was the "Twitterati," a group of elite and upper-middle-class, left-leaning secular youth who occupied the southeastern corner of the roundabout at the center of the square. These activists were known to international followers of the movement for their regular news updates from the square and thus seemed an appropriate entry point to start my networking. As someone who grew up in California, I related to this group's cosmopolitanism and felt comforted by the fact that they spoke fluent English. However, as a practicing veiled Muslim woman, I felt self-conscious around them. I clearly did not fit in with the women in this group who dressed less conservatively than me, smoked liberally, and slept beside their male comrades in and around shared tents. Moreover, my class position among them felt questionable. I was aware of the general aversion to the hijab among members of this class in Egypt, who associated it, in a derogatory way, with the peasant and popular classes; descriptors like *baladi* (of the country) and *bi'a* (ghetto) were common in their discourse on the subject and conveyed their disfavor. Understandably, wearing hijab around this group drew out my own sensitivities about my family's provincial origins, which I had been made painfully aware of as a child growing up among more affluent Egyptians from Cairo and Alexandria in the United States. Paradoxically, in the context of the square, my middle-class position in the United States, which had led me to become a researcher wholeheartedly interested in the Egyptian revolutionary movement, stood obscurely in the background, while my veil and its Egyptian class connotations took center stage.

When I finally found the courage to approach members of this group, I found myself feeling pressured into playing a game ironically similar to the one I was accustomed to playing in my interactions with non-Muslims in the United States: attempting to emphasize my similarity and minimize my difference. I tried to build rapport by consciously carrying myself in a

manner that anticipated and preemptively challenged whatever incorrect assumptions or views they might have of me because of my hijab. Thus, I behaved in ways that highlighted my middle-class, American upbringing and tastes and relayed my cosmopolitan Egyptianness, all in an effort to position myself more as an insider and less as an outsider. For example, I made a point of speaking Arabic and mixing it with English in a way that was customary among upper-class Egyptians. This dance involved a constant and at times uncomfortable negotiation with my religious values, which I tried to avoid asserting for fear it might alienate potential interlocutors. Such negotiations were particularly trying when interacting with men, especially with Muslim men, whom I was raised to be more reserved around. With a few activists my effort appeared to work; if my hijab was at all an issue for them in the first place, my Americanness and researcher status seemed to trump their secular and class misgivings about it. I was able to enjoy some degree of camaraderie with them and rely on them for support with my research, particularly with networking. With others, I understood from our interactions that they could not see past the scarf on my head, all the more unsettling given that the ethos of the movement they were driving was one of tolerance and acceptance. In all honesty, my inability to access them was likely as much a result of some of my own discomfort with our difference and the barriers I might have erected as a result. In retrospect, I could not help but wonder how much easier it would have been to be a practicing Muslim male researcher in this setting, or an unveiled practicing Muslim woman; I imagine that playing up, playing down, or even completely camouflaging my religious identity and religiosity as the field dynamic demanded would have been much easier.

It is difficult for me to decipher the full impact my position as a practicing, veiled Muslim woman had on the quality of data I collected. Generally, those I interviewed appeared to be unfazed by my hijab and seemed to answer my questions as they would have had the same questions come from an unveiled woman or a man. However, some of my respondents might have presented a few of their answers, particularly about gender and religion, in a way that they imagined resonated with my sensibilities. While it might have diminished some of the respect secular elite activists might have felt for me as a serious researcher, my status as a practicing, veiled Muslim woman certainly did not have that effect on the Islamist activists, such as the former members of the Muslim Brotherhood. If anything, it made it easier for me to establish rapport and gain regular access to them.

I believe my hijab made it easier for them to relate to me, and I definitely felt more assured around them.

Ironically, I was also stunned to learn over the course of planning and conducting this research that I, too, had stereotypical assumptions about veiled women as a consequence of my socialization in the West. I started to become aware of this before I traveled to Egypt, when during an advisory meeting my professor pointed out that I had just judged an Egyptian woman activist as conservative based solely on my observation that she was veiled. This incident was all the more troubling considering that I myself resented such assumptions being made about me because of my veil. Somehow, I had introjected the very Western hegemonic views of Muslim women that I had experienced myself and had criticized and challenged in the United States. I confronted these same prejudiced views in the field, where I met women who, though they dressed more conservatively, demonstrated through their views and their behavior that they were anything but. Some, for example, surprised me with their left-leaning politics and their liberal attitudes about inter-gender relations. Moreover, I had also assumed that being a veiled woman would make it easier for me to build rapport with the veiled women activists I hoped to interview. Growing up as a member of the Muslim community in the United States, I felt an instant connection and solidarity with veiled women in general. Without having to verbalize it, on some level, as minority women, we understood each other and knew we were there for each other. But although it may have existed in some other way, ironically, I never sensed this kind of solidarity or sympathy from veiled women activists I met in Egypt. This may have been because Muslims in Egypt are the majority and the veil is the norm. On the flip side, I was also forced to confront my own stereotypical assumptions about non-veiled upper-class Egyptian women, whom I had imagined to be almost categorically averse to the hijab. Ola Shahba, one of my interlocutors who, I learned from our interviews, wore the veil for a number of years, is one of the women who challenged this view and helped me better understand the varied experiences and relationships Egyptian women of diverse classes had with the veil.

Class, religion, and gender, my fieldwork experience confirmed, are not fixed categories even within the same society at the same historic moment. In effect, while my hijab impeded my access to upper-middle-class and elite activists, it did not prevent me from gaining access to groups from lower social backgrounds. Gaining access to activist circles whose members came from Egypt's popular class (discussed in chapters 3, 5, and 6), such as the

April 6 Youth Movement and Youth for Justice and Freedom Movement, meant a very different set of negotiations. With these groups, my veil was not an obstacle, as it was common practice for women from this class to cover. Externally, I had many of the markings of an insider. But internally, I knew I did not fully fit. My socialization abroad as a member of the American middle class placed me a few notches above them on the social ladder. I immediately sensed our class differences in our dress and mannerisms. Their limited English was also a cue, as proficiency in English reflected the quality of education financially accessible to them. This was a group that I had, until then, never intimately engaged with in Egypt and was not sure how to relate to. However, trying to build rapport with members from this group, I found that my family's class origins in rural Egypt worked to my advantage, as I was able to connect with them by activating my rural connection and drawing on my life experiences there.³ The more time I spent with these activists and engaged with them in interviews, however, the more I realized that class difference was not really an issue in the first place. I stopped worrying about broaching topics related to their class background in our discussions for fear of offending them, because their revolutionary activism had moved them into the intelligentsia among whom class distinctions had little place, and if anything, lower-class origins were a source of pride rather than a point of sensitivity. Though I imagined with this group I might be studying down or sideways, in this sense, I was actually studying up.

A real Egyptian?—language and culture

Before embarking on my research, I was sure that my proficiency in Arabic would give me an advantage over foreign fieldworkers and serve me well on the ground. This was true to an extent. But once I began my field research in earnest, I began to see the limitations of my Arabic as a non-native speaker and feel their effects. Though I had grown up speaking colloquial Egyptian Arabic with my family and friends in the United States, and though I had studied Modern Standard Arabic quite extensively, I had not achieved native fluency. My accent was foreign, my vocabulary limited, my collocations at times incorrect, my comprehension sometimes spotty. This had an impact on my ability to build rapport and access knowledge. Forced in some cases to introduce myself and build relationships relying solely on my Arabic because of my interlocutors' weakness in English, I became self-consciously aware of how my accent and lack of fluency not only highlighted my class difference, but also my cultural otherness. Fortunately, my

awkwardness in the language did not work entirely against me, as many found my struggle endearing.⁴ Still, my limited language skills sometimes choked my expression, preventing me from engaging fully with the people I met, which meant I could only go so far in building relationships.

The more significant consequences of my language limitations became evident during interviews. I knew conducting interviews in Arabic would be challenging, but I insisted on doing it myself because I thought having a translator would interrupt the flow considerably and stifle my ability to connect with respondents. I attempted to manage this by preparing an Arabic translation of my interview guide and requesting patience from my interlocutors in the instances I might ask them to speak more slowly or provide extra clarification. This helped, and they graciously worked with me. Still, keeping up with these native speakers—let alone trying to stay ahead of them in conversation and steer the interview—at times proved an arduous task that required immense concentration and effort. That said, I believe that choosing not to use a translator was the correct decision; I do not think I would have gained as rich a data set otherwise. Fortunately, with practice, I had become a much more confident interviewer in Arabic by the end of my fieldwork.

While my indigenous status meant that I would be able to avoid the problem of culture shock, I discovered that due to my upbringing abroad, my knowledge of Egypt's norms and values was not as thorough as I had thought. I was also not immune from subculture shock. There were many instances when I found it difficult to assess what would be deemed appropriate behavior according to Egyptian standards, and so I erred on the conservative side. There were many spaces I initially avoided that were important meeting points for activists, such as Downtown open-air coffee shops (*ahawi*) that I assumed were considered to be masculine spaces and culturally inappropriate for women to frequent, but I later learned from activists that this was not entirely true. I was also not aware of certain etiquettes, such as those related to phone calls and making appointments. There were several activists whom I had tried for months to get an interview with. A friend told me that if I had been a "real" Egyptian, I would have gotten the interview a long time ago. What he meant was that my American restraint prevented me from calling repeatedly and pushing for a meeting, behavior that was customary in Egypt. Even after I had learned this, it was a very difficult practice for me to adopt. The shallowness of my cultural knowledge was especially noticeable when it came to popular and political

culture. In my conversations with activists, I encountered many idioms and cultural references that eluded me, because I had not grown up watching Egyptian television or films or reading Arabic literature, for example. And I certainly was not up to speed on the latest urban slang or how to use it. This affected my ability to fully engage with Egyptian humor, the hallmark of Egyptian culture, and reciprocate it in my conversations, as I simply did not have the cultural repertoire to tap into; again, this affected my ability to build rapport. The gaps in my cultural knowledge also meant I had a steep learning curve when it came to getting caught up on all the political events and figures that were referenced during interviews and relevant to my research.

My limited cultural proficiency made me especially vulnerable in the field when I was trying to discover leading youth activists, as almost every group identified themselves as such or criticized others for making this claim. My inability as an American to figure Egyptians out quickly sometimes resulted in some very serious discomfort, confusion, and concern, as it meant I spent time with people I thought would be valuable for my research but whom I later learned to be unreliable sources. To manage this challenge, I learned to seek confirmation that what I had heard about potential research participants matched their reputation among their peers. In this way, I was able to ensure, before I interviewed someone, that there was relative consensus in the activist community that they were indeed legitimate activist leaders who fit my criteria and would benefit my study.

The revolutionary movement in Egypt attracted scholars and journalists from all over the world, most notably from the West and especially from the United States. Such attention had unforeseen implications for my research. First, there was the issue of competition for the attention of activists. Many of these researchers and journalists were, like me, on the trail of these potential informants, pleading for interviews. It was difficult enough to secure interviews with activists while they were still caught up in the revolutionary struggle; this competition certainly did not help. When I was finally able to interview them, many apologized for not giving me a meeting sooner and said they were burnt out from speaking to so many researchers and journalists.

Second, being new to field research, I was unaware of the power dynamics involved in knowledge creation across the Global North/South divide. I did not consider how the sudden influx of researchers from the West fascinated with the Arab Spring, the latest hot topic coming out of

the developing world, might be perceived locally, especially among the academic community, and how this might affect my fieldwork. When planning my research, I only considered how my indigenous status would give me leverage over foreign fieldworkers. Admittedly, it had not occurred to me that there would be many more local scholars who were more qualified than I was to conduct research related to my topic of interest—and indeed, as I later learned, who already were. Though it is true that I was ethnically Egyptian and connected to the area not only through my heritage but through having lived there for some years, I was also an American who had lived most of my life in the United States and was trained by and affiliated with an American university, which meant I certainly was not local; I could not really claim to be studying my own society.

Starting to realize this upon my entry into the field, I felt myself recoil, self-conscious about my position and unclear about where I stood in the eyes of locals as a researcher across the global north/south divide. Already questioning my Egyptianness as a result of some of my disencounters in the field, I now began to question what right I had to enter this setting and announce my interest in a topic that I would discover local scholars had not only researched and written extensively about in Arabic, but had been intimately engaged with as activists.⁵ I sensed from my unanswered requests for key informant interviews with local scholars, as well as some awkward moments with a few of those who agreed to meet me, that I was not the only one asking this question. I felt the need at these times to emphasize my connection to Egypt, but it did not seem to matter, given what felt like unforgivable gaps in my knowledge—a consequence of my foreign upbringing—that I sensed local informants might not have appreciated being asked to fill in. My unease was confirmed in an article by Mona Abaza, a professor at the American University in Cairo, which I came across while in Egypt. In it, she voiced her concern about the unequal relationship between so-called local experts and their colleagues in the West, who, as “tourist revolutionary academics” had “misused” them as service providers during their brief trips to Egypt, only to return home and benefit from their status as experts, while the region received no return for providing the services upon which their expertise was built.⁶ I empathized with this position and resolved not to be included in this category: I committed to staying connected to the country after my research trip and producing knowledge that would benefit my research participants and their cause. Fortunately, I found that as time passed and I came into my Egyptianness

more through my engagement with the activist community and revolutionary movement, my worry about being the target of these frustrations subsided, and my confidence in the unique perspectives I brought to this research topic as an insider-outsider and the contribution I could make as a result grew stronger.

Egypt in upheaval: challenges in the field

When I initially planned my research, I expected that it would be fairly easy to carry out in the three months I had allotted. And in normal circumstances, it probably would have been. But these were not normal circumstances, as it were: Egypt was in the throes of a revolution.

I was aware that the revolutionary movement was far from over before leaving the US for Egypt, but my impression (having failed to keep up with the news in the weeks before my departure because I was busy preparing for the trip) had been that despite the protesters' frustrations at the slow pace of change and the continued demonstrations they staged to voice their discontent, things were generally moving in the right direction, and a relative calm was returning to Egypt. I had no idea the climate was still so volatile. Even if I had known, I could not have fathomed what this meant, especially for my research, until I immersed myself in the field and experienced the revolution for myself.

Early on, before setting out for Cairo, I had considered how the ongoing development of this movement might affect my research. I knew that because the youth actors I hoped to recruit as research participants were probably still actively involved in the revolutionary movement, it was imperative that I stay focused on their engagement at its inception and avoid the epistemological pitfall of trying to make sense of their participation in current events. This was because, being unpredictable and having no clear end in sight, the revolutionary movement might take my research participants down unclear paths that I could not follow. Concentrating on the beginnings of the revolution would be critical, I told myself, if I wanted to complete my research in three months and avoid getting lost in the field indefinitely. But soon after I arrived, I started to realize there was much more to consider than I had anticipated.

First, there was the nature of the revolutionary movement itself. As I became more intimate with it, experiencing it up close in real time through my own participation as a protester and through my ethnographic study of the youth activists at its center, I would start to see it in all its glory: a

marvelous, dizzying mess. Lacking a unified leadership steering its course, this monstrous, amorphous, living phenomenon called Egypt's revolution behaved erratically, creating an environment of immense instability, confusion, and insecurity. Its twists and turns were sudden and dramatic. At times they were even catastrophic, exposing those involved on the ground to grave danger and tragically taking lives. It was demanding, requiring its protagonists to stay alert and present, if not one step ahead in anxious anticipation of the opponents' next moves. Mechanically, it worked itself out in ebbs and flows, in fits and starts, delivering promising gains one day and defeating blows the next. It was intensely fluid and uncertain. This was the environment in which I had to carry out my fieldwork, this was my field site. Naturally, finding my footing on its shifting ground was an ongoing struggle.

This was also the turmoil my research participants were still deeply embroiled in. Their level of involvement in the struggle never changed. From the beginning, they fought on its front lines, and they continued to do so during my tenure in the field. The implications of this for my data collection process were many. The first was logistical and related to securing interviews with these activists. Being so inextricably tied to this fluid movement meant that these key interlocutors were extremely slippery and nearly impossible to obtain interviews with. As some of its main drivers, they were on call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and when there was a sudden development, they were among the first to respond. Their schedules were as tentative as the revolutionary movement itself, and so were our appointments in them. As such, it was impossible to arrange meetings more than a day in advance. Moreover, it was not uncommon for me to schedule an interview with an activist only to have him or her cancel last-minute or fail to show up altogether without notice because some urgent matter related to their activism required their attention, or worse, a full-fledged crisis had suddenly arisen and snatched them away. When I was finally able to sit down with them, our meetings were often significantly delayed, frequently interrupted, terribly rushed, and/or suddenly cut short. It was always something: the sit-in in July that would last three weeks, the many Friday protests, the several violent clashes that erupted between protesters and soldiers, the Mubarak trial, the Israeli embassy protests, and of course, the month of Ramadan brought its own scheduling challenges. (Sure, some appeared to generally lack discipline in keeping their commitments, but the revolutionary environment certainly did not help.) Eventually I stopped trying to schedule interviews because the timing was

never right. I waited, hoping things would let up, but they never did. The result: one week before my scheduled return to the US, I had only managed to conduct four interviews, three of which were incomplete.

I decided to stay longer and try harder to adapt. I realized there was no competing with the revolution for my research participants' attention: the revolution was the priority, and I had to learn to accept this—embrace this—and work with it as best I could. I saw that I would get nowhere trying to wait its upheavals out from a distance; I had to take the plunge and learn to negotiate with its dynamics and find openings from within. I realized I had to stop passively competing with it and instead try actively engaging with it. So I inserted myself in the movement's center, where my participants were located, joining them regularly at actions, events, and meetings, where I was able to build the rapport that facilitated my easier access to them. Now regularly in closer proximity to them, I also learned how to take advantage of their intermittent availability during the sporadic peaks and lulls of the movement. When there was a lull, I rushed to capture them for impromptu interviews. When there was a peak, such as a major disruption in Tahrir, I tracked them down in the field and accompanied them as a participant and/or observer whenever they would allow me to do so.

I did not expect to gain much from these observations for my immediate research because my focus was on a period that had long passed, but I decided it was better than nothing. And yet, this turned out to be one of my best decisions. As challenging as it was to keep up with these activists in this capacity, I was provided with amazing, unexpected opportunities to observe processes that would give me insight into my research participants and their early involvement in this movement. During the spontaneous eruptions in Tahrir Square in late November, for example, which many likened to January 25 in mood, spirit, and fragility, I was able to attend several late-night organizing meetings with youth activists which, I later learned from my interviews, resembled their meetings in the early days of the revolution. They were trying to figure out how to keep the momentum in the square and capitalize on the new explosion of popular energy across Egypt's other cities to secure gains for the revolution. I had not initially incorporated participant observation into my research methods because I was limiting my inquiry to the leadership and organizing processes activists had engaged in during the first eighteen days of this movement. I could not have anticipated that history would repeat itself and the activists would find themselves engaging in this process once again, and that I would have the

chance to observe them, having missed the opportunity in January. This was perhaps the single most unexpected reward of conducting research in this environment.

Nonetheless, my adjustments and accommodations were not enough. Despite extending my stay twice so that it doubled from three to six months, I was still unable to get all the interviews I had hoped for. The harder I tried, the more the revolution seemed to quicken its pace, challenging me to keep up. The upheavals became increasingly frequent, explosive, and destabilizing.⁷ I simply could not accomplish all that I had set out to do. The revolution would not let me.

Aside from the logistical challenge of trying to identify and enlist the right activists to participate in my research, this persistently turbulent movement presented me with another challenge: how to maintain my project's focus and relevance in this ever-evolving climate and how to convince potential interviewees that it was worth their time and attention. Much had happened since the eighteen-day uprising in January 2011, which was the real focus of my study, and things would continue to develop after my arrival later that June. With each of these developments, some of them extremely frustrating if not downright tragic, those early eighteen days seemed to change in significance for the activists I interviewed, taking on different constructions and meanings for them as they looked back and viewed them through the lens of recent events. This continuous reconstruction and reinterpretation of the past is something I had to contend with when I was recruiting participants and conducting interviews. Sally Tomah, for example, whom I pursued for an interview for nearly five months, agreed to meet several times, asking me to wait until things let up, but in the end, she declined to take part. Being so mired in the current political struggle and emotionally exhausted from the slow pace of change, she struggled to appreciate the significance of their work during the early eighteen days in this later moment. She said she was tired of talking about that time when "we didn't really accomplish shit." For those activists I was able to secure interviews with, although my plan had been to limit my discussion with them to the eighteen days, I realized I had to negotiate a space for recent events in my interviews, as their impact on the activists and their perception of themselves and their work was impossible to ignore. For example, I could not ignore the fact that a few days before I interviewed one activist, he had just buried his comrade, Mina Daniel, who had been killed by the army along with other Copts in what has been called the Maspero Massacre. The

event confirmed for him and the other activists I interviewed that the army was not acting in the interests of the revolution, as it had claimed to be doing on February 11, but was in fact its main opponent. Events like Maspero were constantly spinning the very meaning of the eighteen days in the minds of my informants. Nor could I ignore the fact that another activist I was preparing to interview had just decided to run in the parliamentary elections, a significant step in his political trajectory and an outcome of his involvement since the eighteen-day uprising. These experiences were all connected in the present and would continuously color and shape each other and the activists' memory of them. Essentially, what I had become caught up in by virtue of the timing of my study is the dialectic between ontology and epistemology in action.

I kept trying to adapt by adjusting my interview protocol, making room for new developments as they unfolded, while tailoring my questions to each activist. Even so, the process was further complicated by the fact that I conducted most of my interviews over two or three sessions that were days if not weeks and even months apart. Between one session and the next, something could have happened to change my respondents' recollection of and feelings about the eighteen days quite significantly.

Lastly, in an environment as intense and unpredictably volatile as this one, safety was an important consideration. As an Egyptian who sympathized deeply with this movement, I wanted to be at every action, supporting the cause. As a researcher, this would also prove useful, as fuller immersion meant I might establish a new connection, learn something new, or gain a new insight. As a woman, however, I had to be particularly cautious; one of the many disturbing side effects of these chaotic times was the rise in sexual harassment and assault on women. Not only had this become an alarming, growing trend among men who took advantage of the deteriorating security situation to have a good time, but even more disturbingly, it was the method of choice used by police and regime-hired thugs to intimidate women protesters. Fortunately, I never fell victim to this kind of gender-based violence, but I regularly heard about other women's traumatic experiences and was constantly on guard as a result.

My status as a foreign, Western researcher also put me at some risk in this environment. In an attempt to discredit the revolution and turn ordinary Egyptians against it, counterrevolutionary forces manipulated Egyptians' deep, historic mistrust of foreigners and whipped up a campaign that peddled the movement as a plot by foreign agents conspiring to destabilize Egypt for

their own interests. The campaign succeeded in creating an environment of suspicion and distrust of foreigners, especially those engaged in civil society and human rights work, and by extension, journalists and researchers.⁸

In fact, the introduction of the colloquial term *agendarwi*—that is, someone with an agenda—into the Egyptian revolutionary lexicon reflects how conspicuous and widespread this fear was. I was initially blind to this aspect of my position in the field, thinking that my obvious appearance and identification as an Egyptian protected me from such associations. However, a few anxiety-inducing encounters during my early fieldwork with seemingly ordinary protesters in Tahrir—who could very well have been regime supporters and not opponents, as I had assumed—made me aware of my naiveté. I realized my Egyptianness did not protect me from being seen as an outsider with an agenda. The combination of my non-native sounding, less-than-fluent Arabic and, in particular, my affiliation with a foreign academic institution had betrayed me. The suspicion my affiliation seemed to raise among the protesters to whom I disclosed it left me feeling disquieted, and I became much more cautious when it came to divulging my identity and work as a researcher.

During my time in the field, I had to keep reminding myself that I was there to conduct research; my purpose was to document processes, which I could not do if I exposed myself to major risk. I had an obligation to return to my family and academic community, safe and sound, with quality data in hand. In this respect, safety presented itself as a logistical issue that I had to manage carefully in order to carry out my original objective. This was easy to do in the beginning, when I was still relatively distant and detached from the movement. But as I became increasingly immersed in it and intimate with the revolutionaries at its center, my concern for my safety and reluctance to participate alongside them in riskier protests and actions became a source of inner conflict for me. There were several moments when I felt that as an Egyptian, I should behave more like the revolutionaries who put their bodies on the line for a cause they believed to be greater than themselves, one for which many died, and yet I could not. There was more to my desire to stay safe, I realized, than trying to be a responsible researcher or an ordinary person who naturally wanted to stay out of harm's way; it was another manifestation of the detachment I still felt as an Egyptian born and raised in the United States. I admired my peers' level of devotion to our common ancestral homeland, but I did not share it. Part of me regretted that I did not know what it felt like to feel so invested and attached to this country



Figure 1. Graffiti art from early 2012 memorializing revolutionary icon Shaykh Emad Effat, who was martyred during the Cabinet clashes in late 2011. The Quranic verses read: *"And they will say, 'Our Lord! We obeyed our leaders and notables, and they led us astray. Our Lord! Give them double their share of torment and curse them a mighty curse'"* (33:67–68). Like all the other revolutionary murals in Cairo, this one has since been effaced by the state. Photograph by Rahma Esther Bavelaar.

that I would be willing to risk my life for it. And yet, I also appreciated the unique experience of solidarity my dual identity provided me. It was surreal, during the Muhammad Mahmud clashes in November, to receive an approving nod from new acquaintances in Tahrir when they learned I was a student at UC Davis, which had just made international headlines for a police pepper-spraying incident during an Occupy Movement sit-in; almost a year earlier, during the eighteen-day uprising, I had been greeted with the same gesture on campus when new acquaintances there learned of my connection to Egypt.⁹

As time passed, I began to notice that my immersion in the revolution transformed my level of investment in it, and by extension, my sense of self as an Egyptian and an American. Though I felt distant from the movement both when I first encountered it and when I later decided not to take part as a revolutionary, by the end of my fieldwork I had become very intensely connected to it. I was particularly affected by the martyrdom of the Azhari scholar Shaykh Emad Effat (see figure 1). I knew him from my previous stint

in Cairo in the early 2000s; he taught a classical Arabic grammar class in Nasr City that I had the privilege of attending. I was pleasantly surprised to see him regularly in the square during protests, wearing regular clothes instead of his clerical garbs and often accompanied by his children. Had it not been for his kind smile and more particularly, his elegant gait, I might not have recognized him; he walked through Tahrir just as gracefully as I remembered him walking through the courtyards of Islamic Cairo's old mosques. His assassination on December 17 during the Cabinet clashes drew me into the movement in a new way, emotionally and spiritually. Suddenly the revolution was much more personal, and my passionate participation no longer felt performative. My subjectivity as a Muslim and a woman was also changing as a result of the dynamic and often unsettling processes I was subjected to as a researcher and analyst of contemporaneous societal changes. Through my own engagement with the revolution, I began to witness in myself the very kind of transformations I was interested in observing in my study participants, in my demeanor and my attitudes related to class, gender, and religion, for example. In many ways, I became an extension of my own research.

Activist Representation

I spent six months conducting my fieldwork, from June 24 through December 21, 2011. My primary method for data collection was face-to-face, semi-structured in-depth interviews with youth activists and key informants, recruited through convenience contacts and snowball sampling. Later, my methods evolved to include field notes, as my immersion in the revolutionary movement provided me with more and more unexpected opportunities for participant observation. I also conducted a series of follow-up interviews long-distance via Skype in late 2013 and early 2014 (see chapter 7). Interviews focused on narrative, and participants were invited to share their life stories as they related to becoming activists. They were also invited to share their personal accounts of the unfolding of the revolution from January 25 through to the time of our interviews, with special attention to the leadership processes they had engaged in as well as their personal transformations throughout this period.

I interviewed twenty-five activists, most of whom were leaders or active members of the various youth movements and youth factions of political parties that made up the RYC, which announced itself in Tahrir Square twelve days after the start of the uprising in January 2011. Briefly, the organizations included: (1) the April 6 Youth Movement, a pragmatic

protest movement based on a Facebook network that emerged in 2008 in solidarity with striking laborers in Mahalla factories; (2) the Youth for Justice and Freedom Movement (*Harakat Shabab min agl al-Adala wa-l-Hurriya*), a dynamic, leftist youth protest movement that grew out of the April 6 Youth Movement; (3) the Popular Campaign Supporting ElBaradei (*al-Hamla al-Sha'biya li Da'm al-Barad'i*), henceforth referred to as the ElBaradei Campaign, a group that had gathered around Mohamed ElBaradei, former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna, and attracted a number of disenfranchised youth in the years before the revolt around its general call for reform; (4) youth activists from the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin*), Egypt's largest Islamist movement as well as the oldest and most organized opposition group; and (5) representatives from the various youth factions of the existing political parties—such as the Democratic Front Party (*Hizb al-Gabha al-Wataniya*), the Unionist Party (*Hizb al-Tagammu'*), and the Dignity Party (*Hizb al-Karama*)—as well as several politically independent youth activists. (For more on my interviews and complete data set, see the appendix.)

Although there were other groups I could have focused on or incorporated into my study, I decided to settle on the activists from the RYC for several reasons. First, I learned during my fieldwork that several of the groups under its umbrella were among the most active on the ground in the years preceding the revolution, with bases in Cairo and branches all over Egypt. Together, they strategized for January 25 and continued to help drive the revolutionary movement that ensued, especially as it unfolded in Tahrir Square and Cairo, the movement's ground zero. The effort of these youth activists before and during the uprising was significant, which made them appropriate candidates for investigating youth leadership processes in the revolution. Second, I was interested in interviewing activists who reflected the diversity of youth leadership in the square in terms of class, gender, religion, and political ideologies. I was especially keen on securing interviews with female and Christian activists, who appeared to be a minority in these circles. The leading activists in the RYC were diverse in terms of these variables and as such were a fitting group to focus on.

Lastly, it must be said that I decided to focus on activists from the RYC for the sake of convenience. I made many attempts early on to obtain interviews with activists from other important groups that took part in organizing January 25, like the Revolutionary Socialists and the

administrators of the We Are All Khaled Said Facebook page, but my requests went unanswered.¹⁰ Moreover, I was not fixed on seeking a representative sample of youth activists for my study, as my purpose was never to generalize as one would with a statistically representative quantitative study, but to analyze and gain qualitative insight into the dynamics, determinants, and effects of youth leadership in the revolutionary movement. I wanted to learn how this experience could be explained in light of existing theories. As such, I felt that seeing these processes through the eyes of the activists from the RYC was sufficient for my project; and given how difficult it was to find the right activists to interview and secure their participation in my project in this environment, I decided not to expand my sample, as gaining entrée into a wider set of organizations in the network of revolutionaries would have required additional time and logistical effort that I could not afford.

As robust as my data set is, it is important to note what is missing. There is little representation of leading women activists in this study and no representation of Christians. This is simply because there were very few that fit my sampling criteria in terms of playing an active leadership role in organizing for January 25, and those who did, like Sally Tomah (who happened to be both a woman and a Christian), were very difficult to access for interviews.¹¹ Most of the formal leaders of the movements who made up the RYC's executive committee, for example, were Muslim or secular males. Even outside of the RYC, the Christian and women youth activists I was introduced to did not act in a visible leadership capacity as organizers, and few of them appeared to have a history of organized activism before the revolution. Nonetheless, I was able to secure extensive interviews with Ola Shahba, another important female activist, along with several interviews with other women activists from the movements under the RYC umbrella, all of whom provided me with interesting insights into the gender dynamics among the formal leadership. Their perspective complements that of male activists who shared with me their views on gender relations in the movement.

Something must also be said about the age of my respondents and my reason for including older activists like the forty-two-year-old Basem Kamel as youth leaders. I decided to include Basem in my sample because he was a key member of the RYC and because I was repeatedly advised by other youth activists in Tahrir to speak to him. Since his younger peers clearly viewed him as a youth like themselves (albeit more of a senior, mentor figure at times) and he largely identified as such, especially in the

context of the revolution, it was necessary for me to reflect this in my study. Stated differently, because my goal was to capture what it meant to be a politically active youth leader in Egypt in this moment of revolution and upheaval, I had to account for the broad understanding of what it meant to be a youth leader in the minds of my research participants during this period. After all, youth, as suggested in the previous chapter, is not simply a chronological status but rather a social construct similar to other constructs used to represent social classification or stratification, like race, class, and gender, in that it is based on the consensual understanding between actors within a given cultural context. Failing to take it as such would make my study unsound by imposing a Western understanding of youth and missing a fundamental structural dimension of the movement. In any case, in Arab culture, as mentioned earlier, one is typically considered a youth up until the age of forty. I believe the fact that Basem was close to this age in January 2011 is sufficient justification for including his narrative. The same is true of Mohammed Al-Qassas, one of my other respondents, who was thirty-seven when the January 25 protests erupted.

For the sake of efficiency, I have organized this book around the narratives of ten of the twenty-five activists I interviewed, whose real names are used with their permission and encouragement.⁴⁰ Not only are these some of my strongest interviews, but they are also some of the most illustrative in terms of the diversity of activist backgrounds and experiences before and during the revolution. But before introducing these activists and their stories, it is important first to understand the larger historical context that shaped them and gave rise to their movement.

Chapter 1

- 1 I decided on an ethnographic methodological approach for my inquiry for a number of reasons. First, given my research interest in how youth were operating as leaders in the revolution and the transformations they went through as its proponents, it made sense to study them ethnographically, that is, in real time in the revolutionary context they helped engineer. In this sense, an ethnographic approach would provide me with a richer, more holistic perspective by allowing me to engage with the revolution and experience its effects as a researcher and a participant as I observed my interlocutors in it. Second, this perspective would also be enriched by the flexibility and multiple methods at the disposal of an ethnographer, such as interviewing, participant observation, and the use of secondary sources. Lastly, it would allow me to reflect the most important issues emerging from the field by providing a platform for my respondents from which to project their voice and tell their story.
- 2 My initial sampling process was necessarily biased because I had relied, in the beginning, on English-language media sources. Given that I was

largely following English news sources and Tweets, my preliminary list of potential interview subjects was limited to English speakers. In Egypt, as in most developing countries, English proficiency indicates a certain level of privilege. In other words, my initial sampling was biased because it excluded from my list the names of those who only spoke and tweeted in Arabic and were mentioned in Arabic media only. These activists would likely have come from more varied class backgrounds and have had more diverse histories and narratives. Evidently, this bias needed adjusting.

- 3 For example, impressing one of my activist acquaintances from Imbaba with the intimate knowledge of children's street games I had gained in my parents' village when I was young helped take our relationship to the level of friendship.
- 4 I recall how a misuse of some Arabic words sent my new acquaintances into uproarious laughter. Apparently, I reminded them of an iconic character from a popular contemporary film called *'Asal iswid* who had, like me, lived most of his life in the United States, only to suffer the consequences upon his return to Egypt for being out of the loop for so long.
- 5 Disencounters are failed encounters, which "lack mutual resonance and shared understandings of what is at stake in the encounter" (Astrid B. Stensrud, "You Cannot Contradict the Engineer": Disencounters of Modern Technology, Climate Change, and Power in the Peruvian Andes" *Critique of Anthropology* 39, no. 4 [2019]: 422).
- 6 Mona Abaza, "Academic Tourists Sight-Seeing the Arab Spring," *Abram Online*, September 26, 2011.
- 7 These events included the Israeli embassy protests in September, the Maspero Massacre in October, the Muhammad Mahmud Street clashes in November highlighted in the Introduction, the Cabinet clashes in December, and the chaotic parliamentary elections and campaigning that spanned all of these months.
- 8 For a good discussion on the history of Egyptian anxieties about the foreign threat, see Bel Trew, "The Third Man: Egyptian Fears of the Foreign Plot," *Abram Online*, February 24, 2012.
- 9 The Occupy Movement was a progressive sociopolitical movement that began as a protest in Zuccotti Park in Manhattan, New York, and quickly spread across the US and around the world. The movement drew inspiration from the Egyptian Revolution. In particular, the practice of occupying public spaces as a protest tactic was modeled on the occupation of Tahrir. The movement's demands were many, but among its chief concerns was the concentration of wealth in the pockets of the top 1 percent of income earners compared to the bottom 99 percent, as well as the corrosive influence of big money on the political process. The pepper-spray incident took place at UC Davis on November 18, 2011, during a student-organized Occupy protest. After asking a group of protesters sitting on a paved path several times to disperse, university police pepper-sprayed them in the face. The video footage went viral and sparked a heated public debate about the militarization

- of the police, a theme that resonated with the Egyptian experience. The incident spoke to the shared struggles of citizens of the Global North and Global South under the neoliberal order. See Sunaina Maira and Julie Sze, “Dispatches from Pepper-Spray University: Privatization, Repression, and Revolt,” *American Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (2012): 315–30.
- 10 I was, however, able to refer to Wael Ghonim’s memoir *Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People is Greater than the People in Power* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), which was published after my requests for an interview.
 - 11 I echo the sentiments that anthropologist Nadine Naber expresses in her book after she shares the story of an important respondent who refused to sit with her for follow-up interviews following September 11, 2001. Discussing the implications of this missing narrative for her work, she says, “My book is less compelling without her voice, but her decision contains its own power and makes its own statement” (Nadine Naber, *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism* New York, NY: [New York University Press, 2012], 24). The statement made by the absence of Sally’s voice from my book speaks to the intensity of the revolutionary setting and the emotional toll it took on activists, particularly women like herself, as discussed in chapter 5.
 - 12 As prominent activists who were widely known during the revolutionary period due to the frequent media attention they received, they saw no need to conceal their identities. Their concern for preserving the historical record trumped any safety concerns.