For the Lost in Translation

Rosa Klein-Baer

Writer's Comment: *Writing a senior thesis was something I had aspired to since freshman year. I had always imagined how great it would feel to complete an academic research paper that was truly my own, so when I finally signed up for a thesis course with Professor Ann Savageau, I was ecstatic. Little did I know that, due to encouragement from my adviser, the final product would not be a formal research paper but a quilt and the following reflection of my 16-month study abroad experience in Egypt. Far from being one of the many conventional detached, authoritative papers that characterized my undergraduate career, this narrative relates the thoughts, feelings, and questions that I came across while living abroad. In a way, it was therapeutic to write, as it deals with issues that tormented me both during and after my stay in Egypt—that is, recognizing and accepting the unknown, and dealing with the ambiguity produced by cross-cultural encounters. I want to thank my adviser, Professor Ann Savageau, for providing me with extremely thoughtful feedback, pushing me to express myself creatively, and constantly challenging me to reevaluate and reexamine my ideas.*

Instructor's Comment: *Rosa Klein-Baer's For the Lost in Translation is a soul-searching account of her encounter with the radically different culture of Egypt, and a reflection on how her experiences have led her to question many of her beliefs and assumptions. Klein-Baer opened herself to Egyptians and Egyptian culture far more than most Americans would, and the resulting transformation is nothing short of life-changing for her.*

She describes the 'mental dissonance' that she has experienced and she has come to accept and even celebrate the ambiguity and uncertainty that she still harbors. Klein-Baer's unflinching candor about social inequality, sexual attitudes, religious beliefs and gender issues results in a compelling portrait of the perils and benefits of the overseas experience and why it should be an integral part of higher education.

—Ann Savageau, Department of Design

Augustus 21, 2011—December 24, 2012. I stayed in Egypt for one year, four months, and three days. How can I make sense of my experience there? For one thing, it was full of firsts—first time in the Middle East, first time speaking Arabic, and first time living outside of California.

First time walking inside a pyramid. First time learning about Shahrazad and the one thousand and one nights *in class.* I came to Egypt because of my fascination with the country's rich history—the sheer amount and diversity of culture contained across such sites as the pyramids, the Alexandrian catacombs, St. Catherine's monastery, and Al Azhar mosque had been incomprehensible and compelling to me since childhood. I had two goals in going to Cairo: to visit as many of these historical monuments as possible and to study as much Egyptian history as I could at my host university.

And while I was able to do both these things, my experience in Egypt amounted to so much more than that. History lessons came second to learning Arabic, becoming familiar with Islam, and meeting people. I became more interested in contemporary Egyptian social and political realities than the country's ancient past.

The bombardment of new experiences and ideas that characterized my life abroad led me to question my place in the world. Both during my stay and after my return, I thought at length about my position as an American woman living in Egypt and what exactly that means in the contemporary neoliberal context in which we live, especially in terms of privilege. Ethical quandaries arose, the likes of which I had never before considered. The following anecdotes are an attempt to draw out and make sense of particular experiences in these terms. Uncertainty is a central theme in all of the stories, and it leads both to discomfort and pleasure, confusion and insight. If I have learned anything, it is that the truth is complicated, that things aren't always what they seem, and that our best hope of understanding anything is to look at it closely and thoughtfully, from multiple perspectives, and to take comfort in being lost.

Acknowledging Ignorance

It was only a week or so after my arrival in Egypt. The other international students and I had spent the past few days participating in tourist activities organized by the American University, and most of us were still in the "honeymoon" phase of culture shock. After shopping at

the famous Khan el Khalili, viewing the pyramids on camelback, cruising down the Nile to Luxor, and visiting some of the most famous and well-preserved ancient Egyptian temples, I was still in blissful disbelief that I was actually in the country and would continue to be there for the next year. It had been my dream to visit Egypt for so many years, and now that I was here, my experience seemed somehow unreal.

With our first week in the country now complete, the international students began to prepare for classes at the American University in Cairo. Part of this entailed taking a few basic Arabic lessons designed to provide students with rudimentary communication skills. There is no denying that the class was useful in terms of language, but the most important thing I learned from it by far had nothing to do with Arabic.

A few days after the start of the program, I walked in late to find that the professor was in the middle of introducing an activity. She had cut out pictures of famous people and pasted them onto flash cards, so that we could practice identifying people in Arabic. As I walked in, she turned to me, held up a card, and asked, "*Miin howwa, ya Rosa?* Rosa, who is he?"

I stared blankly at the photo for a few seconds and then admitted sheepishly that I did not know. I was a little embarrassed, but since most of the previous cards had identified famous actors and celebrities, I couldn't imagine that my lack of pop-culture expertise could be that big of a deal. So I was surprised when the professor stared at me incredulously and a sort of silent tension fell over the other students as well. The professor tried asking me again, but after a few more seconds of uncomfortable silence, she burst out, "Mubarak. It's *Mubarak*."

A wave of shame came over me, one that would linger for the rest of the day. Here I was, so privileged to finally be in the country that I had dreamed about visiting for practically my whole life, and yet I hadn't even bothered to find out what the newly-ousted president looked like? The professor's subsequent rant about American students' incompetency in international politics did not help at all; I knew that she was right. I did not know what Mubarak's face looked like because, as a United States citizen, I did not have to know what he looked like. I wondered how many Egyptians could say the same thing about President Obama. Surely not very many.

Things only got worse when, after class, some friends and I went to a café for lunch. Our waiter was friendly and chatted in Arabic with some

of the more proficient students. When he got around to taking our order, he spoke to everyone in Arabic. Needless to say, as someone with no previous background in the language, I was struggling. When it was my turn to order, the waiter ignored my attempts to talk with him in English and instead asked me a question, which a friend translated for me.

"So you came to Egypt without any knowledge of our language?"

"Yes," I told him, blushing furiously. Again, I was forced to marvel at my own level of ignorance. The unlikelihood of an Egyptian even considering travel to the US without at least a reasonable command of English dawned on me.

The waiter stared me in the eyes and asked just one more question. "Why?"

This time, I didn't even try to answer him.

The Cost of Coffee

By the end of my stay in Cairo, I had come—perhaps a bit falsely—to pride myself on my ability to haggle. I had never bargained before coming to Egypt, so at first I found the whole experience to be extremely uncomfortable. Coming from a culture where the "market price" is respected as the ultimate measure of fairness in economic matters, the idea of even questioning, let alone rejecting, a listed price seemed inappropriate and insulting, and it was hard to gauge how low was too low to suggest. However, after engaging in the activity time and again, along with carefully observing people who knew how to do it, I began to see haggling as a game of sorts. You needed to go in with a flexible set of strategies and a concrete idea of the maximum price you'd be willing to pay. It was a weird combination between a sport and a dramatic performance—learning the rules of the game and then designing and acting out a makeshift character you thought had the best chance of making the deal. Most important was not to take anything too seriously—in the sense of cultivating a systematic distrust of anything the vendor said along with accepting your inevitable losses with a shrug and a laugh. With this kind of attitude, haggling became enjoyable, in and of itself as well as with regard to the sense of accomplishment achieved after a successful deal.

The whole thing could be quite elaborate. It was not uncommon to be offered refreshments upon entering a shop and to engage in friendly conversation with the seller for anywhere from a few minutes to half an

hour before getting down to business. At many shops, especially those geared towards tourists, employees would give long spiels explaining the history and production process of their commodity of specialty, highlighting, of course, those special qualities that made it uniquely "Egyptian."

In the best kind of exchange, both people would walk away smiling, with the impression of having struck a fair deal and having created a potential business relationship for the future. It was a nice feeling, and there was something about this kind of shopping that seemed more meaningful to me than the impersonal transactions that I had grown up thinking were normal and natural.

Some of my fondest memories of Egypt are of this kind of bargaining—precisely because of the sociality and warmth they brought to economic matters that, where I am from, are often rigid and marginally social at best. Vendors were no longer just vehicles through which commodities came into the possession of consumers; instead, buyers and sellers really got to know each other and developed a relationship. You made small talk. You joked around. You shared stories. In short, trust was built. Sometimes, the personal connection was more important than the transaction—as when a cab driver refused to accept a fare from me after we had an animated conversation, or when a waiter brought my friend free lemon juice when she told him she had a sore throat, or when I was given free sandwiches at a shop I frequented after realizing I had forgotten my cash. I found these kinds of interactions to be more generous and less hurried than my experiences shopping in America. In addition, becoming a better bargainer increased my ability, if only ever so slightly, to fit into Egyptian society.

Or so I thought. In fact, there was an alternative outcome of the whole bargaining process that was quite different and not just a little troubling. It happened just a few weeks before my return to the United States. I was with a group of American friends at Khan el Khalili, the most famous tourist market in Cairo. We were buying souvenirs for friends and family back home, and I decided to buy a Turkish coffee set for my dad, as it was one of my favorite drinks in Cairo and both my parents are big coffee drinkers. I was able to buy the set itself without a problem. I enjoyed joking around with the stall-owner, and I was happy with the price I paid. But then we passed by a spice shop, and I realized that I should buy my dad some of the coffee itself. I walked into the shop

and was immediately prompted by employees to smell a whole variety of spices. Suspicious from having been tricked once before into buying fake saffron for a "great price" at a similar type of place in Luxor, I told one of the men working there that I wanted pre-packaged Turkish coffee. "Wait," he told me, and, against my protests, he rushed out of the store. The other employees explained that he had gone to get my coffee and would be back in just a few minutes.

I waited a few minutes and a few more, but there was no sign of him. My friends were in a hurry and we were all getting tired, so we decided to go home, ignoring the protests of the employees. We walked away from the shop, but just as we came towards the edge of the market, I heard a voice and turned around to see the old man sprinting up to me, clutching a small package of Turkish coffee.

He was an elderly man, and he was exhausted. Panting, he thrust the coffee in my hands. I asked him how much he wanted for it, and he told me 400 LE—that's about 65 American dollars. I refused the deal and began to walk away, but the man followed me, reducing his price by large increments—first 300 LE, then 200 LE, now 100 LE. Finally, simply by continuing to walk away and insisting that I was no longer interested in the coffee, I managed to get him down to 50 LE. I gave him the money and took the coffee, feeling smug for having finally achieved what I thought to be a fair deal. We parted ways, I with a grin on my face and he with his brow furrowed, looking genuinely upset. It was far from the ideal situation where both parties walk away happily, but I was unperturbed.

After getting back to Zamalek, I decided to show off to my boyfriend, an Egyptian who always teased me on my inability to bargain. I showed him the package of coffee and asked him, "Guess how much I paid for this. How much is it worth?" When I told him I had managed to bargain it down to 50 LE, he was genuinely surprised. "Wow, good for you; that's normally 80 LE. You're getting better at haggling."

At first I was shocked: this was the first time that I had ever knowingly managed to buy something for less than it was worth. But the feeling of surprise quickly wore off, and I started to question my behavior at the marketplace. Before knowing the true price of the coffee, I had conceived of that old man as a manipulative adversary, but knowing now that he had agreed to sell the coffee at a price that wasn't really fair to him introduced an element of desperation into our interaction that I was unable to

ignore. I reconsidered the entire series of events. This man had been so frantic to make a sale that he had sprinted through the market just to find the specific type of coffee I had requested. When he found out that I had left the shop, he went searching for me in alley after crowded alley until he found me. He then begged me to buy the coffee (a commodity that for me had been no more than a passing fancy), eventually conceding to an amount that he clearly was not satisfied with.

It occurred to me that this must have been a profoundly humiliating experience—it would have been for me at least. And for what? It wasn't as if I couldn't afford the coffee; in fact, I could easily spend over 100 LE in a single café visit in Zamalek. No, when I thought about it, my stinginess could easily be reduced to a matter of pride. Because of my own arrogance, I had dehumanized that man in my drive to "win" the game I thought we were playing, driving down the price as far as I possibly could. The social aspect of bargaining, what I had before regarded as an inherently humanizing aspect of economic transactions in Egypt, now seemed to have the exact opposite effect, and I was the bad guy.

Unfortunately, that was far from the only negative encounter that I had bargaining. I got so caught up in not being fooled or taken advantage of that I forgot the extreme discrepancy in power and wealth that exists between most of these vendors and the average American traveler. Why else would an old man sprint through alley after alley just to make a sale equivalent to less that $10 U.S. dollars, driving himself to physical exhaustion and sacrificing his own dignity?

While positive bargaining experiences gave me the illusion that I was somehow "becoming Egyptian," the tension inherent in instances like the one described above forced me to acknowledge my foreignness. It was in these uncomfortable moments that my privilege—embodied in my money and my American passport—was thrown into sharp relief and became impossible to ignore.

It was that inherent imbalance, and the cruelty embodied in it, that seemed emblematic of much larger processes going on in Egypt. Much of the economy is supported by tourism—where foreigners pay relatively little to visit the pyramids, sail the Nile, explore the Alexandrian catacombs, stay in hotels with exotic sounding names, and enjoy many other historical tourist attractions. A new type of tourist industry is cropping up, too, along Egypt's north coast and the various beach towns lining the Red Sea. This kind of tourism, rather than reducing ancient

Egyptian civilization to a commodity, focuses instead on the provision of cheap beachside vacations with more than a hint of exoticism in the "cultural events" such as "Bedouin Nights" that many of these locations advertise. In fact, the events acted out in these Bedouin Nights are more a product of already existing stereotypes than the authentic expressions of Arab culture that they are marketed as. Many of the people employed in such events are from communities whose customs differ substantially from those that they act out, and they are likely to tailor their performances based on studied observations of what their audience wants to see (Cole 255). And this form of cultural appropriation is far from the only problematic effect of a tourism-dependent economy: sex tourism is not absent from this scene either. A young male friend of mine worked for a short amount of time as a waiter at one of the resorts in Sharm el-Sheikh, perhaps the most well known of the Red Sea resort towns. He slept with many of the middle-aged female European travelers that he met on the job, not because he wanted to but because he was expected to. Did they offer you money, I asked? No, but I would lose my job if I rejected them, he explained, saying that he had been instructed by his boss to do whatever it took to make the customers happy.

Two Sides of the Same Coin

"How was it being a woman there?" I have lost count of how many times I have been asked this question upon telling people that I have lived in Egypt. It's not surprising, given the American media's love affair with the sensationalized image of Muslim women as victims. Victims of the veil, victims of Islamic patriarchy, victims of repressive Arab regimes—we as Americans are taught to count our lucky stars for being so fortunate as to live in a country modern enough to have abolished systemic sexism, or at least come close to it. When we label the practice of the Other as degrading, it becomes easy to call ourselves egalitarian by comparison. But the inherent racism entrenched in this viewpoint reveals that we are perhaps not as close to equality as we may like to think.

Regardless of this, I found the situation of women in Egypt to be in many ways comparable to that of American women, in the overarching structure if not in the fine details. Yes, the standards of behavior for women in Egypt differ from those for women in America. And sexism is undoubtedly present in both countries. But that doesn't mean that one country is more repressive than the other when it comes to gender.

Egyptian women are more likely to wear conservative dress than their American counterparts, sure, but even if we are operating under the problematic assumption that covering oneself is inherently more oppressive than *uncovering* oneself, this is only a fraction of the picture. In fact, my impression was that Egyptian women were vocal, direct, and assertive in ways that are uncommon and even rare in American women like myself. I found Egyptian women much more likely to hold loved ones accountable for their actions when they felt they were being mistreated. And they were more likely to explicitly reject degrading sexual objectification that occurs all too frequently in both America and Egypt.

Many American women would consider the choice for a woman to practice abstinence as repressive, oppressive, and sexist. In the American community that I grew up in, sex is seen as a natural impulse much in the same way that eating and drinking are. In this sense, having responsible sex is more than a right—it is a matter of health. Rather than being heavily influenced by social forces, sex is seen as a primal urge rooted in biology, genetics, anatomy, and hormones. If two consenting adults want to have sex, there is absolutely no reason why they shouldn't.

While I still to a large extent accept this viewpoint, conversations about sex that I had with Egyptian women were very enlightening. Sex was a very big deal to most of the women I talked to, and even to consider being sexual with a partner required a good deal of trust. Often, if a woman felt pressured to have sex or had reason to believe her boyfriend was only dating her to be physical with her, this was grounds for a break up. I remember being totally shocked a week or two after my arrival, when a friend of mine, male, told me that it was not uncommon for romantic relationships in Egypt to be completely platonic, not in the emotional sense but in the physical one. Sexuality had become for me so strongly confused with love that a romantic relationship without sexual activity had become unimaginable.

Sex in Egypt is regarded as a responsibility in a way that would be hard to conceive of in the U.S. In many ways it is considered a risk and is treated as such. And it is a risk not just in the sense of the damage it can do to a woman's reputation—there is also the very real risk of pregnancy. I remember an uncomfortable conversation I had with a friend where she expressed concern about unmarried people having unprotected sex, and the consequences of having a baby when both parents are not established in their careers and lack financial savings. "You have to think about the

child," she said. "What kind of life would the child have?" While this same idea is very prevalent in the U.S., our rate of teenage pregnancies seems to contradict the values that we preach. Considering America, a country with an unfashionably high rate of teen pregnancies, her point rang uncomfortably true (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

As for women's clothing, compelling arguments can be made on both sides as to what kind of dress is more "feminist." In the U.S., more revealing clothing is touted as a sign of a woman's freedom to embrace her sexuality, in addition to being more comfortable than cumbersome layers of clothing. But in Egypt, conservative clothing is claimed to be more comfortable by its advocates, as well as to embody a refusal to be objectified. In short, both arguments use discourses of reclaiming one's body through dressing a certain way. But another point of view would have it that both styles of dress are an expression of the patriarchy and its product, female subordination. In one type of dress, women are pressured to market themselves by maximizing their sex appeal, and in the other, they are encouraged to cover up at the cost of being labeled promiscuous. Why else would women's dress standards be so different from the normative males'? A man can dress for style, comfort, or utilitarian purposes without deep assumptions being made about his sexuality. American patriarchy and Egyptian patriarchy are two sides of the same coin. Rather than being one ugly face, sexism is a hydra with multiple heads.

Of course, each of the viewpoints mentioned above is extremely oversimplified. The point is that being in Egypt taught me how easy it is to condemn something you know nothing about, while at the same time embracing an evil that you have always known. And indeed, being removed from the gender issues in America allowed me look at them in entirely different ways. Actions that I had previously hailed as expressions of sexual autonomy suddenly stood naked in front of me as degrading and cruel forms of objectification, dressed up in nothing more than postfeminist illusions. I had been fooled. Or had I? Drawing the fine line between the labels of gender oppression and sexual liberation is something that, as a result of my experience abroad, I am constantly struggling with.

Embracing the Uncertain

Indeed, this mental dissonance reaches far beyond gender. Everything seemed to be an illusion, and I didn't know what to believe. Having

thrown all of my preconceptions out the window, or at least having attempted to, I fell into an existential crisis. I had lost my constant, my anchor that had secured in me a fundamental belief system. Traveling had uprooted beliefs that had formerly been firmly ingrained in my mind and in my heart. I realized that I may never have had a constant, but it had never mattered before I left my country. Only when I was thrust into situations where all I could expect was uncertainty did my lack of faith become an issue. Only when encountering dominant modes of thinking that were different from my own did I realize how lost I really was.

Religion provides a case in point. Before Egypt, religion and spirituality hardly crossed my mind. I wouldn't have labeled myself as an agnostic or an atheist, because any sort of religious categorization seemed totally irrelevant to me—I refused to define myself through my belief, or lack thereof, in a God.

In Egypt, I came into contact with religion in a way that I had never before experienced in the U.S. I found in Egyptians the idea that religion was more than an aspect of one's life. Rather, it was a way of living and a system of decision-making, especially regarding ethical decisions. This all-encompassing faith was more appealing to me than what my preconceptions of religious people had been in the U.S., for I have to admit that before going abroad I had never talked candidly to any of my Christian friends about their religion.

Furthermore, the classes I took in Egypt on Islam were taught by Muslims, and the material was approached from a Muslim perspective rather than a secularist one. All this pushed me to reflect upon the nature of the divine, and to open my mind to the possibility of a reality beyond the purely material. Questions have been engendered in me that will undoubtedly take years to even come close to finding answers to.

Perhaps the only thing that has become clear is that my experience in Egypt has left me with more questions than answers. I have come to revisit what I thought I already knew and have begun to wonder about things I never even knew existed. Living in another country produced an ambiguity within me, an ambiguity that now continues to shape my worldview, religious outlook, and sense of self. Dealing with this ambiguity and establishing an appropriate place for it within my life has been challenging and at times even distressing as I try to understand my place in the world. But this is only half of the story. The emptiness, disorientation, and realization that I am lost have given rise to a new

set of possibilities and a broader way of understanding the world. These feelings of uncertainty have engendered questions and tensions that I am still nowhere near answering after pondering them continuously. I know that I will never be able to answer many of these questions in the absolute sense, though my discomfort may decrease as I learn to accept this and even welcome it. Acknowledging my lack of absolute knowledge and welcoming challenges to it means recognizing my smallness and imperfect humanity in the face of the universe.

Works Cited

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "About Teen Pregnancy." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.* 21 Nov. 2012. Web. 9 May 2013.

Cole, Donald P. "Where Have the Bedouin Gone?" *Anthropological Quarterly* 76.2 (2003): 235-267. Web. 9 May 2013.