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Objects, memories, and storytelling: experiments in narrating ideas of home

Aya Nassar, Mayada Madbouly, Azza Ezzat, Abeer Abazeed, Nayera Abdelrahman Soliman, Menna Agha, Chihab El Khachab, Amira Elwakil, Laila Mourad & Mai Taha

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How do objects narrate the past, the everyday, and interrogate im/possible futures? How do they undo our 'ideas of home'? What affects do they gather and what subjectivities and different forms of intimacy do they call into conversation? This compendium article brings a visual artist together with nine early career academics researching and archiving fragments from homes in Egypt, Sudan, and Palestine (and their global connections). In doing so the piece offers different practices of narrating and visualising stories of and from home. The article moves from bridges and infrastructure to food and clothes and walls. Through attending to these fragments, the authors invoke questions about the ways in which objects archive colonialism, resistance, revolts, neoliberalism, consumerism, dispersion, migration, and exile. At the core of the article is the visual artist Azza Ezzat's creative interpretation of these nine stories, with a visual rendition that asks how fragments of home become interwoven aesthetically. Ezzat is an Egyptian visual artist whose practice relies on unpacking urban elements and recreating an alternative geography of urban space.

Keywords **storytelling, narration, home, archive, fragments, objects**

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Objects Memories & Storytelling

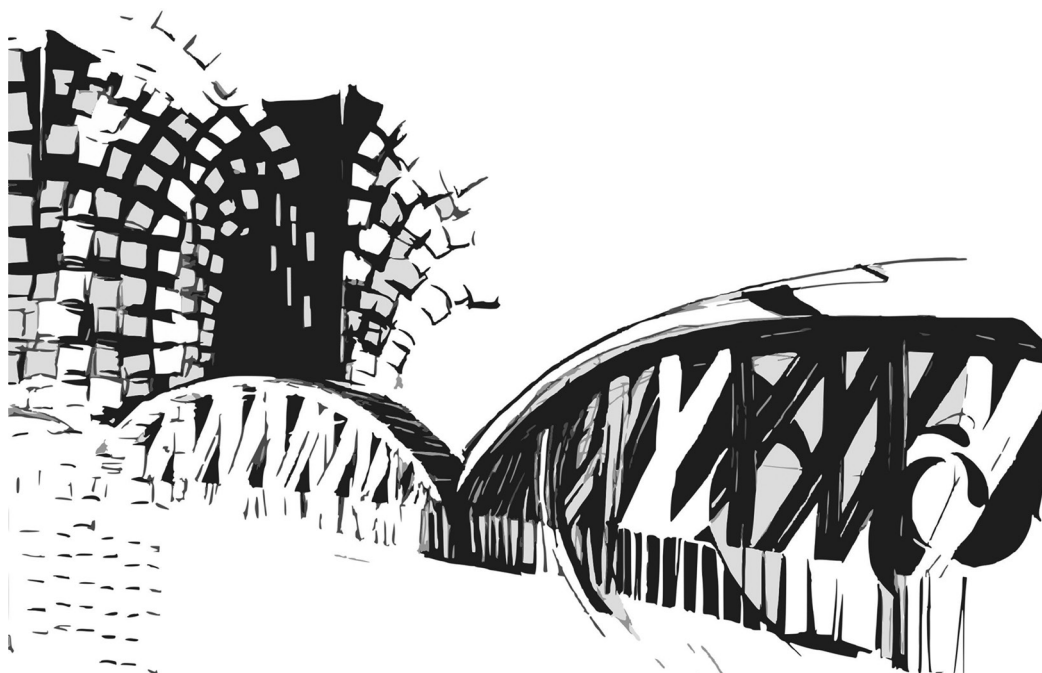
Experiments in narrating ideas of home

Introduction

Aya Nassar and Mayada Madbouly

How do objects narrate the past, the everyday, and interrogate im/possible futures? How do they undo our 'ideas of home'? What affects do they gather and what subjectivities and different forms of intimacy do they call into conversation?

This compendium piece is inspired by the power of fragments to constitute alternative stories of 'home' to those that script far-away homes through ideas of loss or nostalgia. It brings together a group of researchers and creatives who research and archive fragments from and about homes in Egypt, Sudan, and Palestine, including their global connections. In doing so the piece offers





different practices of narrating and visualising stories of and from home, charting connected geographies that are often depicted separately. The article moves from bridges and infrastructure to food and walls. Through attending to these fragments, the authors invoke questions about the ways in which objects narrate stories about colonialism, resistance, revolts, neoliberalism, consumerism, dispersion, migration, displacement, and exile. The core of the article is the artist Azza Ezzat's creative interpretation of these stories, whose visual rendition questions how the fragments of and from home interweave and interact. Indeed, all artwork in this piece is by Azza Ezzat.

The article originated as an online workshop in July 2022, with researchers coming from various disciplines and living in different contexts. Before the workshop, every participant sent a pitch on an object related to their idea of 'home'. Then the discussion we had during the workshop created a collective conversation about how home is perceived, enabling Azza Ezzat to engage with these ideas visually. In this piece we don't aim to establish yet another definition of 'home' from a material or nostalgic perspective. Rather, the fragments gathered here show how images and ideas of home 'travel' (Ahmed 1999) and narrate the intersections between temporality, spatiality, and materiality. By doing so, we collect a shared concern of how daily life objects carry renditions of home. This piece can also be read as an experiment of narrating homes and a collective act of documenting the intersections of our own life (hi)stories as it documents the afterlives of colonialism and settler colonialism, post-independence state, and neoliberalisation.

Olive oil—زيت الزيتون

Mai Taha

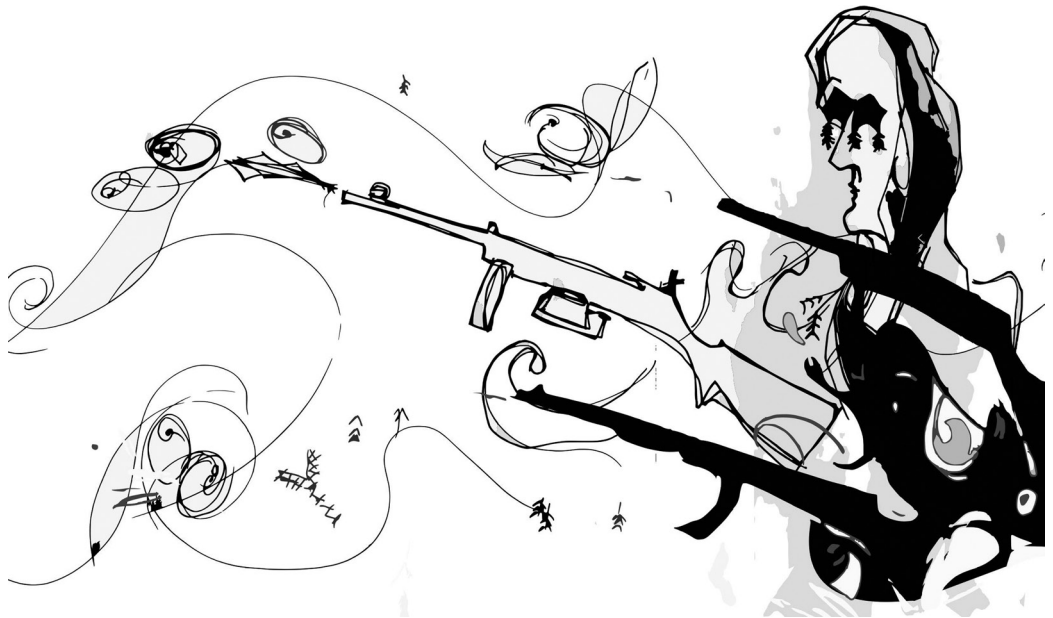
She is telling this story to a young Palestinian researcher in the early 2000s.¹ In fact, she has narrated this story to many other people, not all of them researchers, fishing for anecdotes to populate and enrich their writings. From the generation of the 1936 Arab revolt to the generation of the first intifada, this story reminds us that the fight is at home. It goes as follows: *the British would come to the house; they would arrest people and smash everything. They would mix all the food together: flour with uncooked rice and sugar into a pile and add olive oil, forming an inedible paste of wasted food items.*

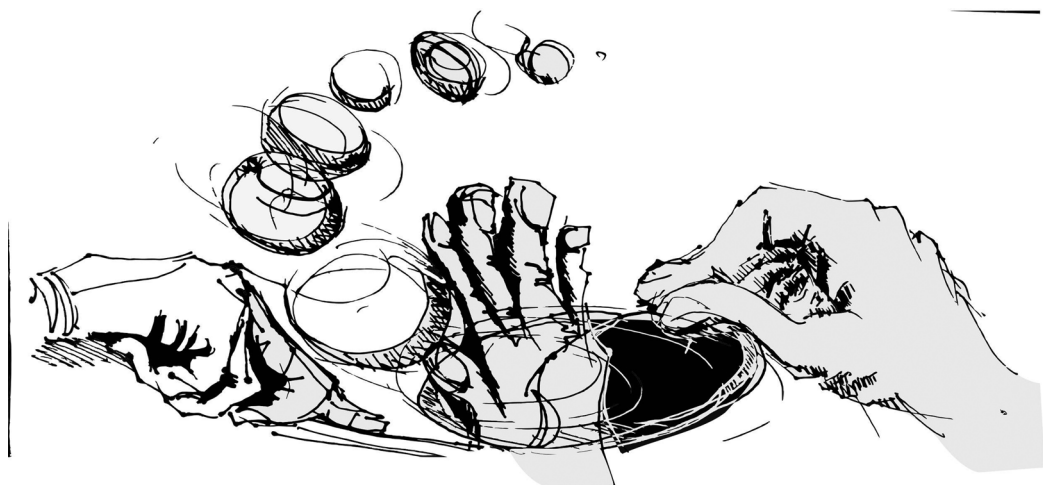
She likes telling this story despite its grimness. Looking at the researcher, with a cup of coffee, she remembers that *after any tensions, the British would gather the women in the Mosque and the men in the village square. The houses would be left open for the search parties that would later ensue. Other than a few home demolitions, and some looting of gold and furniture, they would mix the olive oil with the salt and flour, a paste that was both inedible and also a material trace of the violence of the Mandate where even olive oil gets implicated in the fight.*



She is not perturbed by the changing times. She mocks the ruthless repetition of this act, wasting olive oil, again and again. She recalls images of *the British forces kicking people out of their houses in the early morning only to return in the evening to beds covered in a mix of wheat, barley, and flour, topped with a good dose of olive oil quickly absorbed by the bed sheets, and forming a brown-greenish film.* She reminds the researcher that these small acts of destruction became connected with a line that literally carried those acts to the heart of the village. *At times, the olive oil would form a canal from our home to the village well, as the ground slowly absorbed our food and labour.* The imagery of a canal of olive oil running from the home to the heart of the village reminds us that the home is not only a space of labour, but also one of struggle. Indeed, she remembers the revolutionaries in her family home. *They would knock at the door in the middle of the night looking for food and shelter. Some of them she knew from the village, but others were strangers. Her grandmother would come with a tray of food starting with thyme and olive oil.* In these moments, olive oil became a tool of struggle rather than a weapon by the British Mandate. It became an essential element of the labour of ‘food and water’ necessary for resistance in revolutionary times.

The repetition of the story gestures toward a multiplicity. For *she* is not one person. She is a composite fabulation of many Palestinian women who participated in the 1936 revolution from the home. She and others like her have told different versions of this story to their daughters and granddaughters, friends, and neighbours. It is, after all, an intimate story of the home, its objects, and its people.





Duwee-Douka دوكا.. اءا

Menna Agha

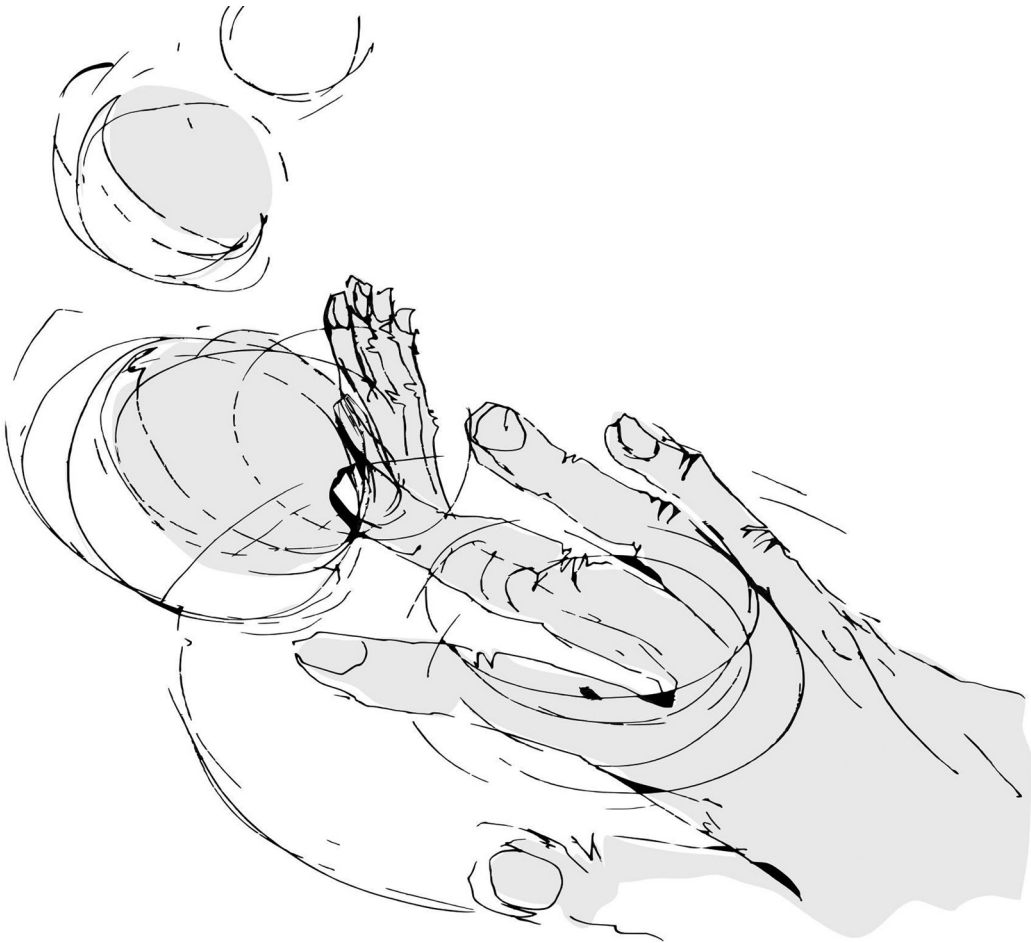
With flat, strong, certain, smooth, shiny, and tender palms, my grandmother would spread layers of liquid(ish) dough on a hot circular surface, the *Duwee*, and only then would the delicious smell emerge to comfort us, the little peckish kids running around a courtyard of a Nubian house in Qustul during the 1990s.

Our grandmothers would continue in mesmerising circular motions, like the whirls of the river from which they were displaced. It felt like magic; the speed, the finesse, the excellence, and the ability to make as much bread as needed to feed everyone around. Not to mention the bottom dough she saved for the last batch on which she will spread sugar and let it melt to make our day, and maybe our days to come. To my eight-year-old self, my grandmother's breadmaking was both magical and mundane. That round surface we called *Duwee* was our cue for warmth, fulfilment, and sometimes surgery treats.

Duwee—as it is called in Nubiin, or *Douka*—as it is known in Arabic, is a circular cooking plane made out of blackened pottery and used to make everyday bread. It is around 40 cm in diameter and is always set on three short posts made out of brick. It would be raised around 30 cm from earth level for my grandmother and mother to squat behind and take the proper position for bread making in a Nubian House. The *Duwee* was so important in Nubian livelihoods that the word for kitchen in Nubiin is *Duwee'n' Noog*, meaning the house of the *Duwee*. My grandmother's *Duwee* was one of the few items she could bring from her ancestral land to *Tahgeer*, meaning the place of displacement after the high dam reservoir submerged most Nubian land in Egypt in the 1960s. It was one of the last remaining traces of our ancestral land; through it, our land was taking care of us as it had done for millennia.

The story of our *Duwee* tells a story of our Nubian land. Nubia was a vast land that was reduced into a number of settlements by Nasser's modernist project of the High Dam. The *Duwee* had its own house. It was an extension of the land. Now we have to settle for cast iron utensils, reduced to fit into the much smaller modern kitchen in diasporic Nubian households like mine. The *Duwee* was demoted from having its own home to becoming an object housed only where a space is found available.

The *Duwee* made Nubian bread types such as *Kabed*, *Sallaba*, and other thin-layered baked foods like *Abreeh*. Most of these breads required a short period of preparation, responding to urgent desires. My mother often bragged about taking freshly made bread to school every day in Qustul, and there is something powerful about the swift rhythm through which the *Duwee* performed its daily rituals. In comparison to these breads, *Battaw* (known as the sun bread)—a part of upper Egyptian traditions—required lengthy preparation periods, including a long resting period in the sun. My grandmother baked *Battaw* during significant events in collaboration with neighbours. To me, *Battaw* was the bread from the sun, and the *Duwee* was from the moon, giving us a lightness and ease to carry burdens of life. It was the care work that rotated non-stop on a *Duwee* until it faded away.



Fava beans—فول

Laila Mourad

On my way to Cairo Airport, before the main road, I spot the famous Hamada Sheraton street food cart selling *ful*, with these words boldly written in Arabic 'if you see beans and do not eat it is the same feeling as when you love someone and can't be with them'. This longing and belonging to *ful*, a staple item in Egyptian households, transforms it into an object that embodies personal preferences, love, and cultural, economic and social practices of everyday life such as cooking, eating, and budgeting household finances.

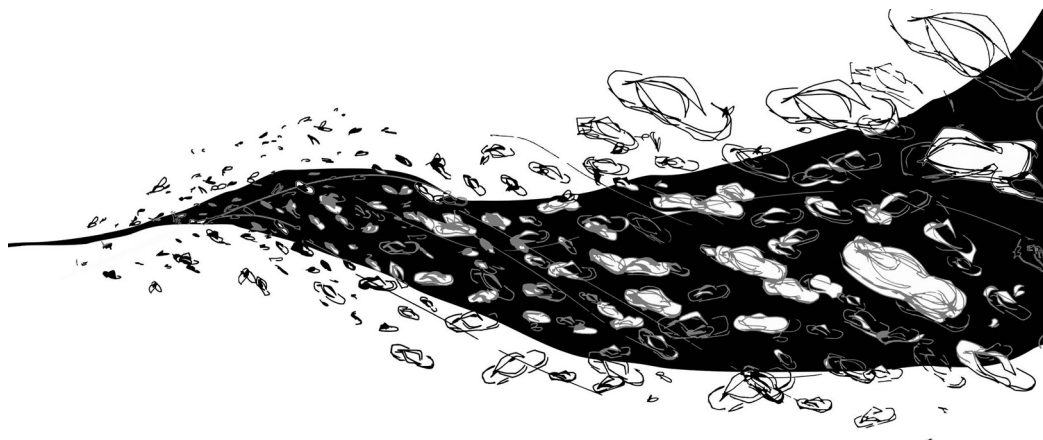


Within most Egyptian homes, *ful* is a dish that often requires sharing the plate or the bread with others. It is best eaten using your hands, to dip bread in it or eat as a sandwich. For me, eating *ful* evokes a sense of family, a reminder of older times. Even preparing and cooking *ful* often evokes discussions, between people and families who have their own tips and tricks and secrets for the best recipe. Yet, *ful* as an everyday item within the home can be a constant reminder of harsh economic realities and the high cost of living. As one popular saying goes: 'I would eat *ful* and walk outside with pride rather than eat *Kebab* and have debt collectors waiting behind my door'. *Ful* is framed as a safe option that will not financially drain you since it is a cheap protein substitute for meat or chicken, which many Egyptians cannot afford to eat. In popular culture *ful* contests these harsh economic realities, as the famous activist poet Ahmed Fouad Negm says: "They eat chicken and pigeons while *ful* has overwhelmed us and itself. Being the affordable, easy, and accessible option, *ful* can evoke feelings of resentment or rejection, against such limited choices and the inability to afford more varied food.

Over the past few years, the Egyptian food market witnessed hyper-commercialization, as did many other aspects of life, and *ful* started to be sold by high-end restaurants at prices only affordable to the upper/upper-middle classes. Modern restaurants and food trucks now frame traditional dishes such as *ful* as 'trendy' and 'modern', rebanding them as authentic objects of nostalgia but disconnecting them from economic and social contexts. Ultimately, there is a love-hate-reject-need relationship that forms between Egyptians and *ful*, one that is shaped and reinforced variously through neoliberal policies, austerity measures, and social stratification over time.

The everyday acts of making, buying, cooking, preparing, and eating food are ingrained in histories and experiences that have been shaped and distorted by, or persisted through, colonial and western cultural influences and power struggles, as well as local and global neoliberal structures. Repositioned through neoliberal reforms and global capitalist forces, traditional dishes such as *ful* nevertheless continue to uphold intergenerational family and communal knowledge of everyday consumption and the sustaining of livelihoods.





The slipper—الشبب

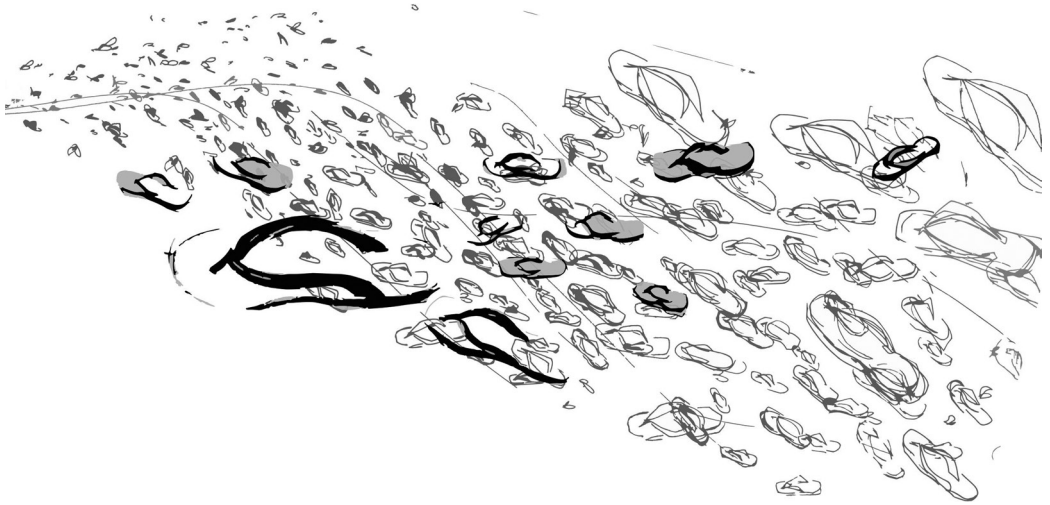
Chihab El Khachab

When I entered the flat in Cairo where I was born, my feet came into contact with a cool, hard surface, sometimes cement, sometimes tiles, ceramics, or marble. The surfaces, most often in light shade, immediately reveal any traces of dust or dirt. So one can wear shoes inside (as a guest) or slippers (as a host) to avoid any impure matter. When I entered the flat in Montreal, where I moved as a child, my feet usually came into contact with a warm, wooden surface. In Canada most inhabitants walk around their homes in socks or barefoot, but my immediate networks—mostly first-generation immigrants from the Maghreb, Eastern Europe, South Asia, and East Asia to Quebec—still wore slippers inside at all times.

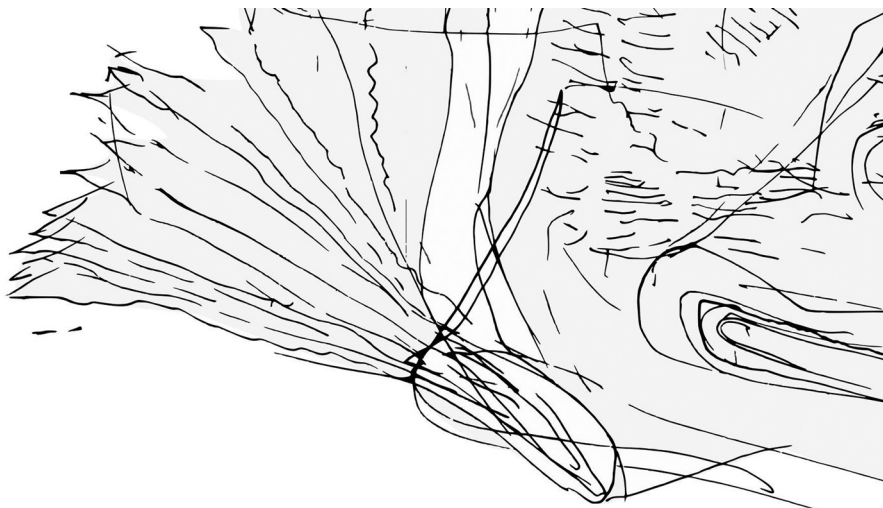
Slippers are humble objects, but their ordinary use is socially complex. I was always struck by the difference between white Quebecois friends, who walked around their homes without slippers, and my immigrant family and friends who could not tolerate this. As a practice, wearing slippers marks a boundary. A physical boundary between the foot's sensitive sole and the home's floor. A symbolic boundary between what is clean (the body) and what is unclean (the ground). A class boundary between those who go around with bare feet (referred to by the pejorative Arabic word, *al-ḥafyanīn*) and those who wear what is regarded as appropriate footwear for well-behaved living.



None of these boundaries are inherent in the object: they are situational and relational. They depend on when and where the slipper is worn, who wears it, and what it looks like. It is noteworthy, for instance, that according to the imagination of the Cairo bourgeoisie, wearing flip flops outside the home is not much better than walking barefoot at home. The slipper is therefore an intriguing boundary object for thinking about what happens to class habitus after migration. Insisting on wearing slippers indoors, even when the immediate physical or symbolic contexts change in the distance between Cairo and Montreal, marks a commitment to inhabiting the home as a bourgeois person. This commitment is enacted every time slipper-boundaries are practiced and enforced; every time those who walk barefoot are ridiculed; every time a parent repeats that children *must* wear slippers as soon as they come home; every time the very feeling of the floor's surface on one's skin elicits shame and disgust.



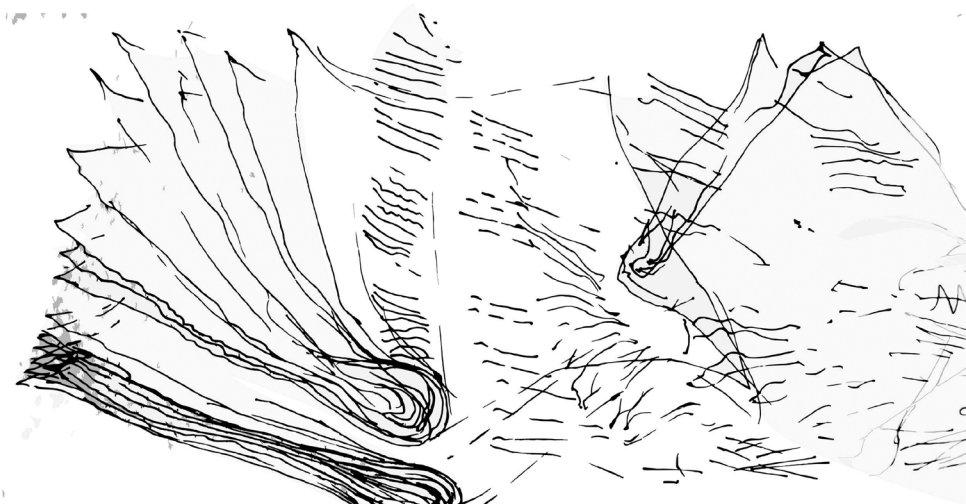
The 'flight of the slipper' refers to the stereotype according to which Arab parents threaten to throw—or indeed do throw—a slipper at their children to discipline them. To me, the flight of the slipper suggests a wider phenomenon, that is, how humble everyday objects can embody the mobility of class markers across borders, even when a migrant's social status changes. It shows an urge to hold onto one's class position when migration puts it in jeopardy. What might be seen as a mere 'holding onto tradition' among Arab migrants wearing slippers in Canadian homes is a more complex instantiation of the desire to cultivate a specific form of bourgeois-ness, which is threatened as people move with their domestic objects.



Newspapers الجرايد

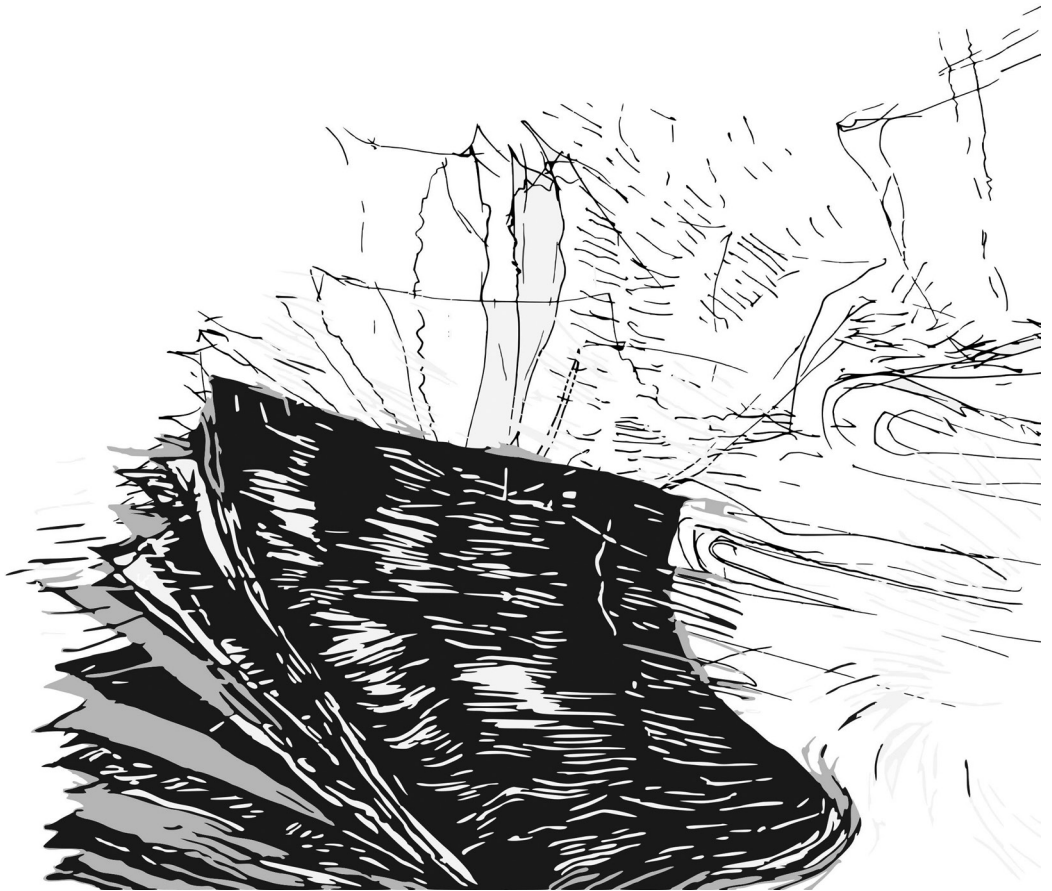
Mayada Madbouly

On Fridays in 2009, I would go with Baba at 11 am to *Souk Al-Zahraa* (Al-Zahraa fresh market) in Cairo to buy our groceries. 11 am is the perfect time to buy everything we need at home and come back before Friday prayers. The trip does not take more than one hour. Once we finish and arrive in front of the building where we live, Baba starts taking out the groceries. I follow his moves and his signs while he orchestrates the whole process. We put the groceries in the entrance of the building, waiting for my sisters and brother to come and help us. Before going up, Baba looks at me and says, 'Don't forget to bring *Al-Waseet* with you'. My parents rarely bought newspapers to read, but they were often keen on taking our free weekly paper '*Al-Waseet*'.² A young man in a red t-shirt would come to our neighbourhood at around 8 am mostly every week and leave a dozen copies in the hall of every building.



Aside from its commercial role in providing information about how the market was going and new fast-food offers, *Al-Waseet* had two main functions: we used its pages as a table cover for our family meals and we used it to clean mirrors and glasses. Thus, taking *Al-Waseet* home became our family tradition. We used to check it every Friday at the entrance of our building, and sometimes take the copies that remained over the weekdays. Its materiality infiltrated our everyday life. Then, for unknown reasons, we stopped receiving it as frequently. *Al-Waseet* was not the only material object that was shaken by disruption of print circulation. Other free objects and gifts such as new year's agendas and calendars also disappeared. I understood later that reducing the print circulation was one of the impacts of the global economic crisis back then.

Holding on to materiality later became my personal travelling tradition that reminds me of home. When I moved to France years later I became keen on keeping the free monthly newspapers I received in my mailbox. And I do the same as my parents used to do: using the papers as a table cover when needed for my meals. So, the materiality of newspapers becomes my travelling family tradition that shapes my living *here* and also ties me to *there*.





Walls of homes—للبيوت حيطان

Nayera Abdelrahman Soliman

The walls of my old room in Cairo were filled with handwritten quotes from the books and songs that I liked in my teenage years. They disrupted our otherwise well-organised house. These writings were one of my first acts to make my room feel like the home I dreamt of. They also expressed what I wanted my parents and others to know about what I liked and believed in. In 2012 I moved to Paris to study, and this was my opportunity to have my own space away from my parents' house. I filled the walls of my 14-metre square room with photos, postcards, and art crafts. It was my safe and magical place. A few years later, when I relocated to my current apartment in Berlin, creating a space on the wall in our living room was the first move my partner and I undertook to make our apartment home. We hung posters, photos, and maps. They have changed over the years, representing how we grew up, and how we changed.

Walls of homes are liminal spaces. They are personal and intimate, part of the inner space of home, sacred and private spaces. At the same time, they are what the inhabitants of the home allow or want their visitors to see and know about them. During my doctoral fieldwork in Suez, Egypt, the walls of each house I visited said something to me about my interlocutors. One of the first interlocutors I met in Suez was a former soldier. The walls of his small living room were all covered by artefacts he had gathered, such as an old *simsimiyya*³, stuffed animals and photos. He was proud of his collection and insisted that I take photographs of it. In each home I visited, the walls said something different: old marriage photographs, photographs of my hosts and their beloved, pictures when they were young, books from ceiling to floor or random landscape images. Our conversations usually traced the walls as they told me about their lives and memories. Usually, there was always something on the walls. With empty walls signifying that the house was not someone's home.

The walls of a city are not so different from the inner walls of houses. They are liminal spaces too, on which people express their personal beliefs, identities, and emotions: from writing their own names to love messages to advertising their services to political slogans. But here in a public shared space. And the more the walls of a city are filled with writings and drawings expressing what its inhabitants feel and think, the more this city feels like home.

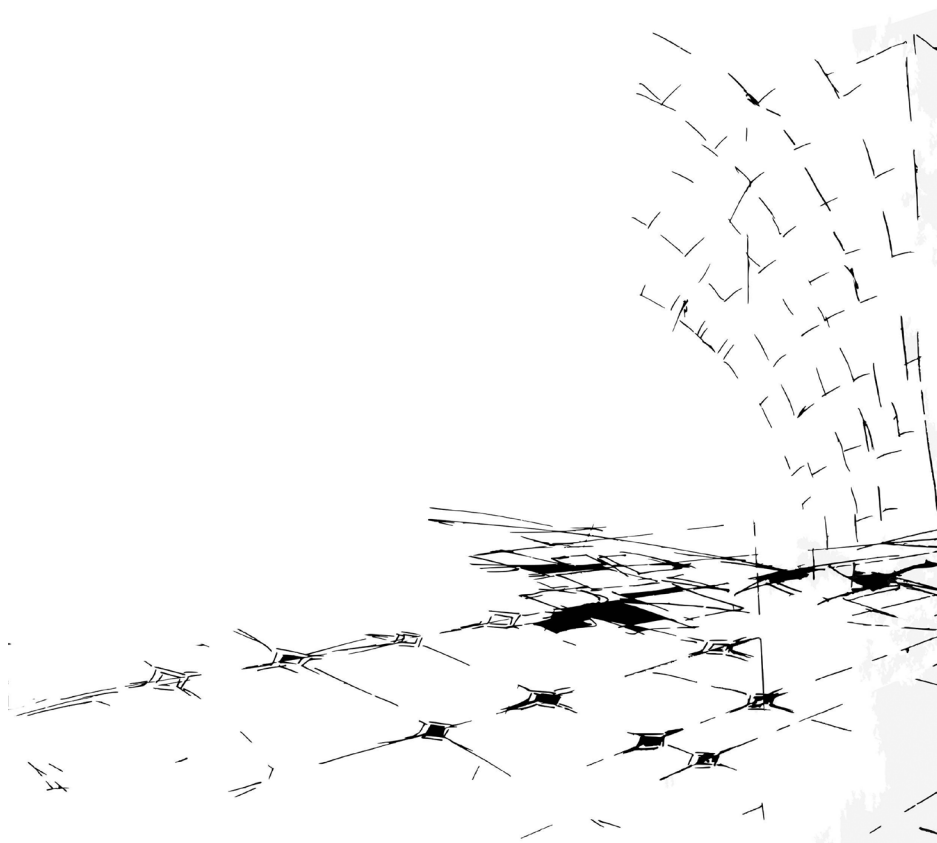


Tiles بلاط السيراميك

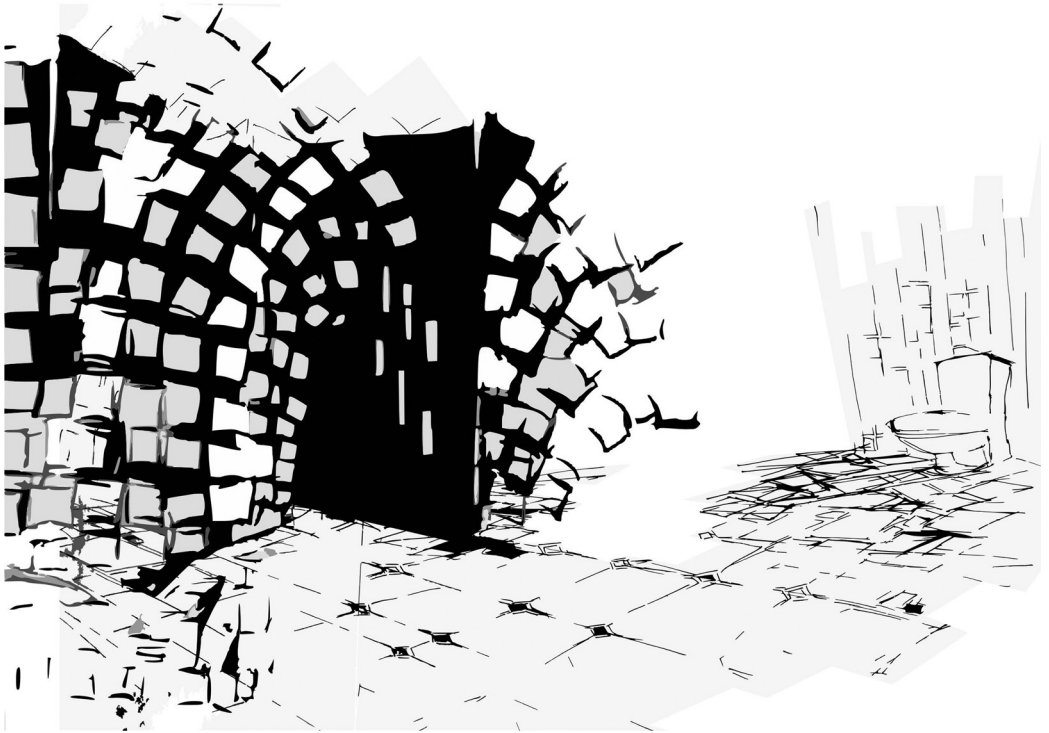
Aya Nassar

I would often stumble over ceramic tiles when doing my doctoral research in Cairo, but then push them to the margins. At that time (around 2016–2017), I was investigating urban change in the 1970s and post-independence Cairo more broadly. I was tracing the 1970s concrete monument of the unknown soldier in Nasr City and managed to get in touch with its designer, the late Sami Rafi' (1931–2019). In my interviews, I wanted to ask about cement, concrete, and the monument. However, Rafi was more excited to tell the stories of his designs for Cairo's underground stations. He recounted how he decided to clad these stations with 30 cm by 30 cm ceramic tiles typical of the 1990s, and in a departure from his earlier public work. The type that is easy to clean, that you find in kitchens and bathrooms. As much as I hate the banality of these tiles, I know and remember them as a defining aesthetic feature of urban Cairo in the 1990s.

I consider the 1970s–1990s as fundamental to our experience of Cairene urban life today. It was the period when the Egyptian state had its protracted flirtation with *Infītah*, the open market, and later the full espousal of neoliberalism in its multiple mutations. Mining these decades through advertisement material in newspapers, journals, and magazines, I would find a repetitive onslaught of a rising new businessmen class advertising bathtubs, toilets, basins, and tiles. An insistent discourse about how, now, you can undo and redo your old bathroom. A promise of a better life condensed around the possibility of making your bathroom anew.



Tiles, new and shiny tiles, were presented as an epitome of class aspiration that coincided with *infitah* and post-*infitah* Egypt, as well as an object of financial speculation and wealth accumulation. So, I pause at this object of desire and the constellation of promises it gathered, all centred on recladding the spaces of domesticity. Cladding the bathroom with ceramic tiles appeared as a fantasy of the good life anticipated by the free market.⁴ By the 1980s and 1990s ‘to explode your old bathroom’—a TV advertisement Jingle—became a mantra and metaphor for the neoliberal individualist focus on change of self: the notion that you are free to change yourself, your relations, and your life and begin anew. In the 1990s, two shopping malls opened in two middle-class neighbourhoods in Cairo, Heliopolis, and Nasr City, with much fanfare. They had their facades cladded in ceramic tiles, like a bathroom, inverted inside-out. For my generation, much of Cairene aspirational urban aesthetics were bound up with these neoliberal promises and fantasies of domesticity and a newly-done bathroom, briefly and for a while, and as much as I was hung on concrete, it is this everyday object of domestic space that lingers with me now.



The photo—صورة

Amira Elwakil

In 2020, I visited home (Heliopolis, Cairo) after several months overseas. During my absence major urban changes through ongoing reconfiguration of the city had taken place; from the displacement of communities to make way for development projects, to the flattening of green public spaces as part of road-widening works. In Heliopolis, five new flyover bridges have been built, an estimated 2,500 trees uprooted (Farouk 2022) and roads in school zones widened with increased speed limits of 60 km/hour.

I took one photograph during that visit to capture this reconfiguration of home and my first encounter with it. I can vividly recall emerging onto one of the main roads near my family home to witness its central gardens being bulldozed as traffic flowed in both directions, sandwiching a strip of sand and piles of cracked asphalt, fleeting ruins that would be swept out of sight to make way for additional road lanes and a flyover bridge. In a state of panic, my instinctive reaction was to reach for my mobile phone and document it. This photograph marked the start of a personal journey of interrogating the question of home and the battle over memory.



Since then, I have taken nearly 2,000 photos of Heliopolis. This is a personal archive I have been compulsively building and adding to an Instagram page I created, *Archiving Heliopolis* (@archivingheliopolis). The photographs not only fix scenes of destruction, but also the everyday mundane that similarly feels to be at risk of disappearance: unremarked building entrances, decaying street signs and the vanishing local *koshk* (kiosques): fragments seemingly collected through a process involving ‘excavations and rag-picking’ (Madbouly and Nassar 2021, 18) that, when pieced together, recreate home. With no focus on aesthetics, I think of the photos as records of the ‘optical unconscious’ (Benjamin 1931), revealing moments and objects often witnessed unconsciously, that have long been shaped by collective memory and affect around Heliopolis.

Multiple similar representations exist on social media, that have meticulously documented sliced buildings standing exposed on the Ring Road, demolished historic shops, and culled palm trees. Others have been assembling a collage of what makes the city, speaking to a precarious temporality but also asserting an urban identity of home that resists erasure. The archives formed on these channels compel us to also reflect on the role that social media plays in this (re-)making of home—but also of the potential precarity of the digital archive as a space of preservation (Hatem, Hallaba, and Ramses 2022).

Three years on, I still go back to the first photograph that I took of the bulldozed gardens and consider how the archival practices myself and others have been engaging in have created a continuum of connections between individuals grappling with similar inquiries and affects about the city and home. How we guarantee the long-term preservation of the archives created and sustain this continuum of connections in a context of disappearance therefore becomes a pertinent question to ask.

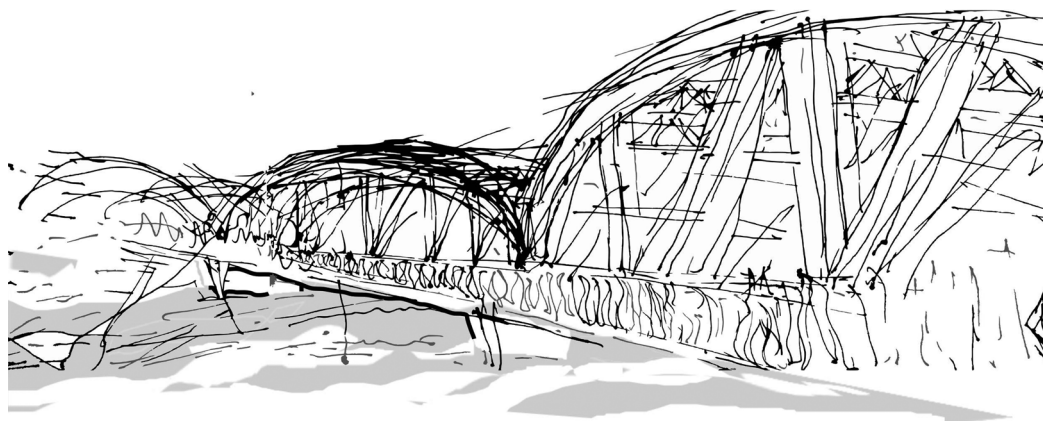


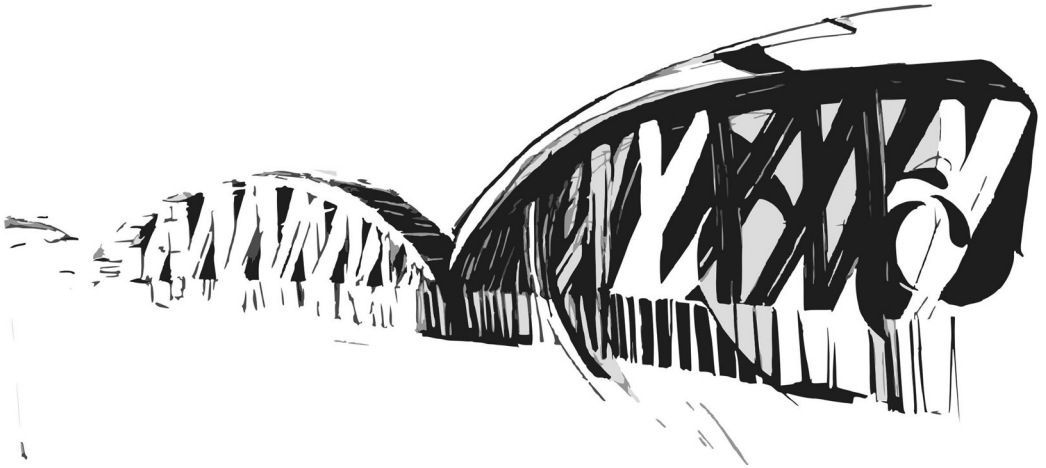
The bridges of the Nile alley—كباري وادي النيل

Abeer Abazeed

My first time visiting Khartoum in Sudan was during my PhD fieldwork in 2018. Once I landed, I got the feeling of travelling back to my hometown—Naser El Nouba centre in Aswan, Egypt—where men wear traditional white *Jallabiyas* and *Immahs*, women are in traditional dress (*toub*), and where I hear Arabic with a Nubian accent. The arid weather and the houses I visited for the interviews in Khartoum had a similar design to the Nubian houses back home, and I could hear the sound of geckos in my accommodation, just like I used to in my family's home in Aswan.

The feeling of home frames identities, which are not fixed but are affected by our movement across places (Gowans 2003). I belong to the third generation of the displaced Nubians who moved outside Aswan to Cairo due to the construction of Aswan High Dam in the 1960s; therefore, Cairo and Aswan constitute my homes. However, in Khartoum during my fieldwork, I found my Nubian culture everywhere in Sudan's capital city. There Nubian culture is in the centre of the nation state not in the periphery as in Egypt. In Khartoum, I also found elements reminding me of my Cairene home.





The Blue Nile Bridge in Khartoum is a material object connecting my home(s) because of its similarity with the *Imbaba* bridge in Cairo. Both current bridges were designed in the early 20th century to function for the passage of vehicles, trains, and pedestrians (Ahmad 2000; Cairoserver 2011). In Egypt, the *Imbaba* Bridge carries me when I travel with my family regularly from Cairo to my home in Aswan. The Blue Nile Bridge in Khartoum connected me as an Egyptian with Sudan; it gave me the feeling of connection with Nubians as a transnational ethnic group.

The bridges as material objects symbolise that home is not only a fixed and private place; rather it is also a 'political scape' where it entangles with indigeneity, nation, and empire (Blunt and Dowling 2006). Besides the feeling of home due to the bridges' architecture, my visit to Khartoum for fieldwork was overwhelmed with debates of colonial relations. When Egypt was under different arrangements of British rule, Sudan was under a dual condominium of Egypt and Britain (1899–1955). This entanglement of colonisation history across nation states interweaved with stories and sentiments of Nubian peoples who inhabit the border areas of Sudan and Egypt and many of them were displaced for constructing mega/national water infrastructure i.e. Aswan High Dam.

Notes

- 1 The text that follows in this piece is a collage of different oral history stories, edited, reimagined, and reassembled into one. I relied on the oral history research done by Faihaa Abdulhadi (2005), Sonia Fathi El-Nimr (1990), Isabella Hammad (2019), and Ted Swedenburg (2003).
- 2 We struggled to find an "accurate" translation that explains at best the idea of this piece. We were between newspapers, leaflets, and classified papers. While the chosen fragment could be labelled as a leaflet or a classified paper, I prefer newspaper as the term used more

commonly in Arabic *gurnâl al-waseet* (Al-Waseet newspaper).

- 3 Musical instrument known in the Suez Canal region.
- 4 This object of fantasy appeared best in Sonallah's Ibrahim novel *Zaat*, where re-doing the bathroom becomes the ongoing and unattainable aspiration for the main protagonist. For a review that dwells on the bitterness of the banality of this aspiration, see: Taha and Salem (2023).

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Aya Nassar is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at Warwick University. Email: aya.nassar@warwick.ac.uk

Mayada Madbouly is at the University of Groningen. Email: m.m.s.madbouly@rug.nl.

Azza Ezzat: All artwork. Visual artist, <https://azzaezzat.art>. Email: 3zza3zzat@gmail.com.

Nayera Abdelrahman Soliman is at the Freie Universität Berlin. Email: nayeraar@zedat.fu-berlin.de.

Menna Agha is Assistant Professor of Architecture at Carleton University. Email: menna.gha@gmail.com.

Chihab El Khachab is at the University of Oxford. Email: chihab.elkhachab@anthro.ox.ac.uk.

Amira Elwakil is Curator of @archivingheliopolis (Instagram), independent researcher and participatory educator. Email: archivingheliopolis@gmail.com.

Laila Mourad is a PhD candidate at York University. Email: lmourad@yorku.ca.

Abeer Abazeed is at the Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Cairo University. Email: Abeer_rabei@feps.edu.eg.

Mai Taha is Assistant Professor at the Department of Sociology, London School of Economics & Political Science (LSE). Email: m.taha2@lse.ac.uk.