Research article

This taxi does not go to Zamalek

Everyday encounters as a way of exploring female non–white researcher vulnerability

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This article addresses encounters as "everyday exchanges across difference" with regards to researcher experience, focusing on the Egyptian context. Drawing on three examples from encounters I had during my own fieldwork in Cairo, I show how even brief exchanges with strangers may destabilise the often taken-for-granted idea of the position of the researcher in the field as always occupying a position of power. Indeed, being marked as female and coded as African in the Egyptian context placed me in a situation where complex systems governing Egyptian and Sudanese gender roles were at play, sometimes corresponding with the dangers pinned to Black bodies. I use these encounters to show the ways in which all involved in an encounter have varying degrees of power based upon intersectional factors.

Den här artikeln undersöker (forskar)möten i termer av "vardagsutbyten över skillnader" med särskilt fokus på den egyptiska kontexten. Baserat på tre exempel från möten jag hade under mina fältarbeten i Kairo visar jag hur också korta utbyten med främlingar kan de-stabilisera den ofta förgivettagna idén att forskaren i fält alltid är i en överordnad position. Att vara kodad som kvinna och afrikansk i den egyptiska kontexten placerade mig i en kulturell kontext där komplexa meningssystem som styr egyptiska och sudanesiska genusroller aktualiseras, på ett sätt som ibland korresponderar med de faror som knyts till svarta kroppar. Jag använder dessa möten i fält för att visa hur alla inblandade i ett möte intar olika maktpositioner beroende på intersektionella faktorer.

Regardless of how one identifies as a researcher (including one's title, gender, or other identity markers), it is how people perceive you – what they see you *as* – that they will act upon. Even in the case of brief encounters, a seemingly innocuous situation can shift the course of one's research. While conducting fieldwork in Egypt, I was called "cousin" when travelling through Aswan, in the country's south, but when explaining my background in Cairo, people would always ask "but you are originally from Africa, no?" (implying there is only one place in the world a person with my skin colour could come from). Within the boundaries of one country, my perceived identity shifted according to geography, history, and local context, with the perceptions of others impacting my personal safety and therefore my ability to conduct my research.

By exploring shifts in perceived identity, this article contributes to the growing body of research that addresses the complexities and perils of doing research when non-white and female (Berry et.al 2017; Hendersen 2009; Hordge Freeman & Mitchell Walthour 2016; Townsend Bell 2009; Zubair, Martin & Victor 2012). In particular, Maya Berry and colleagues (2017) discuss how being female, non-white, and/or being perceived as local can override any social mobility or status a woman might have. They detail being seen as sexually available/vulnerable because of how their positionalities were interpreted in their local fieldwork contexts and how this made their fieldwork dangerous. Factors such as skin colour, gender, religion, nationality, history, and local context can play complex and significant roles in all interpersonal exchanges in the field. This necessarily

influences ethnographic fieldwork, with researchers unprepared to deal with these situations, and universities often not providing appropriate support.

Aim, objective, and structure of the argument

This paper focuses on the fleeting exchanges that highlight and complicate the potential levels of danger experienced during fieldwork, with the aim of rethinking anthropological encounters, accounting for the intersectional entanglement of privilege, deprivation, and oppression in such encounters. I shall explore these issues using examples taken from my own encounters in Cairo's public spaces, each of which occurred in the course of my master's and doctoral fieldwork. Through these examples, I discuss how brief exchanges inform the fieldwork experience, exploring the following questions: What kinds of vulnerabilities are women, and more specifically non-white women, exposed to in the course of daily life during the fieldwork process? What perceptions of the Other are communicated and understood by both parties in a given exchange? How can others' perceptions of what one is override the significance of how one self-identifies in the field? How can encounters reveal the various ways in which different parties – researchers included – operate from diverse positions of power?

Concretely, after having provided the necessary background and context, I will discuss three prototypical examples from my own research experience to show that one cannot separate the researcher from specific intersectional qualities, perceived gender and skin colour, and that expectations grounded in the local context can often have an overriding power. In doing so, I argue that the way in which one is perceived or expected to *be* in a given context takes precedence, and even in the research setting, one can only mitigate so much. The first example I use pulls apart a conversation in a taxi to reveal varying levels of power based upon intersectional aspects. I then describe an encounter with a fruit vendor that further demonstrates the different internal scripts that drive the way an interaction can unfold. Finally, I use an instance of sexual harassment to unpack how expectations projected onto others can create the pressure to enact one's own understanding of those expectations, leaving researchers in threatening positions.

Background and context

Two of the three examples explored here took place between 2006 and 2010, when I was completing my master's degree at the American University in Cairo, working with people who identified as half Egyptian. An integral part of my research and therefore the experiences detailed was traversing public space by multiple means – by foot as well as via taxi, metro, and microbus – to conduct interviews and participant observation. The third example took place when doing doctoral research with anti-sexual harassment groups in 2014 and 2015. It is also important to note that my master's research was conducted before the 2011 revolution and my PhD research after. Perceived gender roles, how they are navigated in public, and their interactions with skin colour become an important part of the fieldwork experience itself, as seemingly the most immediate factors people responded to. While pursuing my master's degree, myself and other Black-coded women found that, at least in passing, many Egyptians did not believe it was possible to be darker skinned and originate from outside the African continent. In the specific stories presented, being Sudanese becomes a relevant category for discussing potential expectations embedded in encounters because, aside from my travels to Aswan, Sudan was the first country people assumed I came from. At the same time, the experiences I describe do not and cannot represent a generalised behaviour of any one group of people, and I have no access to the internal cognitive processes of anyone I interacted with. However, I can reflect on these experiences in relation to the historical and colonial relationship between Egypt and Sudan, as this may inform, but not necessarily define, potential internal narratives created regarding darker skinned women in Egypt.

Lieba Faier and Lisa Rofel argue that colonial encounters are more than just interactions between oppressors and oppressed, instead showing capacities for shaping and reshaping cultural constructs and reinforcing power balances as not purely in favour of one side or the other (2014: 366). This point is reinforced by Eve Trout Powell's critique of Edward Said's work on orientalism, arguing that he ignores the capacity of those who are colonised to in turn colonise others (2003: 9–10). This complication of interpersonal dynamics bolsters the idea of contemporary encounters as interactions between individuals and groups with varying levels of privilege/oppression based on intersectional factors. Skin colour, class, colonisation, and discrimination become even more relevant when we look at Egypt's complicated relationship with Sudan, which stems from Egypt's historical position as both colonised and coloniser. According to Trout Powell, Timothy Mitchell uses the notion of the 'actively self – colonising colonised' when discussing Egypt (Trout Powell 2003: 12), with the Egyptian elite's willingness to adopt European architectural styles in 'modernising' Egyptian cities, and modeling the bureaucratic process after European standards demonstrating this point. During the same period Egypt was experiencing occupation by the Ottoman Empire, Egyptians were put in the role of coloniser when Muhammed 'Ali conquered Sudan, putting Egyptian officers in charge of Sudanese administration.

The fact that Egypt lost its control of Sudan as a colony (1884) in such close proximity to coming under British administration (1882) exacerbated the sense of ownership the generation of Egyptians who had experienced sixty years of regional power over Sudan felt.

Egypt's nationalism movement in the 19th century developed alongside the view that Sudan 'belonged' to Egypt, and thus part of establishing Egypt as a nation was regaining dominance over Sudan. Many Egyptian nationalists discussed Sudan using the same rhetoric, grounded in colonialism, that the British used regarding Egypt (Trout Powell 2003: 6–7). The British saw themselves as 'civilising' Egyptians to keep them from returning to 'barbarism', and the Egyptians similarly saw themselves playing this role in Sudan by sending teachers to the country and through the education in domestic work given to women bought to Egypt as slaves. By this point, many Sudanese had moved to Egypt and become integrated into Egyptian daily life, whether as rich merchants, doormen, or servants, but "in popular and print culture the Sudanese were often portrayed as no more than an empire of domestics" (Trout Powell 2003: 6). While not exploring current sociopolitical dynamics, this brief context can help in understanding how historical perceptions and relationships may inform interpersonal interactions even now.

Alongside this colonial and racial context, it is impossible to discuss doing research in Egypt without discussing how gender is performed and navigated in the public sphere. Traversing the streets of Cairo, as was necessary to my fieldwork, was contingent upon performing masculinity and femininity in certain ways. According to Sherine Hafez, women's bodies serve as both "visible markers of sociopolitical values" and sites of resistance and inversion of these same values (2014: 176). In the years following the 2011 revolution, women's bodies became the battlefield upon which the struggle to control the shape of the nation unfolded (Kraidy 2016), further supporting the idea that encounters act to reinforce or reshape wider social processes. Women's bodies have been historically tied to notions of propriety and purity (de Koning 2009; Hafez 2014; Fabos 2008), while manhood is demonstrated by acting strategically in matters such as navigating the streets and running errands as well as in the use of measured violence (Ghannam 2013: 28, 36–39). Connected with this, sexual harassment and survivor blaming have been commonplace methods of regulating women's bodies long before the nation's independence as much in public as in private (Haddad 2017; Baron 2005).

This is in part because of the slippage that exists between harassment and *mu'aksa*, a form of flirtation, which also plays a role in how men and young boys perform manhood (Rizova 2015; Ghannam 2013). There is a fundamental gap between what is perceived as *mu'aksa* and what is perceived as sexual harassment, and this is not limited to encounters in Egypt, nor the Middle East and North Africa more broadly (Abdelmonem 2015; Carstensen 2016; Galan 2016; Kreil 2012). The conditional permission granted to women to pass through public space, and the justification of sexual harassment as a form of policing, inform the expected behaviour projected on to women, and how this changes according to considerations of class, skin colour, and perceived religion or nationality. Both LL Wynn (2018) and Anouk de Koning (2009) demonstrate how expectations are class dependent, while Farha Ghannam points out that skin colour can be a class marker as well as an indicator of regional origin (2013: 8). Furthermore, Africanness has been historically associated with slavery in the Middle East (Hunwick and Trout Powell 2009: vxiii), with the term *abid* (meaning slave) still used as a racial slur (El-Geressi 2020; Siegelbaum 2013). The confluence of these factors means that being in public in Egypt immediately calls into question a woman's respectability (de Koning 2009: 138), with people constantly scrutinizing others for signs of respectability or lack thereof (Wynn 2018: 36–37, 50).

Defining "the Encounter" – theoretical influences

The anthropological encounter can carry privilege but also exposes the researcher to danger through the vulnerability inherent in the interview process, alongside perceptions of skin colour. Vulnerability is found in the very act of listening (Berry et.al. 2017: 552), enabling shifts in power between people. These shifts in power and vulnerability are key aspects of the encounter, and as Farha Ghannam (2011) states, can also reshape the space one occupies, directly connecting the micro to the macro. I situate my paper among works that challenge ideas of power flowing one way and singularly from and between "place-based identities" (Faier & Rofel 2014: 369) and try to engage with the notion that multiple powers flow in different directions between people that have within them varying levels of power and privilege. I also directly challenge the idea of the anthropological encounter as being monolithic, with power in favour of the anthropologist, based on how individuals in an encounter become, through the unfolding of the encounter itself, signifiers of/for their perceived social, cultural, and historical origins. To that end, I work from Faier and Rofel's definition of encounters as "everyday engagements across difference" (2014: 363), taking into account the impact of context and the capacity to maintain or change social norms as part of encounters, as described by Ghannam (2011), as well as the capacity to exert power in the negotiation of projected and perceived identities in such encounters. For them, ethnographies of anthropological encounters provide a way to examine how the everyday makes and remakes the cultural, with the focus on the meeting of two groups identified as different generating knowledge that enables better understanding of the groups involved (Faier & Rofel 2014: 364). Faier and Rofel note a tendency to assume these encounters happen between unequal parties; what I suggest, however, is that people can be powerful in some respects and lack power in others, these collections of both powerful and oppressed are perceived and communicated in the interpersonal

exchange itself, often marking those involved as representatives of societies, histories and concepts. The encounters I depict in this paper rely on historical and contemporary understandings of intersectional factors, but also demonstrate how the weight of such elements shift within a given context as a result of the negotiation of competing considerations of for example class and gender.

To further support this point, I draw on LL Wynn's (2018) theories regarding the performance of social expectation in the Egyptian context. Demonstrating that individuals have differing ideas and interpretations of love, gender roles and intimacy, Wynn uses Baudrillard's definition of simulacrum as "a copy that has no original, a substitution of signs of the real for the real, which is thus *more real than real*" (as cited in Wynn 2018: 8, 30–31). Pairing simulacra with mimesis – adopting and partially imitating elements of a foreign culture while at the same time changing those elements – Wynn describes how people in Egyptian society perform what they think are expected behaviours based on their social roles, and how these expectations come from their own internal image of something external, turning an augmented reproduction of behaviour into a signifier for reality (Wynn 2018: 89). It is this, I argue, that is at work in the encounter and transforms people into signifiers that play out internal scripts. Hence, in addition to acknowledging how encounters are informed by varying intersectional aspects of inequality, they also both perform and project different ideas based on the self-perception of those involved and their imagined expectations from others.

Faier and Rofel also describe encounters as generators of "unexpected responses and improvised actions" (2014: 364), which reveal aspects of cultural processes undetected by other tools of field research. In an encounter, I speculate, a person is presented with an individual's performance of their identity, and that person can accept or reject that presentation in favour of their own personal perception informed by social contexts, histories and stereotypes.[1] This can be tied to simulacra because it involves performances of identity and/or of expected understandings of identity in the public sphere that play a role in reshaping or reinforcing existing social norms. Farha Ghannam demonstrates how encounters in public space are microcosms and potential 'editing tools' of the social, whereby moving across different areas of the city, and traversing changing intersections of class, gender, race, and religion are argued to be "liminal states of mobility" (Ghannam 2011: 790). According to her, each encounter can either reinforce or change social standing, and in doing so "transform identity, realign social hierarchies or reinforce power inequalities" through exchanges such as "a conversation on the bus, an image on a billboard, a fall

in the street, a disagreement with a seller, a slap from a police officer, a religious audiotape in a taxicab, a stroll at the mall" (Ghannam 2011: 791–792). These types of encounters, not unlike my own which I explore in the following pages, have a transformative potential, demonstrating how things we perceived to be fixed rarely are because they directly affect choices in how one presents themselves and moves through the world. Ghannam's work complements how Faier and Rofel (2014) describe the transformative potential of the encounter on cultural processes, demonstrating how things we perceived to be fixed rarely are.

Encounter one: "This taxi does not go to Zamalek"

I have a meeting on the island of Zamalek and have to take a taxi from my flat to get there. I hail a taxi, and when he slows down, I get into the back seat. The driver asks me where I am from and what I am doing in Cairo. I explain my background, that I am doing research, and the driver tells me that he is Sa'idi (from the South of Egypt). After asking me what I am studying, he asks me if I like to swim. I tell him that I do not. He replies by saying "sure you like to swim" and I tell him again that I do not. He tells me that he has a pool, and that I should come and swim in it. I politely decline. He insists I come swim in his pool, and I decline again. He asks me once again if I am sure I do not want to swim, and again I tell him no. Upon hearing my reply, he pulls over to the side of the on-ramp to the bridge and tells me that "this taxi does not go to Zamalek". Confused, I pay the driver, get out, and hail another taxi. (Fieldwork, spring 2007)

The idea of a lone woman in a taxi was not always viewed as acceptable but was unavoidable for me as a researcher. Perceived as a foreign Other, the type of which we could only know through directly asking the taxi driver, it can be presumed that I fit within a familiar framework that allowed his behaviour as the result of what he perceived as a breach of code. My choice to respond to the taxi driver's questions immediately opens me up to scrutiny, and potentially allows the driver to engage in *mu'aksa*, a form of flirtation associated with performances of masculinity (Ryzova 2004/2005, 2015) to which my exit options are limited by being in the taxi. One possibility is that there is a fine line between business and flirtation with sexual intent, much like Wynn describes in her discussion of *khirty* (informal tour guide) (2018: 85–86). The driver's persistence is reminiscent of how the *khirty* pursues tourists but also how roles in flirtation are imagined. Men are supposed to pursue, and women are supposed to be coy. This brings us back to how Wynn uses simulacra; it is likely that the taxi driver is behaving according to and expecting me to behave according to imagined scripts. Only

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[1] This is similar to what Viola Shafik (2007) says about the power of stereotypes in cinema to rewrite reality.

the taxi driver knows the exact script, but the type of foreigner he imagines me to be plays a role. Women marked as foreign in Egypt were seen as open to encounters deemed inappropriate for 'good' Egyptian women, but women coded as African (which can include for example Nubian women) were seen as open to even less appropriate encounters than their lighter skinned counterparts and were often assumed to be prostitutes (a term used in Egypt at the time, with the intent of being derogatory).[2] Therefore, being foreign but also Black-coded *and* foreign made asking me to swim permissible, reminding us of the idea that Black flesh is available to be "consumed" (Berry et.al. 2017). Hence the insistence of the taxi driver "sure you swim". Having said all of this, de Koning makes it clear that any woman in public in pre-2011 Cairo ran the risk of being seen as "sexually and morally loose" (2009: 540), so this entire encounter is just as equally grounded in just my being a woman versus being a darker skinned woman. Awareness of this does not, however, change the fact that in order to do my research, I must face this kind of risk in public.

The encounter with the taxi driver is a demonstration of varying forms of power and oppression associated with each individual involved. My body becomes a marker of social and political boundaries (Hafez 2014) as the taxi driver determines what is and is not acceptable. This judgement occurs in what could be considered a public space if we use the definition of taxi as an "open societal urban space" (de Koning 2009: 133). The taxi can therefore be considered a site where worldviews are reinforced and challenged (Ghannam 2011). The exchange can be viewed as an exercise of power over a woman by a man, but it is also the exercise of power of a *Sa'idi* (Southern) Egyptian man taxi driver over a female, coded-as-African researcher. In our encounter, a combination of differences in racialisation (associated with our respective skin colours), and perceived gender roles therefore play a role in our encounter, with awareness of these factors directly impacting how we present ourselves and how we react to what we are presented. All of these, however, are grounded in how each of us imagines or expects the other to be. In the case of the taxi driver, it is possible he questions my respectability since I am a woman travelling in a taxi by myself, because of my skin colour, or a combination of the two, and therefore thinks it acceptable to flirt and sexualise me. By insisting I do not swim, I am therefore challenging his construction of reality, whatever it may be, and denying his perception of the dynamic, and to restore his worldview I must be ejected from the taxi.

Encounter two: "No I will not because you are Black"

I was guiding a group of Canadian visitors (friends of friends) through a market in Sayeda Zeinab. We had spent the morning visiting a local monument,

and were exploring the stalls before returning to our respective apartments. At one point, we stopped at a stall where a man was selling a variety of fruit and vegetables. I negotiated with the vendor in Arabic on behalf of the Canadian group in order to purchase some strawberries, and the vendor complimented me on my Arabic, to which I explained I had been living in Cairo, while doing a Masters, for over three years. One of the Canadian visitors paid for the strawberries, and they concluded the deal by shaking hands. As we turned to leave I went to shake the hand of the vendor and he said "No I will not because you are Black" to which I pointed to my camera bag and said "No, this is Black" and left with my companions. (Fieldwork, spring 2010)

The first thing to note here is that in many cases, men do not believe in shaking hands with women as part of maintaining proper boundaries between men and women. Having said this, the Canadian visitor whose hand the vendor shook was a woman, highlighting the potential impact of skin colour as part of the complexities of propriety. It could have been that being a Canadian foreigner versus my being a foreigner associated with the African continent rendered shaking her hand acceptable, and mine unacceptable. I could have also been mistaken for a tour guide by the vendor, despite mentioning I was doing my Masters, which could suggest certain hierarchies revolving around a combination of gender, skin colour and labour/economic standing. More specifically, I could have been perceived as being on a par not with *khirty* (Wynn 2018: 79, 85–88) – unofficial tour guides – but *khirateyya*, people who "seek to profit from them by offering a range of services, inserting themselves as middlemen and fixers of various kinds...the services they offer are often framed through friendship or favour, not as a business" (Ryzova 2015: 14–15). It must be noted that Wynn and Ryzova are talking about the same category of people – *khirty* is masculine singular and *khirateyya* is plural – but Wynn specifically talks about *khirty* as unofficial tour guides. To both Ryzova (2015) and Wynn (2018), *khirty* and *khirateyya* are characterised as tricksters, but while Wynn states that women struggle to be *khirtiyya* (feminine singular) because of the need to approach people and engage in dialogues that overlap with *mu'aksa*, Ryzova states that *khiratiyya* can be men or women. It could be that my presence interrupted a specific inner narrative regarding interactions with tourists.

This brings me to point out that the vendor specifically said he would not shake my hand because of my skin colour, immediately evoking the idea of darker skin being dirty, and associated with prostitution and slavery, but also that at the time (pre-2011), the majority of people did not believe darker skinned people came from beyond the African continent. While the group of Canadians clearly identify themselves as being tourists and visitors from a specific geographical location, it

2 See e.g., The New Arab (2015).

could be that my origins are more open to questioning, with my assumed origins and expected behaviour derived from internal narratives. The direct reference to skin colour fixes me within a set of beliefs guided by individual interpretations of Egyptian social expectations. It could be that, like Wynn's (2018) experiences, the vendor has a set of traits that he associates with different geographical areas. It could be that the historical relationship between Egypt and Sudan plays a role (Trout Powell 2003). Equally, it is possible that the vendor drew upon perceptions of skin colour as denoting class and regional origins (Ghannam 2013). This does not negate the negative implications of the interaction, and at the time added to concerns regarding navigating Cairo public spaces as part of my research.

In an encounter such as this example, my perceived origins are what people use to determine acceptable and expected behaviour. In particular, it situates me as "flesh to be eaten" (Berry et.al. 2017), vulnerable and available to the point of being consumable or at the service of others – an experience had by both women and non-white coded individuals in their daily lives, but more culturally and historically associated with darker skinned women, exemplified by Sudanese women being characterised as house cleaners. At the same time, complementing foreigners who try to speak Arabic was a common occurrence, suggesting an element of the tourism script at play alongside those of gender and skin colour. Aside from complementing me on my Arabic, this man seems happy to interact with me as an intermediary for the Canadian group, but not with me directly. Interacting with me as a translator renders me somewhat invisible, a servant of sorts, but direct interaction undoes that. It is also possible that my role as translator – involving listening and then conveying messages in another language – puts me in a passive, and thus more vulnerable position (see e.g., Berry et.al. 2017). The perceived goal of interaction with me is to be able to engage in a transaction with the Canadian group, reinforcing the idea that in some respect, my going to shake hands interrupted an internal narrative. There may be a hint of the historical relationship between Egypt and Sudan here: darker skinned people are stereotyped and categorised in ways that reinforce the idea that they are meant to serve (Trout Powell 2003), and it is possible the only points of reference that this man had for someone of my skin colour comes from Egyptian cultural constructions of the Sudanese and African Other. Being seen as in the role of a servant might also make touch even more taboo.

Encounter three: Sexual harassment in the street

I was making my way through the crowded streets of Talaat Harb, on my way to meet colleagues at a cafe. The streets had been blocked off for pedestrian use, and I did my best to duck and weave through the strolling crowds. At one point I found myself stuck behind a group of especially slow walking people, and as I tried to find an opening to pass through, I felt a tap on my bottom. Not entirely sure what happened, I focused on getting past the people in front of me. When I felt a second tap, I turned around to see a group of young men, who laughed. I moved my satchel to cover my bottom, and turned to walk perpendicular to the crowd until I found an opening to continue my journey. (Fieldwork, spring 2015)

Described here is a classic case of sexual harassment that had become common in the downtown area of Cairo and continued despite the 2011 revolution opening spaces in civil society to combat it. It involved a group described by Ryzova in Strolling in 'Enemy Territory' – youth who I perceived to be of working-class background. Downtown Cairo is one of the places many men came to from across town to loiter and stake out that turf as part of reinforcing a particular masculine identity (Ryzova 2015: 23). True to the descriptions and arguments of Ryzova (2015), and my own experiences in downtown Cairo, the youth I encountered exhibited the same reactions to engaging in sexual harassment that would suggest blurring the boundaries between the imaginary and reality, enabling them to justify acts that would either be considered taboo, or part of ritual interaction that is part of publicly performing masculine identity. To be clear, I am not categorising sexual harassment as something perpetrated solely by the working class. By this point, many groups had organised street patrols for non-violent intervention in situations of harassment (see Piquemal 2018, Fernandez 2018), but these mainly occurred during holidays, so when patrols weren't present, harassment continued as normal. It can also be argued that such youths are engaging in both mimesis and simulacra, blending expected reactions with interpretations of what is socially acceptable. Recalling Faier and Rofel's (2014) work here, the encounter may be filtered through an internal interpretation of difference, by which I may be seen as a potential prostitute/sex-worker rather than a darker skinned, Western-based, middle-class researcher.

Even if I am not being mistaken for a prostitute/sex worker, my right as a woman to be walking in the streets of Cairo by myself is being questioned. If we look at Ryzova's 2004/2005 paper, my presence in the street can be interpreted as an opening for men to engage in *mu'aksa*/flirtation, which has become conflated with sexual harassment (Ryzova 2014/2015, Ryzova 2015: 33–34). Angie Abdelmonem and Hanan Hammad have also noted that acts of sexual harassment have been regularly excused away as *mu'aksa* (Abdelmonem 2015: 24; Hammad 2017: 45). It may be easier, however, to argue that verbal harassment can be mistaken for *mu'aksa*, but

such would not be the case with this particular kind of physical touch. It is further compounded by the association of darker skin with sexual availability.

I do not wish to delegitimise the act of *mu'aksa*, nor do I wish to undermine the seriousness of the trauma sexual harassment can cause, but this conflation and its repercussions need to be further explored. I can only speculate as to what is being projected on to me, but I argue that the power imbalances present create the pressure to perform gender in specific ways that still mean they will be interpreted within the framework of the context dependent simulacra. In short, I am under pressure to either ignore what is happening – which for some would signal the behaviour as inappropriate (see Ryzova 2015; Wynn 2018) – react as if it is a welcomed gesture or call out the behaviour as taboo. Even if I were to voice how unwelcomed the act was, the youths are not likely to see their actions as problematic, given their laughter when I turned around. Based on the experiences of many colleagues and friends, it would be more likely that I would be further harassed and possibly chastised by passersby, with a much lower possibility of passersby coming to my aid. If the act is *mu'aksa*, I can either signal interest or disinterest; if it is harassment, I can either ignore the act or risk being blamed for it.

Another issue raised here is that the codes that dictate how women are conditionally granted access to public space (see also de Koning 2009; Ghannam 2011), how that permission is withdrawn, and what consequences the actor in question has chosen to be appropriate, alongside the aforementioned acts that could be interpreted as displays of manhood, render researchers stuck between self-formulated and externally attributed social constructions of themselves, a space which cannot always be navigated because researchers are not always able to adhere to the constructions attributed to them in order to conduct research. Furthermore, adherence to said constructions could also prove threatening to the researcher. To apply it to this example, remaining silent and accepting the harassment doled out has psychological and social repercussions for women researchers that can prevent them from collecting fieldwork data. This is further complicated by a lack of consensus regarding gender roles and how they should be enacted, with something one person finds acceptable being deemed punishable by another (see Wynn 2018). As Ghannam (2011) reflects, one can either challenge or reaffirm social constructions attributed to oneself, regardless of whether being a researcher is part of this construction, and part of making that calculation may include the impact of gender/skin colour related perceptions and if these perceptions are problematic or dangerous. A question that remains as a result is how one can challenge norms that potentially threaten physical and mental well-being without attempting to dictate what is and is not acceptable in a culture that is not one's own. Taking culture as an organising force and acknowledging that people act on their own images and interpretations of

social norms can be useful in doing so (see e.g., Wynn 2018: 31). At the same time in the given context, unwanted touching constituted sexual harassment and as of 2014 was a criminal offense, separating unwanted acts from socio-cultural norms (see Fernandez 2018).

Conclusion

For the sake of clarity, I want to state that the issues I raise in this paper are not unique to Egypt or the Middle East and North Africa more broadly, nor can I speak to the current state of affairs in Egypt in the years since completing my fieldwork. I seek to highlight how problems women researchers face in their daily lives are also faced in the field, in part because of global overlaps in how women and non-white women are portrayed in the imaginaries we create and act upon. These challenges are not always considered when examining the Anthropological encounter, and while I cannot speak to the intent or internal narratives of others, I can discuss the negative impact of their actions. As demonstrated by the incident in the taxi, the act of conversation renders a woman vulnerable and subject to scrutiny based upon the internal scripts of others, with the capacity to defend oneself not always guaranteed and the obstacles created making data collection harder or in some cases impossible. To further evidence this point, after this incident had happened to me, I told this story to a White male friend of mine, and he proceeded to explain to me that I had mishandled the situation, and what I should have done was to get into the front passenger seat of the taxi, converse with the driver, and when we reached my destination, hand him the money and leave. All of my female colleagues and friends at the time were horrified when I told them of his suggestion, as it absolutely would have signaled our exchange as *mu'aksa* to the taxi driver. Every taxi, bus, metro, or microbus ride, or even walking in public becomes a gamble with your safety and mental health, regardless of if you engage anyone in conversation, and it is not always assured that you will find the necessary support. This idea of women playing coy or hard to get further problematises the misinterpretation and/or explaining away of sexual harassment for *mu'aksa*, meaning that even while conducting research, women have to be on their guard for potential escalations in conversation that become threatening – a problem that warrants exploration in its own right.

Anthropological encounters, as a concept, need to broaden what are considered archetypal exchanges. Encounters are described as existing across difference, but do not yet encompass the complex prism – like multiplicities between which they can take place. The stories detailed here are only a small representation of what both my fieldwork experience and daily life are like, during which I become a signifier for perceived Others attributed differing roles and degrees of power: a subservient African, one upon which violence is normalised, a prostitute/sex-worker, *khiriteyya* (informal tour

guide/fixer), a disreputable woman. I may present aspects of my identity to people, but in the above cases they are seemingly rejected in favour of perceptions based upon what visible intersectional factors tell people I should be. These perceptions are grounded in the histories, socialities, and cultural contexts that inform how those I encounter interpret the world, with how I self-identify having little to no impact on this. I am then expected to behave accordingly, which puts my health and mental well-being in jeopardy in addition to making data collection harder. These perceptions are not bound by collective identity, which applies equally to how each of the men I interacted with in this paper are perceived by others as it does to me. The taxi driver is stereotyped as ignorant because of where he comes from in Egypt, despite positive imagery of men from the countryside as national figures. The young men are stereotyped as prone to criminality despite being able to navigate the streets being part of how men are made in Egypt. Background, and class respectively, become the factors that shift power away, while gender remains the factor that shifts power in favour. This is all however, based upon perceived ideas of the Other; what one sees oneself as or what is real no longer matters. We must normalise discussion around differing perceptions of the researcher as Other in fieldwork encounters, including how each person in said encounter may have varying levels of power, and how to safeguard ourselves and navigate encounters without engaging in culturally insensitive behaviours. We must also be prepared for the fact that our mere presence in a given context may be enough to challenge perceived norms.

Author bio

Sandra Fernandez received her PhD in Social Anthropology at the University of St Andrews, Scotland. Her research examined the creation of safe spaces by anti-sexual harassment groups in post 2011 Cairo, Egypt. Sandra conducts research around the body via construction/projection of masculinities/femininities, the impact of race and gender in research, gendered violence and potential solutions, social movements and NGO's. Sandra is currently exploring the potential applications of digital technologies in combatting sexual violence, and investigating the interplay between ideas of migration, the construction of specific masculine identities, and the reinforcement of racist ideologies. Sandra is currently a researcher with the Romanian Society for Intercultural and Migration Studies.

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