Building Life: Faith, Literacy Development and Muslim Citizenship in Revolutionary Egypt

by

Nermeen Mouftah

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Nermeen Mouftah 2014
Abstract

Days after the ouster of Hosni Mubarak, the NGO Life Makers announced the launch of Knowledge Is Power, a campaign to eradicate illiteracy in Egypt. Led by one of the country’s most prominent Muslim preachers, Amr Khaled, Life Makers calls on ‘faith development’ (tanmiyya bi-l-īmān) for a revolutionary literacy movement that sets out to fundamentally reshape religio-political subjectivities in order to build the new Egypt.

Based on sixteen months of fieldwork in Cairo, Egypt (June 2011-August 2012, and April-May 2013), this study uncovers how Islamic notions of knowledge and the foundational injunction to read (the first words revealed of the Quran are believed to be “Read in the name of your Lord”) inform what I call Islamic literacy development. I examine how the campaign is conceptualized and mobilized from above, and interrogate the politics and ethics of how it unfolds on the ground. The ethnography pivots between campaign volunteers’ ethic of action on the one hand, and on the other, the implementation of the campaign in two sites: among mothers in a slum of Old Cairo, and workers at a shipyard in an industrial zone.

This dissertation reaches across the anthropology of Islam and development to understand how conceptions and practices of faith and nationhood are cultivated and disputed. One of the
political effects of the campaign is the mobilization of and contestation over what I call Muslim citizenship. Life Makers fosters Muslim citizenship as a way of being and political relation in revolutionary Egypt. They maintain that the country will progress only when its people look within and turn towards God. Knowledge Is Power is therefore an Islamic-civic project of self-making that makes literacy a virtuous practice to cultivate a specifically Islamic form of modern citizenship.
Acknowledgments

Over the course of researching and writing this dissertation, my feelings of gratitude have been, at times, overwhelming. Sometimes on a long commute or while waiting for an appointment, I used to recall the names of those who extended their kindness, patience, and generosity to me. I hope that I have made some way in expressing my thanks to these special individuals in person. In Egypt, my interlocutors were exceedingly patient with me; I was always warmly hosted for a drink or meal with friends in Batn al-Baqara. I am particularly grateful to the woman I call Umm Hazim and her family who helped weave me into neighbourhood life. At the shipyard, I would like to thank all of the men who shared their stories and writing with me. I am humbled by the learners who allowed me to become a part of their attempts, frustration and boredom in learning to read and write. I hope that this work conveys the dignity of their efforts and lives. Life Makers’ interest in my project facilitated access to classrooms throughout the city, and was essential for my entry into the shipyard. I am grateful to the volunteers for their endurance with my presence and questions. I am particularly grateful to Saleh Muhammad who was not only interested in my project and generous with his time, but whose nickname for me, the Joker, became crucial to my understanding of myself and my fieldwork. He facilitated introductions throughout various levels of the organization, as well as within the literacy development world in Cairo.

The friendships I made between 2006 and 2008 while I worked on youth employment policy in Egypt helped to lure me back to Cairo for fieldwork. Omnia Ahmed is a dear friend and a person whose grace and forbearance I try to emulate. This dissertation benefits from her keen insights on Cairo life. Omnia assisted me with selected transcriptions and translations of nearly inaudible recorded interviews. My days with Amal Saleh and her family were among my most
exhausting and fondest memories of Egypt. Visits with my extended family in Alexandria were a welcome break from work, and were always filled with a new kind of learning. I am especially grateful for the time I spent with my grandmother, Teta Butta, whose strength and humor nourishes me.

I am tremendously fortunate to have a committee who are models in their commitments to their students and their craft. Amira Mittermaier offered tremendous support from the early days of a fledgling interest in reading and religion. I am grateful to her for inspiring my interest in the anthropological study of religion and introducing me to the discipline. Her guidance has been a privilege. During a brief overlap in our fieldwork schedules in Cairo, our occasional discussions over coffee always helped me to encounter my sites and interlocutors anew. Michael Lambek’s prodding questions turned over my assumptions and often set me off in new and fertile directions. As my project transformed into one with literacy at its center, I was fortunate to have Francis Cody’s steady guidance to open me up to thinking about literacy’s social consequences in new ways. My committee has patiently watched over this project, demanding me to clarify, rethink and deepen my arguments and for that I am tremendously grateful.

I wish to thank friends and classmates at the University of Toronto in the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations, the Department for the Study of Religion and Anthropology. The Anthropology writing group offered a critical place to begin writing, and at the University of Illinois at Chicago, where I was warmly welcomed, the Anthropology writing group offered the thoughtful feedback that helped me to conclude. University of Toronto’s Jackman workgroup on Islam offered a supportive environment to explore new ideas and draw connections across different disciplinary approaches to the study of Islam. For their friendship and conversation, I thank Ateeka Khan, Susan Kennel, Rebekah Zwanzig, Emily Hemlow,
Hicham Safieddine, Noa Shaindlinger, Susan Benson-Sokmen, Mathew Gagne, Carolyn Ramzy, Basit Iqbal, Youcef Soufi, Sadaf Ahmed, Kori Allen, and Secil Dagtas.

I am greatly indebted to dear friends who held me up over the last years, especially Deena Douara, Grace Wu, Raneem Azzam, Mark Freeman, and Sarah Millermaier. I could not have made it through the final stretch without Katherine Hallemeier’s unflagging support and wisdom. Emmanuelle Stefanidis and Alexandre Caiero were close friends to turn to for unending conversation in Egypt, and beyond. Vivian Solana Moreno and Yasmine Moataz have been careful readers, partners in writing and wonderful friends. My husband, Junaid Quadri, was involved in this project from its beginning; he has listened to me talk out the ideas, and pored over its pages with his discerning eye. His companionship and laughter are my life’s greatest pleasures.

My family has patiently endured my comings and goings for several years now. I hope that I will somehow be able to return their understanding, love, and encouragement. My older sisters, Maye and Nadine Mouftah continue to be my first teachers and show me the art of living through their own examples. My parents, Ebtisam and Hussein Mouftah, encouraged me to pursue my interests, even when they did not always seem practical. The memories of Egypt that they shared became the kernel of my interests not only in Egypt, but in how I saw the world from a young age. Fieldwork accidentally became a way to excavate their stories, and learn the place and people anew, including my own mom and dad.

I made the decision to conduct fieldwork in Egypt after it became clear that my original proposal to go to Damascus would be impossible to pursue, given the escalated violence there. From Cairo I watched the latest news of civil war there. The changes that so many of us hoped for as I set out to start my fieldwork have yet to come. While this dissertation is in some ways a story of (the limits of) optimism, I am moved by the ones who most believe that what started in
late 2010 and spread across the region, is an unfinished project. My deepest respect and gratitude is to those who have laboured, sacrificed, and lost in their struggle. I dedicate this work to them.
Note on Transliteration and Translation

I have adopted the transliteration guidelines of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES)*. For frequently used terms like hadith, IJMES does not employ diacritics. The exceptions to IJMES form include Quran(ic) instead of Qur’an(ic); I do not employ diacritics in names, or employ ayn (‘) or hamza (ʾ) when they appear at the start, so ‘Amr, is Amr. To convey the sounds and meaning of my informants, I render Egyptian colloquial phrasing according to the spellings of Badawi and Hinds (1986). This includes changing the letter ḥīm (j) to ḡīm (g) and the letter ṣāf (q) as hamza (ʾ). Any further departures from this form to facilitate reading are noted in the text. I diverge from IJMES’s spelling of well known public figures who spell their names differently.

Translations of the meaning of the Quran are that of M.A. Abdel Haleem. The English translations of hadith and other Arabic texts are each noted. All other translations are my own.

Many of my interlocutors requested that I preserve their names in my writing. In accordance with their wishes, the names of public officials and figures, as well as Life Makers volunteers and Arab Contractors workers are the names of my interlocutors. I employ pseudonyms for all others.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................ iv  
Note on Transliteration and Translation....................................................................... viii  
Table of Contents .......................................................................................................... ix  
List of Figures ................................................................................................................ xi  
List of Appendices ......................................................................................................... xii

## Part I: Reading, Writing, Revolution

### Introduction: Of Books and Bodies........................................................................ 2
  Reading in Revolution .................................................................................................. 6  
  Building Life ............................................................................................................... 14  
  Making Faith Legible—Il/legible Subjects ................................................................ 17  
  Muslim Citizenship ..................................................................................................... 23  
  Amr Khaled and Life Makers ..................................................................................... 31  
  A Message to the Youth .............................................................................................. 33  
  Islamic Literacy Development: Between Faith, Scripture, and Developmentalism .... 37  
    Corporate Social Responsibility ............................................................................. 39  
    Faith (and) Development ....................................................................................... 41  
    Literacy, Islam, the Quran ..................................................................................... 46

### Methods: On Being the Joker .................................................................................. 50
  Welcome Back ............................................................................................................. 53  
  Ethnography of a Campaign ...................................................................................... 55

## Part II: Making Faith Legible

### Chapter 1: From the “Unlettered Prophet” to National Fetish.................................. 63
  The Unlettered Prophet and the Command to Read ................................................... 69  
    Revelation ............................................................................................................... 71  
  From the Miracle of the Book to the Miracle of Books ............................................ 74  
  The Excellences of Quran Reading .......................................................................... 77  
  Textual Circulation and the Emergence of Autonomous Reading ......................... 79  
  Going to the Fair! ....................................................................................................... 83  
  A History of Literacy Development in the Present ................................................... 86  
  Conclusions ............................................................................................................... 92

### Chapter 2: Success: A Reformist Hermeneutic ......................................................... 94
  Reading Is Life .......................................................................................................... 99  
  The Hermeneutics of Holy Books .......................................................................... 110  
  The Egyptian Bible Society ...................................................................................... 113  
  Conclusions .............................................................................................................. 123

### Chapter 3: The Politics and Ethics of Islamic Literacy Voluntarism ......................... 125
Two Scenes on September 21, 2011 .......................................................... 125
The Politics of Doing Good .......................................................................... 129
Faith: Ahmed and Mona .............................................................................. 135
Sincerity Is a Difficult Thing ....................................................................... 140
   An Illustration, Or the Lawyer who Wanted To Be a Teacher .................. 146
   An Architect without Work, Or the Avid Photographer ......................... 149
Optimism and Death .................................................................................. 153
Acting For/ To Be Acted Upon ..................................................................... 157
Conclusions ................................................................................................. 161

Part III: Il/legible Subjects

Chapter 4: Development and Desire in a Cairo Slum ................................. 165
   Literacy Development as Beyond Khayr .................................................. 170
   Responsibility in the Making of Motherhood ......................................... 178
   Ambivalent Desire .................................................................................. 185
   Producing Desire for Literacy .................................................................. 188
   Conclusions ............................................................................................ 195

Chapter 5: Immediacy and Affirmation: Quran in the Absence of the Mus'haf ................................................................................. 197
   What is the Meaning of “Small Kindnesses”? ........................................ 203
   Meaning through Mediation .................................................................... 210
   The Case of an Improper “T”: A Story of Mispronunciation ................. 215
   Authority of the Text .............................................................................. 219
   Literacy and Quran in Conversation ..................................................... 223
   Conclusions ............................................................................................ 227

Chapter 6: The Production of Happiness: Self-Expression at Work .......... 230
   Arab Contractors, Egyptian Workers, and the Revolution ...................... 235
   Beginnings: On Being the Gāhil ............................................................... 241
   Literacy as Social Discipline ................................................................... 247
   Administrating Demands ........................................................................ 250
   Self-Expression and Complaint ............................................................. 253
   The Final Exam ..................................................................................... 264
   Conclusions ............................................................................................ 266

Postscript ...................................................................................................... 269
   Six Minutes ........................................................................................... 269
   Hope as (Another Person’s) Method ....................................................... 271
   Summary ................................................................................................. 275
   Post-Literacy, Post-Revolution ............................................................... 277

Bibliography ............................................................................................... 279

Glossary and Abbreviations ....................................................................... 306
List of Figures

Figure 1: A street artist depicts Emad Effat on the wall of a government building the day after Effat’s murder as the Institut d’Égypte burns. (YouTube still: Shaykh Emad Effat on Tahrir Wall) ......................................................................................................................................................... 4

Figure 2: Amr Khaled and Muhammad Mu’min in an episode of Tomorrow Is Better in Batn al-Baqara .................................................................................................................................................................................. 101

Figure 3: Amal in front of a classroom at the community centre in Batn al-Baqara ..................... 149

Figure 4: Umar (center) with two worker-students, Abd el Nabi (right) and Rady (left) at the Arab Contractors’ Ma’ sara Shipyard .................................................................................................................................................................................. 152

Figure 5: Map of Batn al-Baqara produced by volunteers................................................................. 173

Figure 6: Poster from literacy campaign in the Literacy Museum, Regional Centre for Literacy in Rural Areas for the Arab States (ASFEC), Sirs al-Layyan, Menoufia................................................................. 178

Figure 7: Vodafone media on Knowledge Is Power in Investor magazine. .................................... 178

Figure 8: Tawfiq (right) and Rafat (left) in class .................................................................................. 244

Figure 9: Sayyid rewrites his first paragraph...................................................................................... 259
List of Appendices

Appendix A: Glossary and Abbreviations
Part I:
Reading, Writing, Revolution
Introduction: Of Books and Bodies

in kuntu ‘adamin, fa-l-‘adamu ghayr al-ma’dūm
al-‘adamu idhā muqābilu mawjūd
ka-l-zilām fī muhajahittin al-nūr
ka-l-qā’il muhajahitt al-fa’il
wa-l-mirāya fī al-muhajahitin al-shams

If I am non-existent, non-existence is not to not exist
Non-existence is the opposite of presence
Like the darkness faces the light
Like the one who speaks faces the one who acts
And the mirror faces the sun

Lyrics from Ali Talibab's Perfection

Cairo, mid-December 2011. Almost a year of revolution. After three weeks of demonstrations in front of the cabinet building where protestors demanded civilian rule, military forces initiated a violent crackdown. Three days of live fire, concrete projectiles, and molotov cocktails. Egyptian television reports show images of injured bodies being carried through the streets to field hospitals. Among the casualties is the Institut d’Égypte, a research center and library, located on a corner of Tahrir Square. Black-grey smoke rises from the building, flames lick out of gaping windows.

The Institute, established by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1798, was the research heart of the French campaign in Egypt (1798-1801), and as it burns, Egyptian television announcers inform their audience that it was home to 200,000 of the most valuable and rare books in the country. As the flames do their work, political and intellectual figures describe the Institute as a beacon of Egyptian heritage and civilization, and an artifact of the richness of Egyptian culture. Protestors blame security forces for igniting the fire and failing to put it out for several hours, but many officials blame protestors for causing the
blaze and accuse them of looting. Throughout these days of violence and in the weeks and months to come, the image of this rare collections library in flames became a symbol of Egypt's self-destruction. Many seemed to forget that they had never known of its existence. The library became visible only in its destruction.

During these same days, violence towards two specific human bodies were discussed alongside the burning of the library: the fatal shooting of Shaykh Emad Effat, a senior official of Egypt’s Dar al-Ifta, a well loved religious figure, and a revolutionary; and the abuse of an unnamed woman captured in a viral YouTube clip depicting soldiers dragging and beating the veiled protestor, causing her clothing to lift above her head and expose her body. Effat’s murder as well as the beating of the unarmed woman became evidence of the military’s indecency. Yet despite the political significance of the murder and beating, the burning of the library became the primary vehicle for national mourning, and occupied public discourse alongside the loss of lives. Images of the burning library circulated alongside images of human bodies being beaten, injured, and killed.
As the library burned, bystanders rushed to rescue the books, moving quickly to find what they could, for fear that the already caved-in roof would cause the entire building to collapse. Some emerged cradling smoldering pages in their arms. Others formed a human chain around the building to protect its contents from looting. A committee emerged, the Popular Committee for Rescuing the Institute. They supported the efforts of the National Library, Dar al-Kutub, to collect pages and deliver them to nearby pick-up locations. This citizen action was reminiscent of another on the 28th of January, 2011, when the flames of the burning National Democratic headquarters—a few hundred meters away from the Institute—came into close proximity with the National Museum. In both cases, ordinary citizens came to rescue their national artifacts, not confident that the state could or would protect the country’s antiquities. It was also similar to the emergence of neighborhood committees that defended their streets when police were absent during the eighteen-day uprising (January 25-February 11), as well as the committees to clean the streets following Mubarak’s ouster (El-Meehy 2012, Winegar 2011). Many of these volunteers articulated their actions as part of an emerging sense of ownership of and desire to participate in their country—they understood their actions as forms of civic responsibility.

The Prime Minister of the moment, Kamal Ganzouri, appointed by the military weeks earlier, aimed his criticism at protestors. General Adel Emara, member of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), referred to the fire as “a shame for every Egyptian.” Zein Abdel-Hady, who ran the country’s main library stated, “I haven’t slept
for two days, and I cried a lot yesterday. I do not like to see a book burned. The whole of Egypt is crying.” Mohammed al-Sharbouni, the Institute’s director, told state television, “The burning of such a rich building means a large part of Egyptian history has ended.”

Reflecting a perspective different from state officials, historian Khaled Fahmy wrote in the literary magazine *Akhbar al-Adab*:

> [M]y greater anger vis-à-vis the sudden interest in the burning of the institute stems from the fact that we are not addressing the real problem that has led to it. It is not that the building was unequipped with firefighting devices, or that the army failed to secure it. The real tragedy is that nobody—not even scholars—knew of its existence in the first place, nor did those who lament the lost manuscripts ever bother to read them. The real value of a book is not its rarity or high cost, but rather the information it contains. And the significance of a library is not measured by the number or scarcity of its books, but rather by how many read those books. A library that is not frequented by anyone, and that people only notice when it is set ablaze, is worthless.¹

Fahmy employed the fire at the library to draw attention to a deficit in reading in Egypt, questioning the value of an unread book. Rather than mourn the loss of the books as reified objects, Fahmy bemoans a country that does not access its libraries, or read books. His intervention raised the national debate about “Egypt’s education crisis,” most notably captured in the country’s high rate of illiteracy.

This dissertation examines how the act of reading became a practical plan of action to rebuild the country, one that revived a national fetish for books and reading. I explore how a campaign mobilized to make Egypt a nation of pious readers and made literacy a project to transform selves in a conception of Islamic development that sutures practices of self-making to Egypt’s progress. As I illustrate, the literacy campaign took the revolution as the point of departure to teach literacy as foundational techniques to

¹ Fahmy translated the original Arabic piece into English for publication in *Egypt Independent* (2011). It was also later published in *Cultural Anthropology* (2012).
transform the subject, lift spirits and strengthen faith, to teach self-reflection and self-expression as well as familial and civic responsibility, and ultimately to bring these reformed subjects together in an Egyptian renaissance (*nahḍa*).

**Reading in Revolution**

Days after the ouster of Hosni Mubarak, Vodafone Egypt announced an initiative to eradicate illiteracy. With the launch of Knowledge Is Power (KIP, *Al-ʿIlm Qūwa*), Vodafone cooperated with one of the country’s most prominent Muslim preachers, Amr Khaled (b. 1967). Khaled’s youth organization, Life Makers, articulates literacy as an Islamic obligation, a form of worship (ʿibāda) and the first step to “build Egypt” (*banāʾ maṣr*). With no previous experience in literacy training, Life Makers led the campaign not because of their technical expertise, but because of the organization’s strong volunteer base and Khaled’s ability to inspire tens of thousands of young Egyptians to participate in community projects. The campaign mobilizes an Islamic “faith-based” (*īmānī*) activism to promote literacy development within Cairo’s informal settlements (*ʿashwāʾ iyyāt*) and among workers (*ʿummāl*) in major factories. At a press conference to launch the campaign, Hatem Dowidar, CEO of Vodafone Egypt, remarked on KIP’s scale, stating that it is the single largest Vodafone Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) project anywhere in the world. KIP’s campaign for literacy not only intended to develop good citizens in order to participate in the country’s development and democracy, but it also departed from the old method of addressing Egypt’s illiteracy through the high-profile

---

2 Note that the colloquial Arabic term to refer to literacy classes is *mahw al-ummayya*, which literally means the ‘eradication of illiteracy.’ There is no single colloquial term for literacy, although official reports employ the Modern Standard Arabic term “*al-qarāʾiya*” when reporting literacy rates. A range of terms are employed to describe the identity of a literate and nonliterate person that I detail below.
government programming of Suzanne Mubarak. KIP would be taking over from where the Mubaraks left off in a campaign that made reading both an Islamic obligation and a civic duty.

Based on sixteen months of fieldwork in Cairo, Egypt (June 2011-August 2012, and April-May 2013), this study uncovers how Islamic notions of knowledge and the foundational injunction to read (the first words revealed of the Quran are believed to be “Read in the name of your Lord”) inform what I call Islamic literacy development. I examine how the campaign is conceptualized and mobilized from above, and interrogate the politics and ethics of how it unfolds on the ground. My ethnography pivots between campaign volunteers’ ethic of action on the one hand, and on the other, the implementation of the campaign in two sites: among mothers in a slum of Old Cairo, and workers at a shipyard in an industrial zone.

The KIP campaign advocated for the ‘right’ kind of reading, which included debates over which texts are most ‘beneficial’ (mufid), as well as how they are to be read, taking place in sites ranging from the Cairo International Book Fair to literary salons to public Quran recitations. Within this vast world of Egypt’s reading culture, I explore how the campaign mobilized books and reading to make all of Egypt literate in five years. By moving through these distinct sites, I examine how Life Makers attempts to transcend religious, generational, and class cleavages through their appeal to faith in God. My research reaches across the anthropology of Islam and development to understand how

3 While I refer to KIP as a national campaign, it was launched in nine of the countries twenty-seven governorates: Cairo, Giza, Alexandria, Sohag, Minya, Beni Suef, Al-Menoufia, Al-Sharqya, and Suez. These are the nine most populous governorates, and according to KIP, the ones with the highest rates of illiteracy. These governorates also include urban centers and universities, which enables volunteer recruiting.
conceptions and practices of faith and nationhood are cultivated and disputed in a literacy campaign that teaches a particular reformist vision of Islam.

As a literacy campaign borne out of the January 25th revolution, *Knowledge Is Power* builds on a long history of literacy breakthroughs that have accompanied national revolutions. H.S. Bhola (1982) and Robert Arnove and Harvey Graff (1987) demonstrate the role of literacy movements amidst large-scale moral and political consensus-building projects in the twentieth century (e.g. USSR 1919-1939, Vietnam 1945-1977, Brazil 1967-1980, and China 1950-1980). Arnove and Graff illustrate how literacy was a concern of religious authority and the state, and that literacy development is not about the acquisition of skills for reading and writing, but rather is part of a larger social change. ⁴

They observe:

Historically, the initiation of a literacy campaign has been associated with major transformations in social structures and belief systems. Typically, such campaigns have been preceded and accompanied by more gradual changes, such as the spread of religious doctrine, the growth of market economies, the rise of bureaucratic and legal organizations, and the emergence of national political communities. But usually there is a profound, if not cataclysmic, triggering event: a religious reformation or a political revolution, the gaining of political independence and nationhood.

(4)

In addition to the historical precedent for literacy campaigns that accompany moments of revolution, in Egypt the turn to literacy was in some ways a continuation of the former regime’s and international development organizations’ literacy development activities. Literacy has been one of the country’s largest and most enduring development projects since the establishment of the Republic of Egypt in 1953, when Gamal Abdel

---

⁴ For a historical account of transformations towards higher literacy rates in a neighbouring country, see Ayolon’s (2004) depiction of the rise of literacy in Palestine from 1900-1948. He describes the role of European and later Zionist-Jewish influence in bringing about the technological and cultural shifts that created the conditions for autonomous reading.
Nasser championed modern education as essential to the state’s progress. In the 1990s, First Lady Suzanne Mubarak became the patron of literacy as a major social intervention to modernize women and families. She created a host of institutions and programs, including the building of libraries and initiating government-subsidized publications, as well as establishing the General Authority for Adult Education (GAAE). Still, though, in a significant way, KIP did follow the historical precedent of mass education movements coinciding with times of revolution.\(^5\) In this way, this dissertation extends the comparative study of literacy campaigns through the Egyptian case, while also illuminating a particular form of revolutionary action within the context of the Middle East uprisings.

Despite Egypt’s long-term efforts, 28% of adult Egyptians—some 17 million—are not literate, making Egypt’s nonliterate population among the largest in the world;\(^6\) In fact, Egypt is among the countries known as the E9, the countries of the world with the highest populations of illiteracy.\(^7\) Alongside state-centric curricula, many religious organizations, both Muslim and Coptic, play a leading role in adult education. The impact of religiously-sponsored literacy programs is significant because their reading and writing practices propagate discipline, belonging, and civic attachment, while influenced by and

\(^5\) For monographs on revolutionary literacy campaigns, see Clark (2000) on Russia’s literacy movement and Peterson on southern China (1997). In India, Cody (2013) describes a moment of decline for Nehruvian state, the rise of Hindu nationalism, and most significantly, the rise of economic neoliberalism (9).

\(^6\) According to the United Nations data, this number is a significant improvement from 1990, when the literacy rate was at 44%, and rose in 2000 to 55.6%. UNESCO projects that by 2015, the rate will be 73.8% (Huebler and Lu 2012).

\(^7\) UNESCO designates the developing countries with the largest populations of adults with no access to basic education as the E9. The group includes Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan. According the UNESCO, of the world’s 771 million nonliterate people, 70% live in E9 countries. (Education For All 2014)
shaping scriptural hermeneutics.

Reaching back further than twentieth-century revolutions, the Protestant Reformation is a watershed moment for literacy in sixteenth-century Europe when Martin Luther advocated for a vernacular reading of the Bible. As I illustrate through KIP as well as Khaled’s broader cultural renewal program, Khaled similarly advocates for autonomous reading as a desired relationship between the individual and the Quran. Still, as I show, his program is at once for reading the Quran as well as for much more than deciphering God’s Word. Unlike the Reformation (and its effects on how the Bible should be made accessible to readers), Life Makers’ Islamic literacy development does not make the Quran accessible through changes in language, but rather through the ability to decipher the text. I explore this difference between Luther’s project and Khaled’s in the second chapter through an analysis of the Egyptian Bible Society’s (EBS) longstanding literacy program in Egypt.

In this dissertation I use the terms ‘autonomous’ or ‘independent’ reading, while other adjectives to describe the reading taught in literacy may include ‘silent’ or ‘private’ reading. My point is to stress the ability to independently decipher words as the marker of literacy. I am interested in how this autonomous reading comes to be understood as an internal practice (an ability more important to the ideologies of literacy planners and teachers than the matter of privacy that ‘private reading’ may suggest). While I show that literacy development invests in the powers of self-making through autonomous reading, I

---

8 See Cavallo and Chartier (1999) for a history of reading in the West that describes reading practices as both ‘silent’ and ‘private,’ among other distinguishing features of reading practices.

9 On literacy ideologies, see Heath (1983) and Street (1984, 1993); specifically with regard to Islamic textualities and modes of education, see Mitchell (1988) and Messick (1993). For an account of the discussions and debates of the ideological model in literacy, see Collins and Blot (2004).
also draw attention to the sorts of relations that are formed through collective reading, particularly reading within the family. In this way, autonomous reading is not a lone practice, but an individual skill that can be done with others.\(^\text{10}\)

KIP gained momentum in mobilizing the youth of the revolution as the leaders of the literacy movement. Within the first three weeks, they enlisted seventy thousand volunteers. The high number indicates the desire to translate the aspirations of the revolution into concrete action. While the KIP curriculum closely resembles state curricula, the distinction is in how KIP implements the campaign through an affective pedagogy of faith, hope, and happiness. One of the political effects of the campaign is the mobilization of and contestation over what I call Muslim citizenship. Life Makers fosters Muslim citizenship as \textit{as a way of being} and \textit{political relation} in revolutionary Egypt. They maintain that the country will progress only when its people look within and turn towards God.

While Khaled preaches to a global audience and promotes the idea of Muslim unity (Echchaibi 2010, Winegar 2014), he also stresses the importance of Islam in Egypt and Egypt’s place in Islamic civilization, particularly in his post-Mubarak teachings. To be a good Muslim is to be a good national citizen and vice versa. I employ the language of citizenship to draw attention to Khaled’s political project to “Build the Person of the Renaissance” (\textit{Banāʾ Insān al-Nahḍa}), which was also the title of his first book following the revolution in 2012.\(^\text{11}\) Recourse to the language of citizenship helps clarify the political

\(^{10}\) Note that my use of autonomous differs from Street’s critique of Ong and Goody, who Street argues employ an “autonomous view of literacy” as opposed to a “context-dependent and power-laden” one (2003).

\(^{11}\) Renaissance (\textit{nahda}) is a term with a specific history in Egypt that I will explore in the second chapter.
implications of Khaled’s venture—particularly at a moment when notions of the political are being reconfigured. KIP’s campaign to make literacy a virtuous and patriotic duty suggests new ways to conceive of one’s piety in relation to the nation.

The central argument of this ethnography is that *Knowledge Is Power*’s literacy development is an Islamic-civic project of self-making, with ambitions to transform a country in flux. The campaign makes the reading, of texts both sacred and mundane, a virtuous practice to cultivate a specifically Islamic form of citizenship. The currency of a specific Quranic verse that became a popular touchstone immediately following Mubarak’s ouster is revealing: “God will change the condition of a people only when they change what is in themselves” (13:11). The verse was central to Khaled’s revolutionary preaching, that a revolution within is necessary to bring about real change for Egypt. The intersection of practices of self-formation for the progress and development of the nation reveals conceptions of and programs for modern national improvement that identify the individual as a locus of national change.

Muslim citizenship is a particular revolutionary understanding of Islamic-civic responsibility and a way to plan for Egypt’s political and religious future. It is not an “Islamist” platform for a Muslim state, nor is it concerned with Islamic political theory or legislation derived from the Quran and sunna. Unlike other Islamic reformers working both before him as well as contemporarily who make explicit recourse to *muwātana*, Khaled establishes the authenticity of his projects precisely in how they are not political. Proponents of an Islamic state, such as members of the Muslim Brotherhood party or any

---

12 In 2003, Khaled hosted a television series with the vernacular rendering of part of the verse as its title, *Until They Change What Is in Themselves (Hatta Yughayyirū bi-Anfusihum)*. The program was aired during American-led strikes on Iraq, a war the Egyptian leadership and broad public opinion was firmly against. Khaled thus situated the program to address what a moment of political crisis.
of the Muslim Salafi political parties, would likely deem Khalid’s form of Muslim citizenship to be neither ‘Islamic’ nor ‘political’ enough for their own agendas.

But, as I will demonstrate, Muslim citizenship powerfully draws on conceptions and practices of self-transformation current in Egypt’s Islamic Revival and puts these ideas forward as a way to realize the revolution. Life Makers see themselves as Muslim in a way that is distinctive, inclusive, and truer to Islam than Islamist political parties. Their appeal to faith is revealing of their orientation towards sincere action, and even co-existence, which is a major feature of Khaled’s national project. Along with Lisa Wedeen, I argue that “movements can be religious and nationalist despite the seeming theoretical contradictions” (2008, 6), and trace how literacy development brings together an Islamic and nationalist vision of the political that sutures the development of the self with that of the nation. In this way, Khaled’s political vision continues to favor the modern state as a framework on which to mold his Islamic project.13

To better elucidate this relationship, I first explain how literacy was folded into Life Makers programming as a way to “make life,” particularly at a moment of revolution, when calls to sacrifice one’s life and become a martyr (shahīd) were strong. “Building life” became a revolutionary position for Life Makers, and was part of an ethos that seeks to make faith legible in this life (dunyā). I then go on to describe an analytic of il/legibility that runs throughout the dissertation and captures Islamic literacy development as a form of making faith legible, and also of literacy as a project to make nonliterates recognizable to the state as something other than “the masses.” A sense of

---

13 For a contrasting view of this positioning between the pious self and the state, see Hallaq (2012), especially his chapter “The Political Subject and Moral Technologies of the Self” (98-138) where he argues that the modern state fashions a subject that is wholly inconsistent Muslim life.
Life Makers’ commitment to make life through faith development clarifies the ethic that forms KIP’s Muslim citizenship.

**Building Life**

Ten months after the fire, on October 22, 2012, the Institut d’Égypte reopened. The Culture Minister thanked the Armed Forces for their funding of the restorations project that cost 6 million Egyptian pounds. The event celebrated the military’s role in rebuilding Egypt, but even as officials were taken on the tour of the renovated building, the dust had not yet settled on the battle over the Institute. That day, official statements accused revolutionaries of systematically destroying the collections, despite those very people’s recovery efforts. The competition over claiming the renovation of the Institute was a competition over who gets to remake the country. The conflict rendered in brick and mortar what was at stake in the making of Egypt’s future. The story of the launch of *Knowledge Is Power* shows how the desire to build manifested in a national campaign to make life through literacy.

Life Makers extend their motto “Together We Make Life” (*Ma’an Nuṣna’ Hayā*) through the KIP curriculum, a series of books called Make Your Life (*Asna’ Hayātak*). The Arabic verb ْṣ-َ-ْn-ّ corresponds to the English ‘to make.’ ْṣ-َ-ْn-ّ is the root for words such as ‘industry’ and ‘production.’ Since the organization translates its name into English as “Life Makers,” I render the same word in the curriculum title, the imperative “asna’ hayātak,” as *Make Your Life*. At the same time, I refer to ‘building,’ which corresponds to the organization’s call to “build Egypt,” as well as the Person of the Renaissance, which employ the Arabic root form ْb-َ-ْn-ّ. The notion of making life illustrates the ways in which the organization extends beyond Islamic vocabularies for
situating their project as part of a universal discourse on the sacredness of life. For Life Makers, life is not limited to the realization of individual selves, but must be collectively created and brought together to a public life. While this dissertation focuses on the ways in which the literacy campaign seeks to make life through literacy, I here want to step back and examine the significance of this call to create life as a particular form of revolutionary action that at once contrasts with, as well as mirrors, revolutionary calls for the sacrifice of life.

Martyrs of the revolution embodied the ultimate sacrifice for Egypt. Organizations for the families of martyrs took to the stage at rallies in Tahrir; wall murals and banners depicted young faces of the dead. Downtown wall graffiti changed weekly with the latest characters to emerge from street battles—winged technicolour youth—hovering over the living. Martyrs proved their readiness to die for the cause of the revolution. Life Makers, however, were part of a different revolutionary politics: rather than sacrifice their lives, they spoke of making life. In doing so, they articulated a sort of inverse of the revolutionary martyr. In his observations on self-sacrifice in Cuba’s revolution, Martin Holbraad observes how each of these revolutionary positions, the person who sacrifices life and the one who strives to redefine it, similarly pursue the reconstruction of society:

In a basic sense, then, these two seemingly opposite existential revolutionary outcomes—becoming a New Man, or dying for the

14 See, for example Asad (2014), Anidjar (2011), Foucault (1966), Taylor (2007) and the vast literature on humanitarianism that examines the sacredness of life, such as Fassin (2010).

15 See Armbrust (2013), where he observes of revolutionary martyrology “In the months after Mubarak’s abdication no complex of symbols and images was as effective as a vehicle for trying to express revolutionary meaning as that of martyrdom. Martyr images projected into discourse or public space implicitly demanded that anyone viewing them declare a position on what they signified.”
revolution—come down to same thing: an essentially ascetic, self-transformative readiness to sacrifice what one is in order for the world—or at least society at large—to orchestrate itself in a new way. (2013, 13)

While Khaled’s Person of the Renaissance is not an ascetic, the ethos of self-sacrifice in the form of donating one’s time, energy and knowledge is central to Life Makers.

One scene illustrates Life Makers’ revolutionary ethos that invests in upholding and making life. On November 22, 2011, in Tahrir Square and its adjacent Muhammad Mahmud Street, the military fired live ammunition at protesters calling for early presidential elections and an immediate transition to civilian rule. That day, I received a barrage of text messages from a group of volunteer teachers making arrangements to donate blood at Qasr al-Aini Hospital. The group of women met at Sayyida Zaynab metro stop, about one kilometer south of the clashes. As we made our way to the hospital, we walked past medical supply stores that buzzed with demonstrators on their way to stock field hospitals. Amal, one of the first to volunteer for the literacy campaign and one of my closest interlocutors, explained that donating blood was the best thing to do, not only because the protests were dangerous, but also because our blood was needed to save the wounded. We spent the afternoon waiting in line with mostly young women who passed along bags of chips to share and give themselves energy before their blood donation. For Amal and the others, they were not simply supporting protesters, rather, by giving their blood, they were giving the chance for a body to heal and to save a life. And so, through the preservation of life, volunteers undertook their own self-making through their own form of sacrifice.

While the blood donation demonstrates their commitment to biological life the teaching of literacy is about not simply living, but about creating a life worth living.
Many of my interlocutors spoke of the revolution as a moment of awakening, saying that during life under Mubarak people moved as though they were already dead or asleep, because nothing they did mattered or had effect. For Life Makers volunteers, life is made, or comes into existence, when it can be reflected upon and represented to others, thus reading and writing are the ultimate skills to build life. And yet, to build life requires more than those skills, but rather a disposition to build with happiness and faith in God and the future. The conception of building and making involved in Life Makers’ faith development is about creating concrete change. It is for this reason that I describe KIP as a campaign of legibility.

**Making Faith Legible—Il/legible Subjects**

The dissertation is split into two parts that take il/legibility as a metaphor. The first half of the dissertation, “Making Faith Legible,” explores legibility as the driving force of literacy development, by sketching a history of Islamic and nationalist notions of reading as virtue (chapter one), the particular hermeneutics of religiously-sponsored literacy (chapter two), and politics and ethics of literacy voluntarism (chapter three). In these chapters, I ask: What is Islamic literacy development and how does it situate itself as a program for modernity and progress? Why does autonomous reading become central to Islamic renewal? How do attitudes towards ritual and sincerity frame the KIP campaign and the sorts of literacy it promotes?

The second half of the dissertation, “Il/legible Subjects,” traces the campaign’s implementation in two sites among ‘illegible subjects’ where men and women were taught that their illiteracy makes them inconsequential and negligent of their civic and Islamic responsibilities. I explore here the implementation of the campaign and
interrogate KIP’s unanticipated outcomes in a slum of Old Cairo called Batn al-Baqara (chapters four and five) and at a shipyard (chapter six). What are the pedagogical aims and techniques of Islamic literacy development? How do learners (en)counter, adapt, and learn from their literacy classes? In what ways do learners incorporate, reject, and modify literacy lessons in their lives?

In the context of the phenomenon of Egypt’s “unregistered” (lam yusajjil)—those who do not have any official documentation, whether a national identification card, or a marriage or birth certificate—the issue of legibility to the state is a pressing one. Those who lack such documentation do not have access to government services, from education to health care, including access to literacy classes. While state officials say that it is impossible to estimate the numbers of those who are uncounted and unrecognized within Egypt, they estimate the number to be about 10% of the population, roughly seven million people, mostly from rural areas that do not register births and marriages, as well as the urban poor, orphans, and the nonliterate.

Illegibility is both a bureaucratic condition, and also the broader result of a refusal to recognize the other in a more existential way. Some of my interlocutors described their sense of negation with the Arabic word ʿadam, in the context of conversations distinguishing life under Mubarak and a sense of becoming an individual only after the revolution. ʿAdam means “lack, non-existence,” “ineligibility,” and “impossibility” (Badawi and Hinds 1986, 567), and yet is a term some of my interlocutors used to explain the state of merely existing. ‘Illegibility’ is therefore a term I employ to capture the sense of non-existence evoked by the ubiquitousness of ʿadam discourse.

KIP is a project of legibility that works in three ways that overlap and intersect
throughout this dissertation. The first is the way in which literacy as a state project is involved in making the subject legible to the state as a citizen, a life of value that is different from mere existence. The second is the entanglement of orality and the written word within the Islamic tradition that moved towards writing as giving knowledge material form. The third is how literacy development summons a sense of a subject with an interior, as literacy is a way to learn about oneself and express it to others.

Islamic literacy is particularly attractive for volunteers because of the ways in which literacy leaves traces, evidence, signs. Like the ledger in which volunteers believe each person’s actions will be recorded in preparation for their Judgment, literacy leads to the promise of written signs of the volunteers’ good works, which, as the teachers expressed to me, endure longer than other *khayr* activities. I am interested in how my interlocutors conceive of their individual consequence on the nation, as well as their relationship with God (sometimes both at once, and sometimes alternating between the two) through their voluntary actions, as well as through practices of reading and writing. While some volunteers complained about their invisibility in a system that made no room for them, I include the third chapter of this dissertation, which explores their voluntarism, in the first part of the work, since it is their effort to make faith legible through tangible results that drives the campaign. Still, in many ways, it is precisely because of their feelings of being *‘adam* that volunteers were motivated to participate in the campaign.

I approach literacy as a grand project of legibility to the state, and follow on James C. Scott (1998) who understands legibility as a “central problem of statecraft” (2).

---

16 Volunteers spoke of the Quranic reference to a book of deeds—the record that will be given to each person on the Day of Resurrection that will include the details of every good and bad deed. See 54:52-3.
Through a variety of examples, Scott demonstrates how legibility is made possible by major projects to organize, name, map, standardize, and otherwise make people and their land visible to the state. At the same time, I take seriously cautions against apprehending the state as a singular and all-seeing entity, by tending to the ways that my interlocutors conceive of what “the state” is and how they see themselves in relation with it.17

Contributors to Anthropology at the Margins of the State (2004) argue that the state’s demand for a legibility of its citizens erases the state’s own traces of power. In Veena Das’ contribution to the volume, she reveals the power of the state’s demand for official documents that can be forged and used out of context. In my own research, written documents also have the potential to be judged inadmissible—such as a renter’s lease or a worker’s contract—and the document that represents a claim to a right, employment, or land, can construct the legal apparatus to dominate the claims supposedly made legible through documentation.18

The Egyptian state’s handling of the rising populations of informal settlements illustrates this issue. Residents of Batn al-Baqara spoke with some fears that a government program would soon relocate them. Government officials had already evacuated nearby quarters. Such relocation projects are often the site of bureaucratic contention. In some cases, residents do not have the legal claim to their homes that is necessary for them to mount a case to resist removal, while in other cases, government officials disregard residents’ land deeds and leases. In the case of the former, the law insists on legal documentation for the claim, while in the latter, this very documentation

---

17 For a thorough critique of Scott see Li (2005).

18 See Hull (2012) on the postcolonial bureaucracy of Islamabad where he details how documents and writing practices create a political economy of paper.
is not accepted, and is in some cases destroyed.

In other words, the state project of legibility is also often one of erasure, a fact that hovers over the women in Batn al-Baqara. They desire better sewage disposal, but the state eschews lessons in basic hygiene and overlook this infrastructural impediment to maintaining clean homes. For these women, this conflict is a kind of “illegible subject,” an issue that learners articulate but which literacy’s champions ignore, occupy, push aside, and obscure. And in the shipyard, the workers describe literacy as a way for them to be better fathers and to gain dignity, two goals that fall beyond the purview of how KIP implements literacy there. The workers’ illegible subjects are their complaints that they air in class discussions, but that they do not put in writing. When I say ‘illegible subjects,’ I therefore refer to such issues, but also those people, particularly nonliterates, who are made to feel that they have an essential lack.

In politicians’ platform speeches and talk show discussions, plans for the new Egypt frequently referred to the poverty and ignorance of al-shaʿb, an enigmatic term that evokes both the collective noble wisdom of “the people,” but also and in this case, the unknown dangers of “the masses.” This widespread Egyptian discourse of “the people” as “masses” makes out nonliterates to be a threat and obstacle to the country’s progress. My interlocutors spoke of this obfuscation as part of their experience of non-existence.

As my interlocutors put it, their non-existence (ʿadam) is different than absence (ghāʾib or ghayr mawgūd), since absence suggests something that exists and may become present. It is also worth distinguishing between the nothingness of the ʿadam and the English term ‘marginalized,’ used in the title of Das’ and Poole’s volume. The spatial imagery of the margin does not capture what I seek to describe. Batn al-Baqara is not
pushed to urban margins, but instead occupies a somewhat central location in the city, whereas the new luxury developments for the elite now occupy the cleaner air at the city’s parameters. The English term ‘marginal’ also escapes the important place of the margins in Arabic writing. In the Islamic tradition, margins occupy a valuable place on the page for recording commentaries, suprataxtual traditions preserved in the reproduction of *tafsīr* and shari‘a texts known as *hāshiya*. In this way, nonliterates in Egypt today are more than marginalized, or invisible; they are non-existent. The literacy campaign seeks not only to make them legible, but to bring nonliterate subjects into existence as Muslim citizens.

The analytic of il/legibility also helps us approach issues of materiality and mediation in the literacy campaign. My ambition is to trace the effort and failure to produce legibility through literacy as a development intervention. In this way, I build on Francis Cody (2013) who describes the cultivation of a particular modernist disposition to the social in the Enlightenment Movement (*Arivoli Iyakkam*) literacy program in Tamil Nadu, India. In Batn al-Baqara, the immeasurable mark of success became whether women came to desire literacy. This goal could not be captured in KIP’s governmental enumeration that justified the campaign and gave urgency to its mandate. The campaign’s regular statistical reporting on the numbers of volunteers, learners, classes, and the numbers of learners who passed their exams, was part of the accounting of making life, and necessary to the logic of productivity and accountability so central to literacy development.

And yet, the statistics that echoed across different levels of the campaign, from Vodafone promotional materials to Khaled’s television appearances to teachers’
conversations, did not capture what was significant about the sorts of changes that literacy sought to produce and the challenges that the campaign met along the way. As I sketch ethnographically how the campaign unfolded, I tend to the sorts of traces that literacy development leaves that are not accounted for in government tools that measure success and failure.

Not until the final chapter will the reader find the written proofs of literacy recorded by worker-students. Yet, this chapter does not present some sort of culmination of the campaign with the legibility of workers. Instead, the representative written passages featured here are mere scripts, and the consequential communication at the shipyard remains within the realm of face-to-face interaction. While workers seek dignity through recognition as people who are not roundly deemed ignorant (gāhil), the actual ability to write is no guarantee that they will transcend this social stigma. In other words, what constitutes the sign of literacy and the literate person is a moving target.

**Muslim Citizenship**

Although Life Makers describe the campaign as revolutionary, they undo the opposition between the people and the state, system, or regime (al-nizām) at a moment when revolutionary calls invoked the strong rhetorical use of the people against the regime. While Khaled’s call to self-transformation as the path to the country’s progress is an optimistic one, as I will show, the collapse in the distinction between individual and society can similarly be used to understand a less positive relationship between society and state. The emergence of a key term in the context of a political debate illustrates Muslim citizenship as a relationship between people and the regime: immediately following Mubarak’s ouster, a discourse emerged of scourging the state of regime
holdovers or remainders known as *falūl*. The accusation of being a remainder was typically reserved for judiciary, high-level government officials, or members of the media, although campaigns such as Accost a Remainer (*Imsik Falūl*), suggest a more pervasive sense of ridding Egypt of anyone who supported or sympathized with the old regime (or who did not back the revolution).

At a Life Makers’ meeting in a downtown branch, during the lead-up to the 2012 presidential election run-off, the conversation turned to the elections. Several of the volunteers articulated the competition as one between the Muslim Brotherhood candidate, Mohamed Morsi, and former Minister of Aviation Ahmed Shafiq, the quintessential remainder. Ayman, a leadership trainer, interrupted the conversation: “Who are remainders? We are all remainders (*kullina falūl*).” He echoed the revolutionary call “We Are All Khaled Said” (*Kullina Khalid Saʿīd*), but to dramatically different effect. Khaled Said was murdered by plainclothes police officers in a street in Alexandria in the spring of 2010. His image and the slogan “We Are All Khaled Said” were emblems of the revolution from its start. Rather than associating oneself with a victim of police humiliation and torture, Ayman’s provocation incited fellow volunteers to see themselves not as revolutionaries, but to implicate them in the country’s problems, to collapse the distinction between people and (remainders of) the system. Ayman thus interrupted the sharp distinction made in protest chants: “The people want the downfall of the regime” (*al-shaʿb yurīd isqāṭ al-niẓām*). If “We Are All Khaled Said” was a slogan to unite the people, Ayman turned it on its head when he echoed its unifying force “We Are All” with the very people and institutions the revolution was working against.

---

19 And just over two years later a stronger and more violent state-sanctioned anti-Brotherhood discourse employed similar rhetoric of cleansing the state of Brotherhood terrorists and traitors.
As he continued, it was clear that Ayman’s comment was not an endorsement of Shafiq; instead, it offered a more cynical view of change than that of his friends. His comment ran counter to the overall optimism of Life Makers. For him, to remain fixated on the distinction between the people and the system is to miss the ways in which Egyptians are intertwined in this system. This relation is formal in terms of employment, whether through mandatory military service for Egyptian men, or the massive public sector that employs several hundred thousand Egyptians, but also much more than that. For Ayman, it is not simply that the Mubaraks or the regime were corrupt, but that all Egyptians are implicated in their malfeasance—all Egyptians are remainders. His comment thus raises the stakes of the need to transform oneself in order for Egypt to change.

In this way the literacy campaign aimed to transform the individual to reform an Egyptian public. Khaled’s Muslim citizenship is the inverse of what Charles Hirschkind describes as an Islamic counterpublic, a form of public life for an Egyptian Muslim citizen (2006, 11). He explains:

While participants in the da ‘wa movement clearly consider themselves to be Egyptian citizens, they also cultivate sentiments, loyalties, and styles of public conduct that stand in tension with the moral and political exigencies and modes of self-identification of national citizenship. In this sense, they inhabit a counterpublic: a domain of discourse and practice that stands in a disjunctive relationship to the public sphere of the nation and its media instruments. While in practice da ‘wa often entails an oppositional stance in regard to the state, this type of public does not in its present form play a mediatory role between state and society. In other words, the practice of da ‘wa does not take place within or serve to uphold that domain of associational life referred to as civil society. (133)

Life Makers precisely aims to fuse one’s practices of self-formation with the transformation of society and to create a pious public, instead of a pious counterpublic.
As a state project, Egyptian literacy programs didactically teach the rights and responsibilities of citizenship (Abu Lughod 2005, 62). Islamic literacy development is a project of national aspiration that goes beyond teaching the abilities of reading and writing to embark on a greater ambition: the making of subjects into pious citizens. The campaign thus allows us to observe two types of citizenship. The first, formal citizenship is integral to the pedagogical project of state literacy programs that teach literacy to introduce subjects to the state. However, my interest lies in the second type of citizenship, Muslim citizenship, that while shaped by formal discourses, is not limited by them. I argue that conceptions of the self that relate one’s inner world to the progress of the nation define the particular notion of Muslim citizenship at work in Life Makers. The campaign seeks to orient subjects towards God through the practices of reading, writing, and teaching, which they believe will in turn have an effect on the nation. I thus speak of citizenship as a form of subjectivity and political relation cultivated through literacy advocacy and practices.

Still, some cursory comments on formal citizenship, specifically the relationship between religious identity and identification with the state, provide context for the discussions of KIP’s Islamic-civic project. The question of how Islam ought to relate to the state has been and continues to be a matter of great contention in Egypt. Suad Joseph observes how citizenship in the Middle East is constituted through one’s religious identification; membership in the state is experienced through one’s religious community (2000, 11). Egyptians are required to mark their religious community on their national identification card. All Egyptians must choose one of Muslim, Christian, or Jewish, or in

---

20 See Agrama (2012) on the co-constituting domains of religion and secularism in Egypt’s legal and political spheres.
other words, they must be one of the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*), as they are referred to in the Quran.\textsuperscript{21}

Nationalist discourses on citizenship started with the 1919 revolution, and continued with the writing of the 1923 constitution. The 1971 constitution established religion as a major feature of the nation-state under article no. 2 that stipulated that “Islam is the religion of the state. Arabic is the official language and the principles of Islamic jurisprudence (shari’a) are a principle source of legislation” (Saleh 1988, 325). What was new to this article was the inclusion of Islamic jurisprudence, which proponents of the amendment argued was required to give substance to the claim that Islam was indeed the religion of the state.

Since the January 25\textsuperscript{th} revolution, this article has been the focus of debate around two constitutional referendums (March 19, 2011 and January 14-15, 2014). While the effects of these constitutional changes raised discussion about the role of religion in a “secular state,” particularly with regard to women and Copts, there has been less explicit discourse on citizen rights and responsibilities in the language of citizens.\textsuperscript{22} In this way, Khaled’s Person of the Renaissance reveals a “citizenship talk” that invokes responsibility without being involved in a legislative or explicitly political conversation about citizenship. The project of Muslim citizenship implicit in Life Makers programming and the KIP campaign attempts to realize the religious character of the

\textsuperscript{21} The legal decision to uphold the law in 2006 caused major outcry, particularly among the country’s sizable Bahai community.

\textsuperscript{22} See Sedra (2013) and Oraby (2013) who argue that national citizenship is a productive way to address sectarianism (particularly as stoked by the Muslim Brotherhood during their period of political power), so that Copts are not “protected,” but rather equal citizens in Egyptian society.
nation not through state legislation, but through the nation’s faithful subjects.\textsuperscript{23}

The \textit{Make Your Life} curriculum is typical of state-centric curricula that employ the national identification card (\textit{biṭāqa}) as a tool to teach letters and self-identify with the state, including the national obligation to include one’s religious status. In KIP classrooms, learners encounter the first lesson, ‘\textit{I} (\textit{anā}) that situates the self as the master of their own narrative, a self to be represented to others, to be made self-aware and to represent through bureaucratic channels such as identity cards and birth certificates. KIP teaches new learners to take care of themselves and to form relations that minimize the mitigating services of the state. In other words, \textit{Make Your Life} teaches the neoliterate to become responsible. It is in this way that KIP paradoxically takes over the responsibilities of the state, by picking up where the state fails, and teaches neoliterates to “build the nation” by being self-reliant. Both the making of KIP and the campaign’s implicit lessons teach that Muslim citizenship is best performed outside the reach of the state through CSR and Islamic faith development. Learners are taught that self-help is a communal good, and that literacy is central to this form of autonomy.

I employ Michel Foucault to understand how citizenship is constituted in everyday practice and moral registers. Kevin O’Neill’s study of Christian citizenship in postwar Guatemala City (2010), and Barbara Cruikshank’s study of the self-esteem movement (1999) each employ this form of governmentality in order to illustrate how techniques of self-understanding relate interior lives to citizenship. The Muslim citizenship that I describe differs from O’Neill’s Christian citizenship in the precise acts that are the basis of what attaches religion to citizenship. O’Neill describes how Christian

\textsuperscript{23} See Herrera and Sakr (2014) on “wired citizenship” as it relates to youth activism in the region, particularly the discussion of cyber optimism and cyber skepticism.
practices such as fasting and prayer ‘repoliticize’ Guatemalans as Christians, rather than political activities traditionally associated with citizenship, such as voting. The Muslim citizenship central to KIP turns not to explicitly Muslim practices, but instead makes literacy sacred as a practice of liberal democracy while also a practice of worship because of reading’s crucial tie to the proper way to respond to revelation.

Thus, although a citizenship project, KIP does not employ the “enlightenment ideals of citizenship” that Cody describes. He shows how the ability to write and its use to petition was understood by activists as a means to make claims to legal rights and participate in a political process. While his activists saw literacy as a mode of political transparency, neoliterates were subjected to state powers that could, rather than recognize them, erase them. KIP volunteers occasionally reference the potential force of literacy as a mode of political representation and emancipation, however these references were backgrounded to the self-making practices of the campaign that in fact guide neoliterates away from making rights claims. For KIP, literacy practices are techniques of the self that are central to the project of self-formation and to conceptions of personhood. I therefore look to literacy development as a site where citizenship is renegotiated and reconstituted at a moment of re-imagining and remaking the relationship between piety and politics. Literacy offers a site of self-governance illustrative of how its techniques become acts of Islamic worship as well as civic practices.

The gendered implementation of the literacy campaign is indicative of the ways in which citizenship is itself highly differentiated and hierarchized along gender lines. Literacy lessons in Batn al-Baqara teach reading as a means for women to be good caregivers who help their children with homework and read them bedtime stories. I
describe how literacy was taught to the women of Batn al-Baqara as ‘Muslima
citizenship’—the feminine form of Muslim citizenship. In most instances, however, I
refer by ‘Muslim’ to both the specifically masculine as well as the general, normative
ideals of citizenship at work in KIP.

Not only were the ideals of the literate citizen gendered, but activities of literacy
were also divided along gender lines. In Batn al-Baqara, women focused on reading and
only occasionally wrote on the wipe-board or on sheets of paper (few women regularly
used notebooks, despite their teacher’s efforts to make carrying a notebook a new habit of
the neoliterate). In the shipyard, greater attention was given to passing the state exam,
which in turn led to an emphasis on teaching workers to express themselves in writing.
Since literacy development throughout the Global South primarily targets women, to
make up the “gender gap,” scholarship takes up the gendered aspect of literacy
development through sites that focus on women (Abu Lughod 2005, Agnau 2004, Cody
offer a lens through which to examine the implementation of literacy in a comparative
framework. The learners’ gender shaped how literacy is supposed to be made useful in
their lives.

In the next section, I introduce the charismatic and influential lead figure of KIP,
Amr Khaled, with a brief biography and sketch of Life Makers. I go on to describe how
Khaled’s overarching affective pedagogy of hope, happiness, and optimism is
incorporated into the campaign. I then describe the significance of Life Makers as the

---

24 It should also be noted that these studies are mainly of rural women. Based on historical
sources, Clark’s work on rural Russians in the national literacy campaign (2000), includes material on
women in urban trade unions.
primary campaign implementers, situating Islamic literacy development as a manifestation of Egypt’s Islamic Revival.

**Amr Khaled and Life Makers**

Amr Khaled is among the world’s most familiar religious preachers. Amid the diverse forms of *daʿwa* (call or invitation to Islam) in Egypt’s Islamic Revival, he is a leading figure of the group known for their televisual Islamic propagation, the New Preachers (*al-Duʿa al-Gudud*).²⁵ His influence spans diverse forms of media as he exhorts Muslims to shape their lives through faith. Media and scholarly publications alike describe him as representative of devolving Islamic authority. Descriptions of Khaled’s distinction from traditional Islamic authorities note his preference of business attire, rather than the cloaks of al-Azhar’s religious authorities. He appears in short-sleeved polo t-shirts in some interviews and television episodes that show him enjoying leisure as part of a well-rounded life. He speaks in Egyptian vernacular Arabic (ʿāmmiyya) rather than the typical Modern Standard Arabic (*fuṣḥā*) used for Islamic learning. In the late 1990s his career as a preacher began when, while working as an accountant in Cairo, he gave lessons in the mosque of his sporting club. His only religious training resulted in a certificate from the Cairo Institute for Islamic Studies earned much later in 2001, after he had already gained notoriety for his public preaching on university campuses and mosques throughout Cairo.

Khaled has influenced a wide audience through various media outlets. In 2000, he

---

²⁵ Like other preachers in this group who include Mustafa Hosni and Moez Masoud, Khaled is called a *dāʾiya*. Together this group of similarly culturally situated preachers appeals primarily to youths in a cadence that makes Islam accessible. On the influence of the New Preachers, see Bayat (2007), Baz (2003), and Moll (2010).
aired his first television series, *Words from the Heart (Kalām min al-Qalb)* on the Saudi-owned television channel Iqra. Khaled produced nineteen television and radio series, and sixteen books. By his own estimate, he has reached over twenty million viewers. His website is one of the most frequented of any individual in the world. His role in shaping Egypt’s Islamic Revival is the subject of valuable analysis of his influence on elite circles (Sobhi 2009, Olsson 2014), his language and rhetorical style (Høigilt 2011, Gauthier and Uhl 2012), and his deployment of media to spread his message (Moll 2010).

In the story I tell of KIP, Khaled inspires volunteer teachers to cultivate laudable habits in a purposeful life. Still, volunteers debate and negotiate Khaled’s teachings among each other. For most of the campaign’s learners, Khaled is an inaccessible public figure who holds little or no importance. Over the course of my research, Khaled’s reception among Egyptians changed dramatically, a shift palpable on mapping days when I joined volunteers going door-to-door, canvassing. In fall 2011, Life Makers volunteers introduced themselves and the organization, often saying that they were one of Amr Khaled’s people (*tābaʾ Amr Khaled*). The name offered a familiar reference for people to understand and situate KIP. In July 2012, on a major campaign day to augment volunteer and learner numbers, Khaled’s name was treated with suspicion by people who believed the KIP campaign was part of a presidential bid. Volunteers adjusted their message over the course of the day. While some explained that KIP had nothing to do with Khaled’s political ambitions, some stopped mentioning his name altogether.

In this dissertation, Khaled emerges and recedes as his influence and popularity ebb and flow. In chapter two, I examine his call for reading, reflection, and cultural renewal in order to understand why literacy became the central project of his
development organization. In chapter three, I depict him as a reference point for volunteers, and also a highly scrutinized public figure.

**A Message to the Youth**

Despite Life Makers’ prominence in good works (*khayr*) in Egypt, no ethnographic work on the organization offers an on-the-ground study of how Khaled’s vision of faith development is carried out. Life Makers is one of the country’s most prominent Islamic charitable organizations. One of the contributions of this dissertation is to give a thick description of Khaled’s programs through Life Makers’ largest development project to date.

The organization is the result of a two-season television program by the same name. The first episode of the Ramadan series *Life Makers* was aired in 2004. *Life Makers* marked a departure from Khaled’s focus on *akhlāq*, proper Islamic etiquette, through the micro-practices of a pious life, that included lessons on the importance of waking before sunrise for *Fajr*, the morning prayer, to the virtues of modest dress and comportment. Beginning with *Life Makers*, Khaled’s main message changed direction, calling on viewers to develop Egypt through grassroots community work. The program aimed to convert television viewers into community organizers. He called on viewers to transform faith into action:

> We stress on this program that if the people want to start a revival and they feel for it within their hearts, it will come true. So, *Life Makers* is a beginning—it is saying that we can achieve through teamwork and everyone’s participation. We also reply to those who say, “It is no use,” by

---

26 Mona Atia’s study of charitable giving in Egypt (2013) examines Khaled’s *Life Makers* television program and describes the organization as an example of “pious neoliberalism.” Also see Rock (2010) on the *Life Makers* television series.
saying that as long as the youths are ready to sacrifice for the sake of the revival of their countries, success will come, God willing. This is the idea of *Life Makers*. The question is: how will this revival come? It will come through transforming the energy of faith in our hearts into the energy of work and action. This is the primary idea *Life Makers* is based upon. Boys, girls, men, and women, old and young—all of them—their hearts are full of love for Allah, full of faith. Their aim is to satisfy God the Almighty. This is how they conceive of the meaning of Islam. It is not only praying and fasting, it is success in life. They also understand that their countries are in the most difficult of times. So it is a call for everyone. What is stopping us from transforming this energy of faith in our hearts into energy of action for the sake of this revival? Our intention is the satisfaction of God. (*Life Makers*, Episode One, 2004)

The series was only the beginning of Khaled’s revitalized message to the youth. He later created the series *Innovators* (*Mujaddidūn*), among other civic engagement projects. The programs inspire hundreds of thousands of Egyptians in their everyday lives through dozens of major social development projects that seek to implement Egypt’s renaissance, from building rooftop gardens to running a national anti-drug campaign. He preaches that it is not enough to have faith in the heart, but that this faith must translate into action. He appeals to youth, encouraging them to eschew boredom with energy for good works. At the end of the forty-six episode series, *Life Makers* established itself among Egypt’s most active Islamic good works organizations, with branches in the Middle East and Europe. The popularity of Khaled and *Life Makers* drew concern from Hosni Mubarak that led Khaled to take up residence in Lebanon and later the United Kingdom. The organization closed several branches and ran only occasional projects until the January 25th Revolution.

Khaled employs an affective pedagogy that *Life Makers* marshals in their development work. Volunteers teach hope (*amal*), happiness (*saʿāda, faraḥ*), and optimism (*tafāʾul*) as an expression of faith for revolutionary action grounded in positive
feeling.\textsuperscript{27} Their message was in opposition to expressions of everyday expressions of worries and despair,\textsuperscript{28} as well as the expression of anger as a sort of revolutionary ethos, captured in the name given to the pivotal January 28\textsuperscript{th} 2011 demonstrations, called the Day of Rage (\textit{yawm al-ghadab}). At moments in Khaled’s teachings, happiness is part of a discourse found in the Islamic tradition and resonates with Aristotelian notions of \textit{eudaimonia}. Happiness is something a person \textit{is} as well as what a person \textit{does}. The Greek term \textit{eudaimonia} means happiness, but also “success” or “flourishing.” People who are \textit{eudaimon} are not in a particular emotional state so much as they are living successfully. At other moments, Khaled’s happiness is consonant with the message of popular-psychology and self-help literature—happiness is about making changes in one’s life to feel pleasure. In chapter two, I elaborate on what I call Khaled’s hermeneutic of success, which is not mere material success, but is success in the sense of a person exploring their potentials and acting in the world.

Happiness has long been a part of Khaled’s message. In 2010, he produced the thirty-part Ramadan series, \textit{Journey to Happiness (Riḥlat al Saʿāda)}, where he taught achieving happiness as a comprehensive program, with activities posted on his website for viewers to follow. Khaled acknowledged the contextual problems of his Egyptian viewers—the lack of opportunities, and what can feel like a lack of resources—and proposed that by focusing on the spiritual, psychological, and rational sides of happiness, one will gain “the strength to conquer” material problems. Happiness should be internally

\textsuperscript{27} I refer to affect, emotions and feelings interchangeably, not as an emotional or psychological state, but rather as a social practice (Lutz and Abu Lughod 1990, and Ahmed 2004). In so doing, I tend to the ways that my interlocutors understand a language of emotions to create and communicate positive feelings through the literacy campaign.

\textsuperscript{28} See Winegar (2013) on emotional registers of frustration, and fed-upness two years following the revolution and under Morsi. She describes people’s espressions of \textit{ihbāt}, heaviness, a sense of “dashed hope.”
cultivated to confront and ameliorate the conditions of poverty and unemployment.

Khaled teaches that happiness is felt in the present partially through anticipation of a better future. His first television series following Mubarak’s ouster was called *Tomorrow Is Better (Bukra Aḥlā)*. The revolutionary context of Khaled’s preaching recast his advice to cultivate happiness into a particular happiness—optimism—which can be seen in his latest lessons, lectures, books, and interviews.

He promoted the new series with a clip outlining the purpose of the program:

Do you know where we are going? Some people are afraid, some people are worried, some people argue, some people can wait, but are not optimistic. I am going to talk with you in this program. We will talk together and think together, I will listen to you and we will work together. But me, I am not afraid or worried or confused, I am very, very, very optimistic, and inside, I am very, very, very hopeful that tomorrow, Egypt will be much better, I swear to God, all of this hope... I want to invite you to the most important political party in Egypt, the Party of the Optimistic for the Future. A party that says “tomorrow, God willing, will be better, beautiful, God willing.” I swear to God, believe me, people who are scared and worried, the days that are coming to Egypt in the future, God willing, will be great. I know that there are some of you thinking, how can you give a program a big name like this, “Tomorrow Is Better?” How can you say that when we are all worried and scared. *Tomorrow is Better* is for you. Better with work, with our hands, with our efforts, with our faith, with the youth's energy, with our hope, our work, with hope, with our movement, production, with foundation... I am optimistic. Our first episode of *Tomorrow Is Better* is “Big Hope” (*Amal Kabīr*) and hope is coming, yes be optimistic Egyptians, Egypt will be great. I have a second a sign (*dalīl*), tomorrow is better, because Egypt is ancient, because it is great. These aren't just words. (*Tomorrow Is Better*, Introduction, 2011)

Khaled jokingly refers to the explosion of political parties when he says that he will launch the party for optimists. Although he frequently distinguishes his development

---

29 Khaled’s use of optimism resonates with Sara Ahmed’s (2010) emphasis on its temporal dimension. In the sixth chapter I describe this specific future-oriented happiness as the volunteers’ teaching of happiness-optimism to factory workers as a way of being in the world.
programs from what he calls politics (siyāsa), his optimism for Egypt’s future became the platform for the spring 2012 launch of his political party, the Future Party. While it may be tempting to understand literacy activism as apolitical, as Khaled does, Life Makers mainstreams non-confrontational actions—such as voluntarism for a literacy campaign—as a particular kind of non-oppositional politics, one that articulates development as the political program. Khaled never openly criticized Mubarak’s regime, and only after the revolution did he subtly mention that his actions and programs were monitored and that he was under pressure from authorities in the past. Still, following the July 3, 2013 coup, he initially fell silent on his Twitter account. Two weeks later he released a statement that he supported the safety of police and the security of the country. He dispelled rumors that he was founding a Brotherhood group against violence, and reiterated his position as one of contributing to and building Egypt through hard work and patriotism.

Happiness as a revolutionary affect were also appropriated in advertising that emerged immediately following Mubarak’s ouster. Megabillboards five stories high touted international brands that sold the latest brand of corporate optimism. Coca Cola chimed, “Make Tomorrow Better,” with a woman drinking from a curved bottle while a young man pulled down a brick wall to reveal a shiny Nile view and freshly scrubbed Cairo towers. On another billboard, a Snickers bar wrapper read, “Develop Your Country,” and below it, “Don’t Stop!” Pepsi joined in with the words, “Think, Participate, Dream, Express Who You Are.” These were the quickly changing signs that annotated Cairo’s cityscape.

**Islamic Literacy Development: Between Faith, Scripture, and Developmentalism**
The cultural politics of Khaled and Life Makers significantly shapes how KIP came to be and how it was implemented. I trace the influence of literacy sponsors on the campaign, however, in so doing, I focus on the role of Life Makers and their faith project over Vodafone Egypt’s role as the financial backer of the initiative. My interest in literacy sponsorship is informed by Deborah Brand’s analysis of sponsors, whom she defines as agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy, and gain advantage by it in some way. Just as the ages of radio and television accustom us to having programs brought to us by various commercial sponsors, it is useful to think about who or what underwrites occasions of literacy learning and use. Although the interests of the sponsor and the sponsored do not have to converge (and, in fact, may conflict) sponsors nevertheless set the terms for access to literacy and wield powerful incentives for compliance and loyalty. Sponsors are a tangible reminder that literacy learning throughout history has always required permission, sanction, assistance, coercion, or, at minimum, contact with existing trade routes. Sponsors are delivery systems for the economies of literacy, the means by which these forces present themselves to—and through—individual learners. They also represent the causes into which people's literacy usually gets recruited. (1998, 166-7)

The campaign reveals how Islamic traditions of khayr (good works), intertwine with what it means for a business to do good. One of the reasons I focus on Khaled’s and Life Makers’ role is because of how their effort to mobilize literacy as a response to the revolution converged with Khaled’s program to reform Quran reading practices, as well as learners who articulated their desire to read the Quran. Still, different participants in the campaign embodied different ideas about what was ‘Islamic’ about literacy. This section therefore tracks the motivations and contradictions in the mobilization of KIP as a corporately sponsored campaign grounded in faith, the Quran, and developmentalist ideologies. First, Vodafone’s role in KIP suggests the increased role of both the

---

30 See Rudnyckyj on “spiritual economies,” what he describes as “the convergence of religious ethics and business management” in an Islamic reform movement. In the second and third chapters I take up discussions of Khaled as a neoliberal preacher.
corporatization and technologization of development in Egypt and other emerging economies, as seen through CSR’s plan to use mobile phones in classrooms.

**Corporate Social Responsibility**

At the time that KIP launched, Vodafone had much to gain from the positive image of collaborating on a development project with Life Makers.\(^{31}\) While I conducted interviews at Vodafone, I decided early on to focus on the campaign’s implementation, which allowed me to work closely with volunteer teachers and learners. My visits to Vodafone’s headquarters in Cairo’s Smart Village illuminated how employees saw the role of CSR in Egypt’s largest push for literacy. In the words of one Vodafone Foundation employee, “Life Makers are our hands on the ground.”

While Vodafone funds the campaign, they are not involved in recruiting or training teachers, the development of curriculum, or the establishment of classrooms, all roles in which Life Makers took the lead. Khaled’s collaboration with a CSR project is in some ways unsurprising. As the financial sponsors of the campaign, Vodafone’s involvement in a national literacy campaign reveals how neoliberalism is enmeshed in a developmentalist paradigm (Elyachar 2005, Mitchell 2007, Li 2007). CSR plays a major role in shaping development projects that are advantageous to conducting business.\(^{32}\)

---

\(^{31}\) Like the other major mobile and Internet networks, Vodafone cut their services for five days, starting on January 28 (although some key activists had their lines cut for several months) (Carr 2011). The unpopular decision led to protests in front of Vodafone branches in the United Kingdom. Vodafone Egypt CEO, Hatem Dowidar, publicly defended their decision to suspend service, stating that the company abides by the laws in which their networks operate, and that the state could have cut connection in their stead, which would have made reconnecting take longer.

\(^{32}\) Vodafone has an expansive international CSR division, as well as country-specific and administered Vodafone Foundations that work closely with national partners. CSR projects are typically company-initiated and work more explicitly on company objectives. In Egypt, employees work between the Foundation and CSR departments.
literate clientele is profitable as it enables expansion into Egypt’s data market. Vodafone deems Egypt an “emerging market” (India is the only other country with this designation), as it is a key country in the company’s advancement.

As Vodafone employees explained to me, the “added value” of the company’s role as a sponsor was in how they planned to put their technology to use in teaching literacy. They stressed how they were uniquely positioned to lend their technological expertise. They promoted the use of a mobile application that can be used on inexpensive handsets. During the first year of the campaign, the application was featured in KIP promotional materials shared with investors, as well as employed in demonstrations at KIP training camps, and the application was officially launched in October 2013.\footnote{In both its conception and design, it is similar to mobile applications that teach literacy in programs implemented in Nigeria (\textit{UN News Centre} “UN to Use Mobile Phone” 2013) and Afghanistan (\textit{BBC} “The Simple Phone” 2014).} The turn to (hyper)technologize literacy through mobile phones is an example of how advancements in science and technology are incorporated into global development.\footnote{See Moore’s (1980) study of the engineering profession as a key factor in Egypt’s theoretical modernization launched with Nasserism.} The social status given to engineering in Egypt lends particular value to science in the role of modernizing and developing the country. Within KIP classrooms, literacy was a technology for self-understanding and relating to a nation beyond their neighbourhood (Anderson [1983] 2006). And yet, the women in Batn al-Baqara conceive of literacy as a communicative technology that does not translate into their Quranic encounter. I therefore tend to the ways in which the skills taught in pen-and-paper classrooms offer a differing sense of mediation and materiality in the women’s Quran lessons in the fifth chapter.

In one conversation towards the end of my fieldwork, I commented to one
Vodafone employee that I was struck by a similar ethic at work in Vodafone corporate
culture as that of preached by Khaled, namely the ways in which both pedagogies
focused on developing the self and evaluating one’s improvement. She saw no
relationship whatsoever, and my observation appeared to undermine her estimation of my
work. For her, Vodafone clearly had nothing to do with Islam. For her, Khaled is an ideal
partner because of Life Makers’ large volunteer base, but there was no similarity between
Vodafone ethics and Khaled’s Islamic da ‘wa. She distinguished between “the good” of
corporate responsibility and religion, in ways that diverged from the ways that KIP was
being implemented on the ground, where Muslim citizenship was taught as an
assemblage of faith, (personal) management, and self-help.

**Faith (and) Development**

Knowledge Is Power interweaves Islamic discourses on the virtues of
knowledge\(^{35}\) with what I refer to as developmentalist literacy—the sort of literacy
promoted within national and international institutions and organizations that teach
literacy as a fundamental component of development. Lila Abu Lughod employs the term
‘development realism’ to describe an Egyptian media aesthetic that “idealizes education,
progress, and modernity within the nation” (2005, 81). She traces this aesthetic through
television melodrama serials, yet it can be seen across different media. Egyptian literacy
programs, including KIP’s, take up UNESCO’s definition of literacy that development
and state agencies widely regard as the reference point. UNESCO first established a

\(^{35}\) The name of the campaign employs the word ‘ilm for knowledge in its broadest sense, including
scientific knowledge. Ma’rifah is sacred or mystical knowledge, it is God knowledge. See Rosenthal (1970)
on the major role of knowledge and its pursuit in the Islamic tradition. On the transmission of knowledge in
medieval Cairo, see Berkey (1992). On knowledge as a social practice, see Lambek (1993) where he
examines knowledge as embodied and objectified.
definition for literacy in a 1958 resolution that stated that literacy is “the ability to both read and write, with understanding, a simple statement related to one's everyday life” (UNESCO 1958). While this definition is the subject of vigorous debate, it remains the benchmark for developmental literacy and today is only briefly elaborated in UNESCO’s definition with the addition of the single sentence that literacy “involves a continuum of reading and writing skills, and often includes basic arithmetic skills (numeracy)” (UNESCO 2014). Developmentalist literacy is concerned with reading and writing that advances a person’s potential to work and participate in the progress of their families, communities and countries. What I refer to as state-centric curricula are examples of developmental literacy that require self-reflection and participation in public life as key to the cultivation of citizens. Religiously-sponsored literacy teaches reading for the benefit of reading scripture, which in the case of KIP, combines with broader development goals.

While this dissertation explores literacy as part of processes and ideologies of modern education (ta‘līm), I am interested in the durability of ideas of education, more than educative practices. This is because, as I argue, planning, imagining and talking about modern education is pivotal to development thinking, as well as ethics and Islamic reform. While education is a national issue frequently debated in the media, and on the tongues of concerned parents trying to educate their children, ‘basic literacy’ is for the weakest members of society, beyond the reach of ‘normal’ education. Literacy programs regard nonliterates as not simply in need of education, but in need of development

---

36 Modern education in Egypt, especially the sciences, are part of what Starrett describes as the charismatic role of education (2009). See also Eickelman (1992) on the place of objectified Islamic knowledge.
(tanmiyya). Literacy is thus a form of social intervention, one that situates education as a means of social, economic, and personal improvement.

Life Makers self-consciously mark themselves off from other Islamic khayr organizations, not only through an appeal to faith in order to make their works more authentic, but also as a particularly modern organization that mobilizes development scripts. For Life Makers, their temporal orientation towards the future creates a notion of development that is productive in its aim to make self-sustaining projects and self-empowered recipients. Volunteers articulate a modern subjectivity now frequently observed in works that explore how the Islamic tradition is debated and adapted today (Deeb 2006, Ghannam 2012, Hafez 2011, Jung, Petersen and Sparr 2014, Moll 2013). The KIP campaign and its teachers employ a vocabulary to self-consciously produce Islamic literacy development as a modern form of daʿwa and development. Their recourse to faith, as well as autonomous reading, is indicative of their particular strand of Islamic reformism.

Life Makers’ faith development offers a case study of religion and development, in which the two are not perceived to be at odds with each other. While a recent growing body of literature seeks to explicate how religion can be productively incorporated in development agendas (Bompani, Deneulin and Bano 2009, Frahm-Arp 2010, Clarke 2011, Haynes 2007, Ter Haar 2011), my central aim is to highlight how Khaled’s reformist Islam shares the same aim of improvement and progress as developmentalist logics. In this way I put into conversation the anthropology of Islam with development

---

37 For a critique of the religion and development literature and its emergence in development studies as a response to major development initiatives of international development agencies, including the World Bank, see Jones and Peterson (2011).
to enrich our understanding of how particular practices—those associated with literacy and its advocacy—are understood in both Islamic and developmentalist logics, discourses, and planning.

As I will show, KIP in fact sacralizes the act of reading. While the Quran is central to their call to literacy, their mobilization of reading as an act of self-making and nation-building makes the act of reading itself an act of worship. Grounded in the Islamic call to *iqra’,* reading is an act of worship not only because it is “God’s first command,” as Khaled explains, but because of its effects on building a pious public. Literacy is an Islamic-civic practice. Not only does Khaled’s role in KIP make reading a form of individual worship, but reading becomes a part of Islamic reform that redefines what constitutes “Islamic.” The call to literacy reaches beyond a language of obligatory practices to evaluate actions on the good they produce and their potential effects on society. While not obligatory (*fard*), literacy is taught as a duty for the personal and social good and is attached to distinct forms of responsibility.

The anthropology of development can enrich the ways that the anthropology of Islam approaches practices of self-cultivation by broadening the horizon in which we think of improvement beyond frameworks of piety to include heterogeneous modes of self-fashioning. I therefore extend what Amira Mittermaier calls the “trope of self-cultivation” within the anthropology of Islam by locating such practices beyond what is deemed “Islamic.”

---

38 Jens Kreinath’s edited volume *The Anthropology of Islam Reader* (2012) is illustrative. One part collects ten chapters around “Muslim obligatory rituals” (14), with chapters on prayer (Mahmood and Henkel), fasting (Frankel and Schielke), “feast of sacrifice” (Bowen and Werbner), pilgrimage (Scupin and Cooper), and alms (Weiss and Bentham), nearly following Islam’s five major tenets (but substituting out the first basic Islamic teaching of the witnessing of God’s oneness and Muhammad as God’s messenger (*shahāda*) for “feasts of sacrifice,” that while not a major tenet is a central “Islamic practice.” In this way the anthropology of Islam appears to be interested in following the religion’s major tenets.
of the self (1988) and care of the self (1986), scholars such as Talal Asad (1993, 2006), Saba Mahmood (2001, 2005) and Charles Hirschkind (2006) elucidate the ways in which practices, such as prayer, seek to embody the Islamic tradition and cultivate piety. By extending this framework to literacy, we train our analytic eye on practices associated with development ideologies that reveal the “will to improve” (Li 2007), as well as a turn to human development, and well-being.39

At the same time, the anthropology of development informs my approach to Islamic literacy, by drawing attention to how development schemes create categories of people for intervention (Deeb and Winegar 2012, 540). The campaign’s promise that literacy makes life is therefore a different sort of relationship between faith and development than of that described by Daromir Rydnyckyj, who traces the “afterlife of development,” in post-Suharto Indonesia when Islam took over as a means of national development after the failures of modernization plans (2010, 4). In the context of Indonesia’s economic crisis, he explains, “Islam was substituted for the nation as the common denominator” (ibid.). In the case of KIP, the nation is not replaced by Islam, but rather by an Islamic-civic project that calls on reformed subjects to faithfully participate in Egypt’s improvement. The Islamic cadence of KIP’s implementation does not reveal the afterlife of development, but rather the congruence between Islamic and developmentalist conceptions of self-improvement to structure a new mode of

39 Life Makers’ commitment to build life runs parallel to and consonant with human development aims as articulated by its founders Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2000), who propose that education creates transformative capabilities. For an analysis of human development in the Arab world, with special attention given to Arab women, see the special sub-section on the Arab Human Development Report in the International Journal of Middle East Studies 41 (2009).
citizenship, a new way of being and acting for the betterment of the nation.

**Literacy, Islam, the Quran**

Khaled is on a television special promoting *Knowledge Is Power*. He poses a question to the talk show host: “What was God’s first command? It wasn’t to fast. No. It wasn’t even to pray. God’s first command was to read. Read in the name of your Lord.” Islamically-sponsored literacy programs as well as Egyptian state literacy programs alike cite this Quranic command to “*iqra*”, which translates approximately as read, recite or proclaim. Khaled highlights the verse as evidence of the necessity to read in order to fulfill one’s religious obligations. Indeed, the Quran is the backdrop for literacy.

And yet, the place of the Quran in KIP is full of contradictions that I unravel throughout this dissertation. Literacy promoters marshalled the Quran to recruit learners. When KIP volunteers went into local mosques and knocked on doors to recruit students for their classes, men and women asked if literacy classes would help them learn how to read the Quran. And yet, the mosques in which these discussions took place were often the very places in which Quran lessons teach recitation and memorization. But volunteers and the people they recruited were speaking about a different kind of reading, one where reading the Quran meant deciphering the letters of words on the page. Thus, “to read the Quran” meant to engage a particular encounter with the Quran: autonomous reading. Khaled’s project seeks to make autonomous reading an essential tool for reflecting and creating a contemplative relationship between the reader and God’s Word.

Autonomous reading of the Quran involves a different sense of embodiment of than recitational practices. Over recent years, scholarly attention to the arts of recitation has highlighted the centrality of the Quran’s performance for both the listener and the
reciter, particularly through the embodiment of ethical capacities honed through performance and audition (Gade 2004, Hirschkind 2006). These works emphasize how the Islamic tradition claims that learning should not be to discover knowledge for its own sake, but that it is to be embodied, which has implications for the transformation of the self (Lambek 1993, Mahmood 2005).

The Quran runs as a thread throughout the following chapters as I explore how a call for a different kind of encounter with God’s Word plays out in literacy’s promises and learners’ aspirations. In order to do this, I draw on Talal Asad’s call for an approach to the anthropology of Islam grounded in the tradition’s textual legacy. “If one wants to write an anthropology of Islam,” he writes, “one should begin, as Muslims do, from the concept of a discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts” (1986, 14). The turn to Quran as part of Islamic revivalism is indicative of a textualizing strand of reformism that traces back to Muhammad ʿAbduh in the early twentieth century. Placing the Quran at the centerpiece of education and reform is a departure from Islam’s legal tradition, which has long been the distinguished subject of Islamic learning.  

At the same time, as I will show, the skills taught in literacy to teach autonomous reading are not always taken up. While a few worker-students began to read small books of supplication during spare moments in their lessons, the women of Batn al-Baqara did not transfer the skills of their literacy classes into their Quran lessons, but instead, alternated between distinct disciplining reading practices.

---

40 See for example, Brinkley Messick’s study of Muslim text practices in Yemen that examines shariʿa jurisprudence manuals and treats shariʿa as a “centerpiece for societal discourse” (3). For Messick’s study of textual domination, he is attuned to the “constitution of authority in texts and the social and political processes involved in articulating the authority of texts (1). The aim of my project differs in that I locate the influence of the Quran on textual ideologies to shed light on the sorts of powers understood to work through literacy.
A defining feature of Egypt’s Islamic Revival is the diffusion of religious authority away from state-affiliated institutions and figures, and a turn to self-learning through books. Khaled both contributed to and gained influence through this devolution of Islamic authorization. He is himself representative of how diverse Islamic reform movements introduced modes of self-education, where especially university-educated Muslims take responsibility for their own Islamic knowledge by studying the Quran, \textit{sīra} (the life of the Prophet), and shariʿa.\footnote{See Eickelman (1985). On forms of Muslim self-education, see Grewal (2013). Although dated, see Haddad, Esposito, Hiel and Abugideiri (1997) for an annotated bibliography on the Islamic Revival across different countries on English sources between 1970-1988. For more recent ethnographic accounts of the Islamic Revival, see, for example, the influential work on Egypt by Hirschkind (2006) and Mahmood (2005). Schielke (2012) examines non-pious living amid Islamic Revival. Through an ethnography of dream interpretation that falls beyond the orthodoxies of contemporary revivalism, Mittermaier (2011) demonstrates a different grappling with tradition that is not subsumed by revivalist piety. The development of an “anthropology of Islam” has in fact taken as its focus the Islamic Revival in Egypt in a number of works that I am in conversation with throughout this study.} Thus, while there is much emphasis on the embodied modes of piety at work in Egypt’s Islamic Revival, it is in fact the role of autonomous reading that greatly contributes to the new facets of autodidacticism and self-making.

Since the 1970s, Egypt has witnessed a proliferation of new forms of Islamic publications such as low cost books, booklets, and learning manuals, which are sold outside of mosques, in kiosks, and literally off the streets. Booklets of supplications and religious advice are distributed at weddings and funerals; book markets behind al-Azhar mosque and other parts of the city specialize in Islamic learning where students and laypeople alike purchase books ranging from multi-volume Islamic jurisprudence tracts, to inexpensively produced contemporary works by public shaykhs, such as Yusuf al-Qaradawi.

KIP promotes literacy as a way of creating proximity to the God’s Word, with an
understanding of modern reading that displaces, but does not eliminate, traditional reading practices. When would-be learners ask if they will learn how to read the Quran, they indicate a modern scriptural practice that forms a particular relationship between the reader and the text, one based on autonomous reading. Ebrahim Moosa observes this modern turn to books across religious traditions. He explains how reading scripture became a comfort to the faithful reader that in some cases replaces traditional religious authority:

… it is peculiar as well as a luxury of modern literate and book-reading societies that people who are troubled by a moral or religious question can reach for their copies of the Qur’an, Bible, or Bhagwad Gita for solace. During earlier phases of each of these traditions questioners would have consulted living authorities. And, there was no guarantee then that the answer would be found in some authoritative written book. Nowadays, most people find their answers in books! (2006, 112)

Moosa points to modern autonomous reading as a phenomenon that disrupts traditional forms of religious authority. Holy books become texts to mine for ‘answers.’ This positioning of the subject to the text, made possible by autonomous reading, gives scripture a new role in the life of believers and invests scriptures with distinct powers.

Khaled’s approach to Quran reading illustrates this turn to modern reading practices, and conceptions of understanding, that endow scripture with the power to respond to daily life. And yet, Islamic literacy development does not displace Quranic encounters that invest in performative dimensions of recitation and collective reasoning. Knowledge Is Power is a particular project for Islamic reform in Egypt’s ongoing, albeit greatly altered Islamic Revival. The campaign aims to be revolutionary not only in its timing, but in its aim to remake the people who become a part of it, to make literacy a way to reorient the self to a unifying view of social, political, and divine orders.
Methods: On Being the Joker

Life Makers volunteers are unemployed youth looking to be productive rather than idling away their days with empty time-wasters, like a hand of cards. Among these volunteers I was known as the Joker: a regular presence within the organization, but not a true participant—a face in a deck of cards. Saleh, a Knowledge Is Power director, gave me my new name while at a teacher training session to explain my role to the other volunteers. Having earned a nickname, I felt a part of Life Makers’ camaraderie, but I wondered if the ambiguities of the Joker were part of their ambivalence towards me. After all, the implications of a Joker on a game are dependent on the game in question. I could move between roles, like the power of a Trump card; I could both benefit and harm the card holder; I could also be the Fool, or a card best avoided. After they named me, I typically saw myself as the kind of Joker used as an Excuse card, shifting identities based on the circumstances. As the Excuse card, the Joker implies a sort of (empty) presence, similar to the ways that I was a part of door-to-door literacy campaigning and classroom life, but never with the responsibilities or consequences of a volunteer. Like the participant-observer, even when the Joker is a part of the game, it is also outside it. My friend's nickname for me, the Joker, is a reminder that we are not the only observers, but are ourselves observed by our interlocutors, interpreted, and, significantly, named.

On a late night in Ramadan within my first month of research—weeks before I had even met a Life Maker or learned of Knowledge Is Power—I sat in the salon of a renowned Quran recitation teacher, Ustaz Ahmed. I came here with Fatima, a twenty-three year-old Moroccan-Canadian who moved to Cairo to learn the arts of Quran.
recitation and performance. I began my research in Cairo among these Muslim student-travelers, following them through their study of Arabic and Quran in a project that took a different approach to ‘religious reading’ than the version I was soon to find. When we arrived, Ustaz Ahmed told us that there would be other foreigners tonight, but continued with Fatima as usual in their practice of “call and answer,” where he would begin a verse that she would take over attempting to reproduce and continue his melody. Shortly after she began, an American radio show host arrived with an assistant. The radio host had questions about music and how what Ustaz Ahmed did with the Quran was different from singing. He opened up his large recording devices that occupied most of the salon. Fatima tucked away her small voice recorder that she used for later practice at home. Ustaz Ahmed called a few of his star students to come and join the evening and his wife came in with trays of hot tea. It was a never-ending Ramadan night and there were visitors. The radio host listened to Fatima perform. Ustaz Ahmed then asked me to repeat after him and I did, feeling awkward that the host would think me a student of his. Soon, the seasoned long-term students arrived, taking off their shoes in the hall before entering, shaking hands with the visitors and their large equipment. As we shuffled our seats to accommodate Sherif, who sat beside his teacher to perform, I moved beside the radio host and spoke with him in English. I asked how he learned about Ustaz Ahmed. His assistant was well acquainted with Egypt’s Quranic melodies (maqamāt) scene. He also interviewed Kristina Nelson, who had also guided him here. I told him that I knew Nelson’s book, and that I was an anthropologist studying those studying Quran recitation. I thought he and I shared this interest. I tried to make clear that I was not Fatima or Sherif, that I too was an observer. We spoke intermittently between the different parts of
the performance that Ustaz Ahmed was putting on for this man and his imposing recording equipment. He told his usual stories about the people he angered with his melodies and the degradation of the arts of recitation in Egypt. The radio host listened earnestly and took notes in a tiny notepad. The night wound down only because the sun would soon be rising and all of the students wanted to return home for some food before the fast would soon start again.

Some weeks later, I went to the radio host’s website. In addition to a podcast series on music in Egypt, from Saints festival (mawlid) music to techno-pop, he had a segment on Quran recitation. He wrote a piece about the magnanimous character of Abdel Mustafa Kamel. In it, he described two of his Canadian female students, noting their gender and the long distance they travelled to study with this expert. I appeared in a photo beside Ustaz Ahmed, the caption: “Abdel Mustafa Kamel and student.” I was not used to seeing Ustaz Ahmed called by his full name, and I did not recognize myself as a student. I had clarified that I was not a student for more than the accuracy for his story. I had accidentally become the object of study for another observer, and I did not like the feeling. It was not only that I felt misrepresented, but that I had become a character for the radio host to tell his story of this fabled teacher. But being incorporated into another person’s story was an early caution for my own efforts at seeing and writing in the field. To be observed can be an awkward experience. I tried to recall this feeling of misrecognition throughout my fieldwork and when I sat to place each word on the page. I knew these risks of representation—the power of the ethnographer to inadvertently play the Trump card—but the experience of accidentally becoming the subject of an American radio program was a helpful reminder.
Welcome Back

I set out to commence fieldwork in the early months of what some were calling the Arab Spring. Returning to Cairo was a path that opened up because the pursuit of my project in Syria was no longer feasible due to the violence there. I returned on June 1, 2011, arriving at the new airport, pristine, unused, empty. My cousin and one of his friends came to pick me up. They both worked in tourism, but my cousin recently lost his job; he rushed to tell me what a blessing this was, how he finally had the opportunity to do something more important, especially now that there is so much to be done in Egypt.

I have been coming and going for some time now. Arrival used to mean dozens of relatives waiting outside of the Alexandria Airport, uncles sucking on cigarettes, aunts dabbing at the sweat on their cheeks, children creating new games to pass the time. In my recent travels, I send a few emails a week before I depart for Cairo; I try to make these comings and goings familiar. I relay the proper greetings by telephone; my suitcases are packed with things mostly for me. Growing up, summer vacations to Alexandria meant stuffing our bags with Pampers and Colgate, pop cassette tapes, 35 mm cameras. These were the days before international brands were available, so we, the Canadian cousins, brought these goods, not as charity, but to fill the gap of availability. When I first moved to Cairo in 2006 to work for the International Labour Organization, I discovered international shopping in luxury malls more sophisticated than anything I was accustomed to.

At that time I worked at the Ministry of Manpower, a large unremarkable government building in a part of Nasser City where Egypt’s bureaucracy expands over
several city blocks. I used to watch men wait nervously for the necessary signatures to procure a work visa. I had unexpectedly joined Egypt's infamously bloated civil service, among notoriously underpaid civil servants (muwazzafin). For nearly two years I worked on a project devising policies to address the lack of youth employment opportunities, the National Action Plan for Unemployment (NAP). Through an employment scheme aimed at offering international development experience to young Canadian graduates, I was sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) to work on the NAP, an initiative of the International Labour Organization’s Youth Employment Network, and managed locally by Egypt’s Ministry of Manpower. I cooperated with a swath of ministries and international development organizations as a communications officer. Paid by Canadians and managed by Geneva, my everyday responsibilities were tasked by my local boss at the Ministry. This woman led the largest national comprehensive policy package for creating decent work opportunities for Egyptians, and as I made my way to her office, I passed the administrative body that authorizes visas to find work abroad.

One of the key ideas behind NAPs worldwide is that youth have a voice in the policy creation process, to be articulated through youth consultative groups. The Egyptian Youth Consultative Group (EYCG), consisted of about twenty young people representing different youth NGOs. They were invited to “capacity building” training sessions run by the World Bank, the ILO and other international agencies with funds earmarked for youth initiatives, particularly ones that encouraged youth participation as a strategy for democracy-building. The idea of the EYCG was to give voice to young people, and to cultivate leaders capable of interfacing with the government and international
community. Through my work with them, I discovered an NGO culture in Cairo where young people met to create grassroots projects. They came from all sorts of backgrounds, from the well established Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services, to Risala, a well known Islamic khayr organization. A few of the young people had jobs that they worked at during the days, and worked for their organizations on evenings and weekends, while others worked for the organization, whether paid or unpaid. I observed how they moved between their grassroots community organizing to sitting at the boardroom table at the Ministry of Manpower to represent “the voice of Egypt's youth.” Years later, when I returned to begin research on reading I did not expect that some of my interlocutors, the youth volunteers, would so resemble the youths I worked with in my previous development work.

Three years after I finished working on youth employment, after I began graduate school, and then returned once again to Cairo for fieldwork, I sat on a bus stuck in traffic on a hot day. I noticed a large Vodafone branch with floor to ceiling signage on the front glass. The font appeared like handwriting across the storefront window: *Our goal is that by the year 2017, every Egyptian will be able to read this sentence and write it too.* Below the sentence were the words *Knowledge Is Power.* When I returned home, I searched the Internet and learned that Amr Khaled had pledged to eradicate illiteracy in Egypt.

**Ethnography of a Campaign**

I approach the story of *Knowledge Is Power* from several angles: to observe and participate in the lives of literacy learners and their teachers, as well as to map the wider terrain of literacy development in Egypt. The reader will move through the chapters in
ways similar to how I moved through my research sites to investigate different aspects of the campaign. I describe my research as “pivoting” between volunteers’ ethic of action on one hand, and literacy’s effects on the other. In this way I describe my methods as what George Marcus describes as “multi-sited,” within a national context. This method “ethnographically constructs the lifeworlds of variously situated subjects, it also ethnographically constructs aspects of the system itself through the associations and connections it suggests among sites” (1998, 96). Pivoting between discrete sites of the campaign therefore allows us to examine how ideas about literacy travel, how conceptions of identities attached to education levels are both internalized and contested, and how pious reading is adopted and refuted. By moving through the campaign, the tensions and contradictions of Islamic literacy development emerge. Pivoting is also a privilege afforded to an ethnographer. This ability to move easily between different classes and genders, allowed me to transgress the sorts of social boundaries that structure the lives of my interlocutors.

The ethnography for this dissertation is based on field notes I took as a ‘participant-observer,’ the signature method of anthropology (Ortner 1997), yet what this role meant in each of my sites was very different. In Batn al-Baqara I sat with women on the front step of their homes in narrow alleys that brought their lives so closely together. There, among ten primary interlocutors, I alternated between literacy classes and the long-standing Quran lessons that were offered in the same small community center. In the factory, I encountered the men’s lives at work, sneaking out with them for their cigarette break, or loitering after class, helping them put off the inevitable return to work. I interviewed approximately thirty worker-students and was based in two classrooms with
about a dozen primary interlocutors there. I spent hours each day in long commutes with teachers who told me their stories, shared their frustrations, and planned for their futures. Between teacher trainings, Life Makers social events and Amr Khaled lessons, I interviewed about forty volunteers, and among them about ten were close interlocutors. At the same time, I was interested in the ways that the campaign sponsorship influenced the way literacy was defined, taught and evaluated. This led me to regular Life Makers meetings and the General Authority for Adult Education (GAAE), as well as the air conditioned offices of UNESCO and Vodafone. I asked how the campaign came to be and what it may say about evolving ethics of giving and action, marked by the political conditions of Egypt's economic neoliberalisation, different forms of Islamic activism, and the revolution.

I interviewed literacy experts from a swath of literacy programs and ministries, from UNESCO’s director of education in the regional headquarters in Cairo to the director of the GAAE. In those interviews, my interest was to grasp how literacy was conceptualized as a problem for development and to appreciate how experts planned for literacy to improve life. The libraries at ASFEC, UNESCO and the GAAE were critical to locating research on adult education, curricula, policies, and awareness campaigns that together form the history of literacy development in Egypt. The voices of experts make up literacy’s promises: the social and economic goods of literacy that motivate literacy development in Egypt and in various iterations, around the world. In addition to the literacy experts, I traced the specific discourses of KIP through Egypt’s Vodafone Foundation and CSR media, directed at both a general public as well as their investors. I also tracked Khaled’s media production, making use of the online archive at
amrkhaled.net, as well as collecting news-clippings and following his post-revolutionary programming, particular as his latest productions, books and lessons for cultural renewal became part of how to bring about the deep changes needed for realizing the new Egypt.

My research investigates both the developers (Khaled, Life Makers, factory administration) and the objects of developed (learners in Batn al-Baqara and Arab Contractors). Volunteers straddle these two categories, as their work as teachers extended literacy’s promises to the learners, and yet, their participation in the campaign was a part the campaign logic to mobilize youth. In addition to being a multisited ethnography, it is also multilevel, in that by examining literacy sponsorship, I study “up” (Nader 1972) to examine how the powers of literacy’s visionaries and implementers shaped the campaign on the ground. To understand how literacy development has become something of a hobby and fetish, it is necessary to understand how it works at each of its stages and among the different people who participate in its implementation. At the same time, it is necessary to understand how learners engaged and participated in their education. Only by tracing how literacy works on and through the different actors involved in the campaign can we understand the durability of literacy development as a social intervention. I gesture to state literacy programs and other religiously-sponsored literacy programs as points of comparison. By focusing on a single program, I offer a sample of a particular iteration of developmentalist literacy in a revolutionary context and as part of an Islamic reformist project. KIP is a particular instantiation of a globalized development project directed toward the Global South. In each of the chapters I elaborate on the fieldwork methods and my shifting positionality in the particular site.

In addition to Knowledge Is Power, I conducted research in a number of literacy
classrooms belonging to different state programs, NGOs and religiously-sponsored charitable organizations and institutes. These included the National Council of Childhood and Motherhood classrooms in Duwa’a’s Suzanne Mubarak Housing Project, GAAE classrooms in a Giza village near Kafr Ammar, one hour south of Cairo’s city center, a Salafi institute in Nasr City and Egyptian Bible Society classrooms on Golden Island, a rural community living on a small Nile island west of Old Cairo. While I plan to elaborate on this preliminary research in future work, for the purposes of this dissertation, this breadth of literacy programs allowed me to understand what was particular about *Knowledge Is Power*, namely their understanding of literacy’s benefits as an Islamic-civic project to create the Muslim citizen.

In order to be able to move between different sites of the campaign, I lived in Dokki, a central district of Cairo that gave me access to public transportation networks and facilitated my ability to do multisited research in a city that is notoriously challenging to navigate through dense traffic. The apartment that I rented was on a main artery that linked the Giza governorate (the eastern half of Cairo) to the Cairo governorate. A twenty minute walk to Tahrir Square, I lived on a popular route that funnels protestors from the eastern districts of the city into the Square for regular Friday demonstrations. I was able to reach Batn al-Baqara by riding two subways and a fifteen minute walk; to reach the shipyard, I travelled approximately thirty kilometers south of the city center by taking two microbuses to the industrial zone of Ma’sara. I could also reach two Life Makers offices within thirty minutes by public transportation. My location enabled me to move fluidly within the city to participate in different aspects of the campaign, including door-to-door canvassing for volunteers and learners, as well as to meetings with teachers,
literacy experts, development workers, booksellers and others who make up the voices of this study.

The period between June 2011 and 2013, the two years over which I conducted my fieldwork, witnessed the rise to power of political Islam, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood which won the first democratic elections in the country’s history, as well as their party’s demise and persecution. In this period a major shift emerged in how Egyptians discussed Islam and envisioned the role of religion in the public sphere. Following Mubarak’s ouster, the country was first ruled over by the interim government of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), and then later by elected president, Mohamed Morsi and the Freedom and Justice Party. At the end of my final leg of research, I left two weeks before the June 30, 2013 demonstrations against Morsi. On July 3, the Army stated that Morsi and his government failed to meet the demands of the people, and overthrew him. Adly Mansour was installed as the interim president, although the Minister of Defense, Abdel Fatah al Sisi enjoyed credit for the overthrow and was lauded by most Egyptian media. In June 2014 he was elected Egypt’s sixth president. In the year leading up to his presidency, Egypt was fiercely criticized by Egyptian and international human rights organizations for the arrest of thousands of Muslim Brotherhood members, unionists, and leftists who are interested in continuing the revolution.\textsuperscript{42}

Throughout the months of my research election rounds for each of the Upper and Lower Houses of parliament, as well as the presidential elections were conducted over multiple days, and with run-off second rounds. The period was also regularly interrupted

\textsuperscript{42} See the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights’ May 2014 statement to the “future President of Egypt” that outlines the increase in political prisoners and detainees since July 2013.
http://eipr.org/pressrelease/2014/05/22/2083
with bouts of violence, mostly the result of political protests and violent military and police crackdowns. There was also much discussion about a decline in security, from an increase in the reporting of sexual harassment and sexual attacks on women at protests, to increased attacks against Copts. Throughout this dissertation I use various terms to refer to and evoke this period, sometimes as revolution (thawra), a moment, or a revolutionary moment, uprising, counter-revolution, and post-revolution. My intention is not to resolve or somehow clarify this political juncture by assigning it one of these terms, but rather to lay bare simultaneous narratives of the present. My interlocutors understood the moment as one of possibility. Volunteers saw the revolution as a moment in which the state became undone; they conceived of their social action as a way to make life—theirs and others—and to remake the state. Learners’ ambivalence towards literacy is therefore not simply a lack of desire for education, as literacy programmers frequently observe, but it is an ambivalence towards the grand claims of literacy and its promise to build Egypt.
Part II:
Making Faith Legible
Chapter 1
From the “Unlettered Prophet” to National Fetish

In the month following Mubarak’s ouster, March 2011, the American University in Cairo Press was due to release what they called a memoir by Suzanne Mubarak, *Read Me a Book: The Story of Egypt’s First Lady and Her Grandson*. The book cover and description occupied the first page of the AUC’s spring catalogue. However, the publication date was postponed until September 2011, and then finally canceled. The book, written in English, was Suzanne Mubarak’s narration of the importance of reading in the life of her grandson, Mohamed, who died in 2009 at the age of twelve from a health crisis rumored to have been a brain hemorrhage. AUC Press endorsed the book as a “personal and poignant chronicle of a child’s intellectual and emotional growth through reading, of a family tragedy, and of the universal trial of mourning” (Spring Catalogue 2011, 1). *Read Me a Book* was an effort to both humanize Suzanne Mubarak and further her advocacy for family reading. She describes her discovery that her grandson could read independently:

> The moment when I realized Mohamed could read took me by surprise… At first I thought he had just memorized the words—this was a favorite story, though we hadn’t looked at it for some time. It was only when he halted, then tried out the letters of the word that was holding him up, that I understood what was happening. (ibid.)

*Read Me a Book* illustrates the powers of reading: its ability to give the reader confidence and creativity, to form relations between grandmother and grandchild, as well as between the person and the page. This was the message Suzanne Mubarak wanted for her legacy.

---

43 The Press declined my request to see the unreleased book, stating: “The publication of Suzanne Mubarak’s “Read Me a Book” was postponed indefinitely after the Revolution last year, at the author's request. So it has never been printed, and no copies exist” (personal communication).
as the First Lady of Egypt. In 1994 she launched the Family Library (*Maktabat al-Usra*), which produced inexpensive classics. In the same year, she established the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood, a national body to deliver social programs and work on policies for Egypt’s women and children. They spearheaded their own literacy programs, independent of the GAAE, which had been established just three years prior. She was the Head of the Board of Trustees of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. She was also the patron of libraries around the country in the mid 1990s. After the Mubarak’s ouster, the Mubarak Public Libraries were renamed the Misr Public Library, allowing the logo that employs the acronym MPL to remain intact. In brief, Suzanne Mubarak’s primary activity as First Lady was associated with the national push to create a nation of readers. Her vision of literacy was a vision of national development that included the culturing of its citizens.

My first encounter with Egypt’s literacy media campaigns was in the summer of 2007. The main streets of Cairo’s downtown had changed. One afternoon while crossing the Qasr al Nil Bridge, I noticed colourful banners hoisted atop lampposts that read: “Reading for All” (*Al-Qirā’a li-l-Jamī‘*). The newly launched public campaign was the latest in the First Lady’s programs to make reading central to the development of children, and healthy families. The banners advertised to a reading public that Egypt was continuing to invest in reading. The *Reading for All* campaign was announced on a prominent thoroughfare, connecting the Opera House and the Arab League. The campaign, like other strategies in the push for Egyptian literacy, was a public spectacle.

Those who could not make out the words saw bright colours and an abstract image of an

---

44 For more on public writing on billboards and murals, see Starrett (1995) who analyses the presence of religious signs as a way of creating a sense of God’s presence in the public domain, not only for believers, but all who encounter the images.
open book, resting on its spine, while readers were assured that their government was doing something to address the country’s education problem. That week the First lady appeared in a television commercial to endorse the program: “Let us make reading part of our daily life. Let us read for life.” After the Mubaraks’ downfall, her appeal to “let us read for life” echoed in Life Makers’ curriculum, *Make Your Life*. Her call for literacy as the basis of building life endured, even as she herself all but vanished from the public eye. In her stead, in the early months of revolutionary Egypt, Amr Khaled appeared as the new face of literacy development. Khaled’s vision for literacy draws explicitly on the platform of literacy for national development and cultural uplift. At the same time, through the ethics of the campaign and his turn to develop a personal relationship between the subject and their scripture, Khaled promoted reading as an Islamic duty.

In order to understand what I call Islamic literacy development, it is critical to uncover what is ‘Islamic’ about how KIP planned, advocated and taught literacy. At the same time, KIP extends Egypt’s book fetish through a major national development intervention. This chapter therefore straddles the Islamic as well as developmentalist genealogies that come together in Life Makers’ implementation of KIP. I trace a particular history of reading that moves from Islamic conceptions of “reading” (*qirā’a*) and “the illiterate” (*ummī*), to the literacy fetish of the modern state. The reason for this eclectic scope is to situate Islamic literacy development within both an Islamic discursive

---

45 In the months following the ouster of the Mubaraks, particularly around the time of the start of his trial in the summer of 2011, Suzanne was depicted as a mastermind behind the wrongdoings of the former regime. The public libraries she established officially removed her name. She was accused of embezzling money from the Bibliotheca Alexandrina—the major national library built to be the modern replacement of one of the ancient Wonders of the World, the Great Library of Alexandria—as well as from international funds allocated to the *Reading for All* program. She was held in detention; however, after returning some 4 million USD to the state through the Illicit Gains Authority, she was released. For more on how first ladies were depicted as uniquely villainous in the context of the falling regimes of the Middle East uprisings, see Brand, Kaki and Stacher (2011).
tradition, as well as national and international developmentalist discourses. I explore how Islamic and state-centric literacy endeavours are sometimes discrete and at other times intersect. As I will introduce here and elaborate in the following chapters, KIP advocates a form of reading that disciplines (and sometimes derides) traditional forms of transmission and experiences of texts in their campaign for literacy as a technique of (self-)development.

By highlighting how the Islamic tradition incorporated various reading and writing practices that champion the book as a bearer of knowledge and evidence of God’s greatness, I locate how the tradition’s evolving relationship between the oral and written often embraced the book form without much autonomous reading, and the continuation of collective and recitational reading practices. The book form thus did not displace traditional reading practices, although it did give rise to new mode of relation between the reader and the page. I then turn to a present-day visit to the Arab States Fundamental Education Centre (ASFEC), a regional centre for literacy expertise established at the same time as Egypt’s independence from the British in 1952. The center is at once a relic of literacy’s promises to develop the nation, and is a recently revived hub for literacy activity as a post-Mubarak initiative. Here, under the direction of newly appointed Dr. Reda Hegazy, hundreds of volunteer teachers receive teacher training. ASFEC continues to promote literacy as a tool for enlightenment and economic development, while at the same time, Hegazy himself articulates the psychological goals of literacy to cultivate self-awareness and self-actualization for the neoliterate subject.

This chapter probes how the Islamic referents of the campaign were deployed to advocate for a particular version of literacy, that was, for Life Makers, part of a project of
cultural renewal. My purpose is to bring into focus Islamic literacy development as a particular crystallization of Islamic notions of transmission and mediation within the modern state project to transform citizens through modern education. I introduce critical terminologies and theologies that pertain to reading and the transmission of knowledge that I will trace ethnographically in later chapters. This chapter moves between the act of reading and the object of the book and back to reading and literacy. By moving between action and object, I pay attention to the sorts of relations ideally developed between the reader and the page. It is this relationship between the subject and object that I refer to as the fetish. By fetish, I mean the ways that humans form relations with objects (Marx and Freud). I follow Tim Dant who argues “that the fetishisation of objects involves an overdetermination of their social value through a discursive negotiation of the capacities of objects that stimulates fantasy and desire for them.” Dant’s fetish draws on Jean Baudrillard, who sees the fetish as a sign of social value (1972). According to Baudrillard, the fetish object gives the owner social status. According to his theory, the object begins as distinct; however, the object and its subject become increasingly entangled through the process of consumption. Dant explains:

> It is in the process of consumption, which refers not merely to the purchase of objects but to the use, enjoyment and disposal of the capacities of those objects (Miller, 1987: 190-191), that a relationship between human subjects and material objects is established.” (510)

When I refer to “the book,” I refer to both a form and also a symbol endowed with sacred meaning. As I will show, references to “the book” (al-kitāb) can mean the Quran or Bible. But even when not associated with scripture, the book is often a marker of social status.

---

46 In 1837, the Oxford English Dictionary defined fetish as “something irrationally reverenced.” Charles de Brosses used the term in 1870 to describe practices of worshiping objects. The broader cultural meaning of fetish was established in the nineteenth century. See Dant 497-8.
and class. And yet, today in Egypt, while there is an overwhelming sense of the symbolic powers of the book as an object of potential, its material form does not translate into all reading practices, as I will demonstrate through the Quran lessons of the women in Batn al-Baqara.

Today both state and Islamic literacy development programs refer to the first verse of revelation—“Read (iqra’) in the name of your Lord”—as an unequivocal reference to the reading taught in literacy. What is more, Khaled describes the Prophet’s mission as a mission to teach his nation to read. Khaled’s settled understanding of iqra’ as autonomous reading requires an examination of how depictions of the Unlettered Prophet (al-nabī al-ummī) have come to be interpreted in order to teach literacy as an Islamic obligation and a form of worship. Life Makers repeat Khaled’s phrase “we are the umma of iqra’,” we are the nation of reading. This phrase that serves to promote Life Makers’ pursuit of knowledge, and endorse KIP, pivots on two words. Both umma and iqra’ are at the centre of understanding how Islamic sources are mobilized to promote developmentalist literacy. Islamic literacy programs, including those of the state, teach reading as a virtue, one that is self-evident and located in the Islamic tradition. The imperative iqra’ is commonly invoked in Egypt to promote seeking Islamic knowledge (when used in the context of da’wa) as well as to enjoin literacy as an Islamic obligation. The different interpretations of qirā’a—to read, to recite and to proclaim—correspond not only to different activities, but also to conceptions of revelation and reading disciplines. The plurality of meanings is replaced in the modern period with a firmer distinction between reading and recitation, where autonomous reading is qirā’a, whereas
recitation, though it may also be qirāʿa, is more often tilāwa. Thus, while the term qirāʿa undoes the sharp divide between literacy and orality, and while the multiple meanings of the term suggest a flexible way of thinking about textual encounters, Islamic literacy development promotes modern autonomous reading as the ultimate arbiter of the literate—and more broadly—a knowing subject. Particular interpretations of these terms are the foundation of conceptions of the miracle of ‘the Book,’ the material form of the Quran known as the mushaf, projected onto ‘books’ writ large. The sacralization of ‘the Book,’ and thereby ‘books,’ makes the reading of not only the Quran and other Islamic texts an act of worship, but more broadly associates reading with edification. It is not that Muslims always read as Muslims, but rather that KIP’s particular Islamic reformist and nationalist call to read makes literacy an Islamic-civic obligation. Reading is a capacious activity around which to centre both a national development agenda and an Islamic reformist movement. By focusing on reading, my aim is to uncover how conceptions of this activity have transformed and solidified reading as an act that oscillates between, and sometimes straddles, the private and social, the pious and worldly.

The Unlettered Prophet and the Command to Read

A television program created by Egypt’s Dār al-Iftā’, a preeminent Islamic institution that is one of the major world bodies for issuing Islamic legal rulings (fatwas), is illustrative of the anxieties around understanding illiteracy as a characteristic of Muhammad to be emulated. Since Muslims take Muhammad to be the ultimate human exemplar, the argument can thus be made that the Prophet’s illiteracy is a characteristic of

47 My account for how qirāʿa is taken up in contemporary Egypt differs from Messick’s distinction between qirāʿa and tilāwa in Yemen. There, in their application to different reading practices and texts, t-l-’ refers to “silent” or “comprehension” texts, whereas q-r-’ is related to recitational reading (91).
his person that to be embodied, like growing a beard, or eating with one’s right hand.

While none of my interlocutors articulated this line of argumentation with me, the State Mufti Shaykh Ali Gomaa’s treatment of the topic on the program suggested that the issue is of relevance to his viewership. The Mufti’s programs were structured as responses to questions posed by Egyptian viewers. In his explanation he maintained the contemporary orthodox understanding of Muhammad’s illiteracy:

> If a man told me “I am illiterate and the Prophet was illiterate” this is a major mistake (muṣība). The prophet’s illiteracy was a miracle, and the illiteracy of this man is a deficiency, not a miracle. Illiteracy debases (inḥiṭāt) and does not elevate a person. But the Prophet’s illiteracy was a miracle of God that comes to us in this honourable Book, the Quran, and through the honorable and purified prophetic tradition.

The reference to the Prophet as al-nabī al-ummī in the Quran (7:157-8) is seen as justification for the dominant position that he was unable to read or write, an understanding that became central to the Islamic theology of the miracle of the Quran’s revelation through the Unlettered Prophet. While Quranic references are ambiguous as to whether Muhammad was able to read or write, the traditional interpretation of ummī, that understands it as illiteracy, emerged in the early second/eighth century ( Günther 2002 ).

Belief in the Unlettered Prophet has theological significance, as his illiteracy is evidence of the authenticity of revelation through the pristine vessel of his person for the miracle of the Quran. In terms of its relation to the designation of a people, ummī and ummīyyūn may also indicate the Arab people—a people without Scripture—or any people without Scripture. Alternative meanings include ‘Arab,’ ‘Meccan,’ ‘layman’ and ‘heathen’ (ibid).

Ummī could also be one living in “an original state” (relating to the term’s association

---

48 The variant, umma, is a powerful political reference to the nation, that sometimes refers to Muslims around the world, and at other times is used as an alternative to waṭan, nation or nation-state.
with *umm*, mother).

In addition to Quranic references to Muhammad as *ummi*, in a widely circulated tradition, he is reported to have said: “We are an *ummi* nation, we do not write and do not calculate” (*innā umma ummiyya, la naktubu wa la naḥsubu*). Again, the designation of *ummi* is not pejorative, but rather a way to indicate that the Islamic calendar should not be calculated, but rather be based on observations of the moon by the human eye, a matter that has animated Islam legal debates for centuries. The notion of the *ummi* nation thus distinguishes the Muslim community from other societies of the Book; the *ummi* nation gave the early Muslims a sense of identity that served as the foundation for a discrete and authentic community—authentic because of the authenticity of revelation. Shaykh Ali Gomaa distinguishes between illiteracy as debased for humanity, and the Prophet’s illiteracy as a miracle of God. Although he articulates Muhammad’s illiteracy as part of the miracle of the Quran, it should be noted that this feature of revelation is typically understood as distinct from the doctrine of the inimitable nature of the Quran (*iʿjāz*), typically associated with the Quran’s style and language. Muhammad’s command to read and the subsequent verses are his first and ultimate miracle in his prophecy and the most significant of the tradition.

**Revelation**

49 See Günther 2002 for a full discussion of medieval and modern scholarly debates on possible understandings of *ummi*. Some of the ambiguities as to whether Muhammad could read or write are captured in Quranic descriptions. For example, in Q25:5 opponents of the Prophet claim that he did not receive revelation, but rather relied on ‘writings of the ancients’ (*asāṭīr al-awwalīn*) that he ‘writes down’ (*iktatabahā*). Q 29:48 addresses the Prophet: “You never recited any Scripture before We revealed this one to you; you never wrote one down with your hand. If you had done so, those who follow falsehood might have had cause to doubt.”

50 As narrated in the hadith collection of Bukhari, chapter No: 31, Fasting no: 137.
Muslim conceptions of revelation shape understandings of what reading is and its relation to the formation and transmission knowledge. Islamic literacy hinges on notions of revelation, which are in the Quran referred to *wahy*, “communication” and *tanzīl*, “sending down.” Muslims maintain that the first words of revelation came to the Prophet when he was forty years-old in the year 610, while he was on Mount Ḥira, where he was in the habit of going for seclusion and meditation. The Prophet’s wife A’isha Siddīqa is the source of two narrations of the first revelation, as relayed in the hadith collections of Bukhari and Muslim.

He used to retreat alone into the cave of Ḥira’ where he would spend several days in devotion before going back to his family. He used to take some food with him, and when he came back, he would take a fresh supply for another period. He continued to do so until he received the truth while in the cave of Ḥira’. The angel came to him and said, ‘*Iqra’!*’ He replied, ‘I am not a reader.’ The Prophet says, ‘He held me and pressed hard until I was exhausted, then he released me and said, ‘*Iqra’!*’ and I replied, ‘I am not a reader.’ He held me and pressed me hard a second time until I was exhausted, then he released me and said, ‘*Iqra’!*’ I replied, ‘I am not a reader.’ He then held me and pressed me hard for the third time. Then he said, ‘*Iqra’* in the name of your Lord who has created — created man out of a germ-cell. *Iqra’*— for your Lord is the most Bountiful One, who has taught the use of the pen, taught man what he did not know.’ The Prophet returned home to Khadijah trembling and said, ‘Wrap me! Wrap me!’ They wrapped him and his fear subsided. He turned to Khadijah and exclaimed, ‘What has happened to me?’ and related to her what had happened and said, ‘I fear for myself.’  

While literacy organizers invoke the first words of revelation to promote private reading, taken in the context of Muhammad’s experience of the revelation, the story of these first verses often centres on the emotional impact of the immediacy the Prophet felt to the command: a pressing down of the message upon him. John Bowen describes the centrality of this episode in the Muslim understanding of revelation: “This epistemology

---

51 This translation of the hadith is from of Sayyid Qutb’s explanation of the verse in his, *In the Shade of the Quran* (1979, 194-5).
of revelation—valuing the precise act of aural revelation, repeating the act of oral transmission—derives from the ideology of absolute and unmediated presence that founds the religion” (2012, 18).\(^\text{52}\) It is this sense of immediacy that is so central to the women in Batn al-Baqara’s experience of Quran lessons that I describe in the fifth chapter. It is notable that Muslim theories of revelation continue to animate theological debates today, with intellectual reformers turning to Orthodox versions of revelation as a starting point for their interpretive interventions.\(^\text{53}\)

The explanations of qirāʿa among the classical Quran interpreters (mufassirūn) include three meanings of the word: read and recite, as well as the sense of reading to reach others that is associated with the public act of proclaiming.\(^\text{54}\) The third understanding of iqraʾ relates to the speech act, one in which a statement is read aloud, or proclaimed. In Jonathan Boyarin’s analysis of Biblical references to reading (1993), he explains the Hebrew q-r- with regard to this third meaning. In his analysis of q-r-’, he observes that the word is always used to indicate an oral act, whether there is a written text to speak aloud, or none at all. He argues that the meaning therefore suggests the English “proclaim” as a possible rendering of the Hebrew. Boyarin observes that the word “read” meant something very different to Biblical culture than it does today. Through examples that indicate reading both prescriptively and descriptively, he shows how instances of “to read” suggest that someone who was part of an audience to a text

---

\(^\text{52}\) For an example of a different depiction of the first revelation of the Quran to Muhammad and the tension between versions of revelation that prioritize immediacy over mediation, see Daniel Madigan (2002) who emphasizes the mediatory role of the angel between the Prophet and God.

\(^\text{53}\) For example, see Arkoun (1988), Shahrur (1990), Abu Zayd (1990, 1992).

\(^\text{54}\) Tabari explains “qaraʾa ḥattā balagha” (2001, 527). Baydawi distinguishes between the first and second instances of iqra’, the first relating to a general imperative, and the second to be rehearsed aloud to an audience, or in prayer. Lane’s definition of qarāʾa includes both reading and recitation, while Wehr’s includes the third meaning, ‘to declaim.’
being read aloud could be the person “reading.” What is common across his examples is that “to read” meant to be of “public consequence,” where reading requires a response from the audience, since it is “a proclamation, a declaration, and a summons” (1993, 14). In other words, reading is a performative act, carrying illocutionary force (Austin 1962).

Recall from the excerpt from Suzanne Mubarak’s memoirs that she remembers the moment her grandson first made out his first words. She brackets this moment as a special discovery. His autonomous reading of a favourite story is more extraordinary than if he had memorized and recited it. In its multivalent meanings, qirāʿa pivots and blends distinct epistemologies that relate readers to texts and audiences in different ways. As such, qirāʿa is a fault line for polemics between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity.’

Distinguishing between this plurality of meanings becomes a problem in modernity, particularly the distinction between recitation and autonomous reading as they are each associated with different practices of internalization that raise the question as to what constitutes understanding. The distinction between these different modes of reading also highlights different notions of the force and effects of reading on the reading subject and their public. While recitation is illocutionary, where the act of reading and its force is of consequence, autonomous reading is locutionary, where the content of what is read is of paramount concern. In the following section, I examine the theological reading practices of the earliest Muslim community and in doing so sketch some of the traditional Quranic reading practices that Khaled’s reading project both takes up and prunes down in his reformulation of Quran reading practices for a successful life.

From the Miracle of the Book to the Miracle of Books

The depiction of the Quran as a miracle became, through modern iterations on the
virtues of reading, a basis for regarding books as miracles. The revelation was God’s Word (kalām Allah) revealed in human language. But this Word had form, and that form became a powerful object and metaphor. It is sometimes referred to in Arabic as al-Kitāb (the Book) or the Umm al-Kitāb (Mother Book). Mohammed Arkoun describes a movement from the Book to books in what he calls the “phenomenon of the Book-book,” in which not only is the secondary literature of the Islamic tradition, like the hadith, part of the expansion of the idea of the Book, but rather an objectification of the book. As he explains, this is not only because of the stature of scripture, but because of how scripture is a part of a Muslim sociality.

Arkoun’s concept of the Book-book indicates the central importance of the Quranic term ‘kitāb.’ The use of the word kitāb in the Quran is most commonly glossed as book, but also means record or a written page. Yet, Daniel Madigan as observes, the kitāb is not a “bound, written codex,” but a symbol for God’s knowledge and authority. It is based on the verb for writing, kataba. The Muslim narrative of communication between God and humanity is thus saturated with logocentrism that lends itself to KIP’s version of Islamic literacy development that promotes the reading of all books as virtuous (cf. Messick 1993). Islamically sponsored literacy teaches the book as a material object laden with virtuous powers of mediating knowledge, whether that knowledge is divine or

---

55 See Graham (1984) for a discussion of how ‘Quran’ became the title of the collected revelations.
otherwise. The authority granted to reading as a result of its connection with revelation is central to the contemporary book fetish.

In its promotional campaign, KIP referred to books in their miraculous capacity to contain and convey knowledge. A pop song, *The Greatest Miracle* (*Akbar Muʿgīza*), composed and sung by Mustafa Ramadan (who also wrote and sang the song *Tomorrow Is Better*), and who is well-known for singing religious songs, *nashīd dīnī*), describes the ‘greatest miracle’ the Book, the Quran. The song, which circulated widely across Khaled and Life Makers media, promotes the particular Islamic literacy activism of Life Makers, where reading is a key to all knowledge, but where all Knowledge starts with the Quran.

When you find me far from beauty
And if you find me not with you, live imagination
And if you find me in a situation without any solution
Look in my hands and you will surely find a book
Yes I am a weak creature, strengthened by dust
But I fly above the clouds
And that is not the miracle, the greatest miracle
Of ours, oh people, was the Book.
When you find yourself in a moment of constraint
Medicine, science and engineering have no limits
History, civilization, literature and art
Look in my hands and you will surely find a book
Yes I am a weak creature, strengthened by dust
But I fly above the clouds
And that is not the miracle, the greatest miracle
Of ours, oh people, was the Book.
(*Greatest Miracle* 2012)

Khaled’s Islamic message brings the miracle of the word to the world in a way that encompasses the world in its entirety. The Quran points towards science and civilization ("medicine, science and engineering have no limits/ history, civilization, literature and art"), an invitation to go beyond the pages of the Quran to read God’s signs (*āyāt*) in

---

books that make up knowledge. According to the song, while the greatest miracle is indeed the Quran, the miracle of the Book expands to the miracle of books.

### The Excellences of Quran Reading

In Batn al-Baqara, where women participated in KIP literacy classes, they also studied the Quran with a local teacher. In their Quran lessons they performed ritualized readings of the Quran that have a long history in the Islamic tradition. Since the earliest Muslim community, reading has occupied a central place in worship, despite not being enshrined in the necessary ritual performances. Walid Saleh describes Quran reading as a paradoxical theology of reading that at once provides little liturgical use of scripture in proscribed ritual, and yet, through the development of hadith and the *fadāʾil al-Qurān* (works that deal with the “excellences” or “merits” of the Quran) teaches a particular reverence for reading. Theological reading, as Saleh describes it, makes “perusing, meditating, reciting, listening to the recitation and memorizing the Quran the most assured path for salvation” (359). Evidence that Quran reading was a major act of worship can be seen in its material culture.\(^{57}\) Quran reading and nightly vigils were central practices of the early Muslim community. However, with time, the status of reading diminished. Saleh explains:

Somewhere in the move to Medina Muhammad downgraded that aspect of the cult (see Q73:1–19 for the cult of nightly Qur’anic vigils, and Q73:20 which rescinds the rule). Officially the Qur’an hovers over the tradition. Yet the original impulse to make the Qur’an ritually central was never dimmed – perusal of the text remains a kind of unofficial act of worship

---

\(^{57}\) For more on the curative and apotropaic qualities of the material Quran, see Zadeh (2009), El Tom (1985, 1987). Like reading, the act of writing itself can transmit healing powers. Emilio Spadola examines the curative powers of the *fqih’s* writing in Morocco. The *fqih* was one who memorized the Quran and was often the only literate person in the village. Their scriptural authority is not only in their role as the person who writes official documents, but their writing penetrated the *ghayb*, the unknown and unseen, through their reed pen and ink (2009, 2013).
even if the official cult does not emphatically demand it. If the official cultic rituals of the new Muslims did not envision much reading or recitation of the text, the cultic manuals made a central presupposition about the availability and proximity of the physical text: it presumed that Muslims had to read it, touch it, and come into contact with it. (363)

The curative effects of the text made it so that the *muṣḥaf* was cemented in the lives of Muslims, even if they could not read it. Theological reading is not a reading that presumes to know the meaning of the text. The sorts of practices associated with theological reading are indeed a part of the socialities formed around the Quran, as well maintaining a healthy body and body politic. Each of the Quran’s chapters was imbued with salvific powers. Some verses brought material success in this life; however most of the rewards were directed towards Judgment and the next life. For example, reading chapter 91 is rewarded as though the reader gave the entire world of wealth in alms (364). Saleh probes how the act of reading for salvation is a paradox. While reading is what he calls a “process,” salvation is a “moment of grace,” a singular act and not a habitual practice.

The Islamically sponsored literacy of KIP eschews reading as an *act* to cultivate reading as a *practice*. Khaled opposes aspects of the theological reading that Saleh describes, where the miraculous quality of the Quran is restricted to its ritual performance. While I deal with the hermeneutics of KIP in the following chapter, my point here is to give texture to how modern conceptions of reading dismiss theological

---

58 Examples of multiplying rewards for reading particular verses at particular moments of time are many. For instance, reading the short chapter, *al-ikhlas*, Sincerity, three times is reported in hadith to be equal to having read the entirety of the Quran. Interpreters have taken this to mean that the unique attributes of God in these verses are of particular importance. The most holy time to make prayers are the late evening-early mourning hours, when the worshipper is said to be closer to God than any other time. Within the lunar year, the holiest night, the Night of Power (*laylat al Qadr*) is not a precise date, but rather takes place on one of the final ten evenings of Ramadan, likely one of the odd-numbered nights. The night itself recalls the anniversary of the first night of Muhammad’s revelation. The verse that describes the powers of this special night states that prayers on that night are better than a thousand months (*khayrun min alf shahr*) (97:1-5).
reading as an *act* of worship in preference for what they understand as an all-encompassing pedagogy of reading as a sacred *practice*.\(^{59}\) Recitation is associated with both act and practice, while autonomous reading is taught as a practice, and not an act. As a different sort of ethical practice from that of audition, autonomous reading seeks to cultivate the modern reader to be a cultured, responsible self-knowing subject—the Muslim citizen.

Print and modern forms of text-processing have been central to Egypt’s Islamic Revival, even when print forms are less popular than other mediums, such as Islamic television, cassette and radio programs. Even neglected (unread) books exert a force of authority in their presence. As Dale Eickelman observes: “Even if only a minority of the population read books, a much larger number hear them spoken about—and books, following the paradigm of the Quran—remain central to the cultural imagination” (2003, 35). KIP’s Islamic literacy development transforms theological reading to be an ethical practice of the Muslim citizen, a process I show ethnographically in the following chapters. Just as the miracle of the Book became the miracle of books, the virtues of reading are expanded beyond the Quran to the practice of reading.

**Textual Circulation and the Emergence of Autonomous Reading**

As I mentioned above, KIP takes the miracle of the Quran to project the miraculousness of the Book onto all books. But how precisely is such a move

\(^{59}\) See Lambek (2010) on the relation between ethics, action and practice, where he observes that “acts percolate from or disrupt the stream of practice, and they consequences for subsequent practice. In moving from the performance of individuated acts to practice more generally—thus from specific acts of piety, generosity, etc. To practicing piety or generosity, and thus to acquiring or manifesting a pious or generous disposition and being or becoming a pious person—we enter the realm of virtue theory according to Aristotle” (19).
accomplished, particularly in a tradition in which there is—in particular historical and geographic contexts—a strong preference for face-to-face learning rather than through books? In this section I turn from a focus on reading to the historical anxieties surrounding writing, especially as writing was compiled in the form of the book. The pen and the position of the scribe, and later of printed text, is elaborated in the Islamic tradition as a technology of God and part of the sacred pursuit of knowledge. At the same time, major Muslim thinkers distrusted writing as the sole means of the transmission of knowledge. For example, in Ibn Khaldun’s (d. 1406 in Cairo) *Mugaddima*, he explains the more generalizable Platonic fear that to write is to risk betraying the meaning of the author’s intention. For Ibn Khaldun, the written word without the author is a text without its context that can morph and take on erroneous meanings. Public reading was closely associated with the ambiguity of the written word in the absence of precise vowelization. Therefore, “a mute and private reading could never recover the author’s meaning, never restore the author’s presence. The entire practice of Arabic scholarship revolved around the problem of overcoming the absence in writing of the author’s unequivocal meaning” (Mitchell 1988, 152). Oral aspects of reading culture were in fact part of preserving and rendering the text’s meaning. It was not until a century after the death of Ibn Khaldun that books spread outside of the elite and Islamic scholarly circles. Still, as early as al-Jahiz (d. 869), literacy permeated Muslim lands. In his famous seven volume work *The Book of Animals*, al-Jahiz opens with several pages on the value of the book. He was not only a champion of the book form, but of the book as a medium for

---

60 See Messick (1993), particularly the chapter “Audition.”

61 For a history of the relationship between audition and writing in early Islamic literature, see Schoeler (2009), who observe how the transmission of knowledge shifted to the use of writing that included
scientific knowledge. The distinction between Al Jahiz and Ibn Khaldun’s much later warnings suggests how different political milieus effected ideas about the reliability of the text, as well as distinctions in the sorts of knowledge that can be transmitted through text alone. Scientific matters were understood to be effectively taught in books, while religious knowledge required the presence of a teacher. This early historical distinction highlights the stakes of teaching literacy as a technique of Quran reading, so that autonomous reading is a shift towards giving the reader more, though still not unrestrained, powers in the process deciphering the text.

In Nelly Hanna’s study of the spread of books in sixteenth to eighteenth century Egypt, she demonstrates how the works reflected the language and concerns of daily life at the time (2004). The rise of the book prior to the penetration of the printing press was made possible by the accessibility of affordable paper. The production of paper enabled the emergence of private book collections as well as public libraries in Cairo, Aleppo, Damascus and Istanbul. Prior to the dissemination of books, the contents of well-known texts were known beyond those who could read them, largely due to the practice of reading books out loud. Boaz Shoshan notes that in the fifteenth century, books were read out loud since few could read on their own (1993, 350). Similarly, in Edward Brown’s descriptions of Egypt during his 1673-4 visit, he observes the common practice of reading books aloud to be enjoyed by groups in leisure (1974, 53-4).

Copyists who produced books formed guilds. The most popular early tracts were Sufi texts, like the Dalā‘il al-Khayrāt, a Sufi prayer text that was the most widely produced book sold at a wide range of prices, indicating that less opulent productions of the book were created for individual homes, while others that included miniatures and scholarly practices like audition (samā’) and dictation (imlā’).
other embellishments, were sold to wealthy households and public libraries (Heyworth-Dunne 1968). One in five libraries, large and small, were in possession of the Dalāʿil (95). The production of the same texts at different prices indicates that people across different classes were in want and possession of same texts. The most popular texts were performed orally and often in public. As Hanna notes:

It does not follow that everyone who owned a copy of Dalaʿil al-Khairat actually read it. Some owners might have done so, while others could have used it for reading out loud in a home of family context; others owned it as a blessing to the house, perhaps without reading it, especially if it were the only book that they owned; some might have memorized and recited parts of it. Thus, for this particular book, the way the owners used it might have varied as widely as their social and educational background. Yet the very fact that this particular book was so widely read is in itself of some significance. (95)

Hanna argues that the increased production and accessibility of books changed reading attitudes, so that the tradition of studying with a shaykh and reading in groups became less important, since the circulation of books made the idea of independent reading not only possible, but indeed a means of edification. At the same time, literary works began to self-consciously draw attention to the benefits of autonomous reading. In the story Anis al-Jalis (1773) a character finds consolation from the world in books: “Better are books than people, they keep you from being lonely.” The wise man in the story speaks of his relations with scholars and poets. As Hanna explains: “He was talking of a very personal relationship with books: his reading was a private affair” (97). Similarly, in a book of anecdotes by the Azhari Shaykh Muhammad al Mahdi, a young man, Abd al-Rahman al-Iskandar, faces loneliness after his parents die. His shaykh recommends that he visit the book market and buy books of history and literature to be his companions and give structure to his daily life (98). Indeed, printing brought new relationship between the
reader and the page. In other words, autonomous reading is more than a shift from oral to silent reading, but is a reading that creates an independent reader, one who can find company in the comfort of books. The increase in book production thus gave rise to new sorts of reading publics who began to form private relationships with their texts. Hanna’s history of the emergence of book circulation indicates how “traditional” reading practices were not simply replaced by private reading as the result of the emergence of book circulation, but how some books, like the Dalāʾil, in fact put into material form such traditional reading practices. This period of increased book production and the emergence of an autonomous reader made possible the idea of a form of intimacy between the reader and their reading material.

I explore this connection further by turning to a sketch of the 43rd Annual Cairo International Book Fair that took place in Cairo in February 2012. The brief scene at the book fair offers a view of the state’s reading program from the opposite end of the spectrum from that of literacy programming. The fair’s promulgation of the national fetish of the book enjoins readers to read more and for enjoyment. The relationship between the reader and their book is a ‘site’ of personal growth and interpersonal connection. At the same time, the fair is also a site of tension between calls to read for culture, and the important role of reading and book publishing for diverse strands of Islamic daʿwa that employ the event to spread Islamic knowledge.

**Going to the Fair!**

A young man hung off the side of a minibus in Ramses Square, shouting “Fair! Fair! (Mahragān! mahragān!)” The vehicle quickly filled and we were on our way. Egypt, a country with one of the highest populations of illiteracy, is also host to the
world’s largest Arabic language book fair, second in the world only to the Frankfurt International Book Fair. Each winter the International Fair Grounds in Nasr City fill with stalls from across the Arab world. Families travel long distances, while students attend carrying empty suitcases ready to be filled. That morning, a radio station played patriotic songs. There was a sense of national mourning. The Port Said massacre had taken place days earlier. Seventy-eight soccer fans were murdered at a match between the home team and the country’s favourite, Al Ahly. The massacre was suspected to be retribution by police against Ahly fans, some of who were active in the revolution. But the fair did not close for the day in memorial for the dead. It had already shut down on January 25th to mark the one year anniversary of the revolution.

Visitors poured through the gates of the fair grounds. While events in the cultural tent circled around the latest tragedy, there was still a sense of festivity. While it is a cultural event, it is also a fair in the truest sense of the word. A vast food court sold the same treats sold at carnivals (malāhī) and Saint’s days (mawlids), like cotton candy and zalabia, fried dough drenched in a sticky syrup. The diversity of the stalls, over six hundred from twenty-nine countries, catered to distinct tastes. Children wandered the stalls with their parents, balloons tied to their wrists. This year Tunisia was the guest of honour, with the theme of the fair “One year of the January 25th Revolution.” Book exhibits ranged from popular Egyptian presses selling their latest releases, to the government subsidized stalls of the General Egyptian Book Authority (GEBA), which prints both classics and selected authors in low costs editions. The Book Authority runs bookshops in which they sell their publications, as well as others. They promote Egyptian and Arab authors and try to engage a broad readership.
At the Culture Cafe tent, prominent writers, politicians and intellectual figures took the stage. The cultural program was often the site of contention over the place of Islamic books and their authors at the fair. Historically, the program generally reflected the state’s effort to control cultural production. For example, Khaled’s 2000 talk, and later the 2008 talk by Saudi self-help author and shaykh Ai’d al Qarni stirred debate. Some argued for the need to preserve the book fair as an event independent of the influence of Islamic da’wa trends, while others took the events as a sign of the need for free speech and the freedom of the press. This year, beside the open air book market, a row of stalls sold Muslim Brotherhood publications, from the writings of Hasan al Banna and Sayyid Qutb, to the Freedom and Justice Party’s political program. While Islamic books are a mainstay of the fair, two years ago, stalls with Brotherhood materials were not tolerated by the Book Authority.

At the stall of Dar al-Shurūq, a major Egyptian publisher, I ran into an old friend, Walid. He was with a childhood friend of his, Yusuf. Although the two grew up together, they no longer found the time to connect and had been meeting annually at the fair for the last five years. It gave them a chance to catch up as they prowled the vast stalls. I tagged along and found myself enmeshed in Yusuf’s expedition. While Walid came in search of some specific titles on Ottoman history in Egypt, and to browse more generally, Yusuf gravitated to less scholarly displays. In particular, he was interested in the open-air section referred to as Azbakiyya, named after the permanent Cairo book market where many of the vendors came from to sell their books. Here old prints of miscellaneous titles were stacked against each other. Unlike the rest of the fair where the newest and most

---

62 For more on the politics of culture, and Egypt’s ‘culture wars,’ see Mehrez (2010). See Winegar (2006) on how Egypt’s art world brings rise to debates about cultural identity and authenticity.
popular books were on sale, this was the section for second-hand books sold for only a few pounds each. Yusuf was searching for a series of books he read as a child with his father who had passed away several years ago. He explained that the books were difficult to find now and although he looked from time-to-time throughout the year at different book markets, he had the most luck at the book fair, when he could usually procure one or two more installments in the series. Just as Suzanne Mubarak’s memoir didactically instructed, the fair functioned as a site of not only knowledge-acquisition and culture, but as a means to connect people with books. For Yusuf the fair re-connected him with his friend Walid, and through his book collection, to the memory of his father.

**A History of Literacy Development in the Present**

While KIP was the public face of literacy development in post-Mubarak Egypt, there was a single specialist who all literacy players in Egypt referred me to, Dr. Reda Hegazy. In March 2011 he was appointed to be director of the Arab States Fundamental Education Centre (ASFEC) to breathe life into a nearly obsolete center for literacy. Here, in what I call a history in the present, literacy’s enduring promises are not only still at work, but are in fact revived through the center as a strategic site at the moment of revolutionary impasse. Together, Hegazy and the center are illustrative of a history of literacy ideology that has evolved over the last sixty years. While the notion of development remains the same, and there is a remarkable lack of change with respect to how literacy is yoked to economic and social development, Hegazy himself emphasizes the goal of transforming the psychology of the neoliterates, so that literacy aims to civilize through self-discovery. This notion of the self that he articulates echoes throughout the campaign’s implementation, but as I will show, nowhere is the idea of a
knowledge of the self more pertinent than among KIP volunteers, whose ethic of action is premised on properly guided intentions. ASFEC shows both the durability of the ideals of literacy’s promises, as well as its current preoccupation with the self-knowing subject.

A microbus drives away from Cairo and through the vibrant green Nile Delta. I am on my way to meet Dr. Hegazy. Although he lives in Cairo, he requested we meet at the centre, so each of us drives sixty-five kilometers north of the city to meet in Sirs el Layyan, a small town in the governorate of Menoufia. Sirs al Layyan is an agricultural region in the fork of the Rosetta and Damietta branches of the Nile. It is my first journey out of Cairo in two months, and my eyes appreciate the lush green fields. Literacy programmers at KIP, the GAAE, and UNESCO, repeated Hegazy’s name to me. He was the technical consultant to KIP, but also a major figure in curricula design and literacy evaluation in Egypt. He graduated from the University of Mansoura and worked for several years at the National Center of Examinations and Educational Evaluation. As each of my Cairo interlocutors made clear, if I wanted to understand literacy in Egypt today, all signs pointed to Menoufia. KIP teacher training transported volunteers out to ASFEC. Volunteers complained about the long journey, but campaign leadership insisted it would be a productive team building exercise to travel together to the countryside and learn from leading experts in adult education. ASFEC is one of the major institutions in the country dedicated to addressing Egypt’s ‘literacy crisis.’

In the final days of King Farouq’s monarchy, the idea for a regional centre for literacy expertise was established in cooperation with UNESCO. The centre opened in 1953, only months after the First Officers’ coup and the establishment of the Arab Republic of Egypt. The centre was to be the hub of education training for Arab states. It is
the second regional literacy centre established in the world, following one established in Mexico in 1951. ASFEC was created to be a training centre for teachers in basic education that would include upgrading agricultural methods and household hygiene. The budget was funded by UNESCO, the United Nations Technical Assistance Administration and participating regional countries. ASFEC clearly demonstrates the logic of literacy development as it became a major national project for modernity in the mid-century. The centre was first located in proximity to this agricultural hub in order to reach out to local farmers. Early lessons at ASFEC focused on new agricultural methods, from new beehives that produce more honey, to the introduction of new breeds of poultry and the use of fertilizer.

When I arrive at the centre, I walk through a gate where I encounter three statues of women, each with a name: Science, Education and Plenty. Dr. Hegazy greets me in the expert administrative offices. After just a few minutes of introductions, he excuses himself to meet with a delegation of education specialists he invited from Cairo. He sends me on a tour of the grounds with an employee. My guide shows me the visitors’ dormitories, including an abandoned-looking long-term residence for researchers. A central courtyard is edged off with an art department, a small printing house, a library and a small mosque. I gravitate towards the center’s museum, a space that pays homage to itself. It tells the story of literacy development in Egypt starting at the end of the Second World War and the establishment of UNESCO. My tour guide is pleased that I found something that interests me and leaves me to wander the one-room exhibit. The museum displays a story of literacy as key to developing the countryside (rīf) with the ultimate goal being social development (tanmiyya īṭimāʿ īyya). The museum narrative moves
cleanly from the ills of countryside life to the good of industrial development and orderly city living.

I find the centre’s library. The librarians are surprised to have two sets of visitors come on a single day. They tell me about their resources and invite me to eat lunch with them. I peruse old dissertations on Egyptian education until the guide returns to tell me that Dr. Hegazy is ready for me. As I settle into his expansive office, he asks me what my goal is in speaking to him. I ask him about his involvement with KIP and explain that I am particularly interested in the logic of the curriculum and its teaching methods. I sit opposite him with my notepad and take notes. He takes an interest in my note-taking and our interview becomes a lesson. He tests my listening by examining how I record his words. After a sentence, he pauses and suggests that I write down what he is saying at that moment, since it is an important idea. I get so distracted by his interest in my notes, that I lose track of his words for a few moments. Then, he notices me writing in English and questions how it is possible that I take notes on an Arabic conversation in English. I explain that it is easiest for me to write and read my notes in English, so I take the bulk of them in English, while noting key words in Arabic. He instructs me that this is an awkward method that is difficult for me to capture what is being said. He finds this transmission of his words unreliable. He leans over the desk to get a better look at my notebook. I point at Arabic words in the margins to show him how they correspond to our conversation. I point out the Arabic term “ṣūra baṣariyya,” which I have learned means learning by phonetics. I paraphrase this part of our conversation back to him to demonstrate that I captured the meaning of his explanations in my notes:

The use of phonetics is not the best method for Arabic literacy. Looking at the Arabic does not give the full “picture” of the word, since it is without
vowelization. This is the reason that Arabic literacy programs do not favour phonetic learning, but instead combine learning letter sounds in combination with word recognition. While this method is controversial among international specialists, it is the most appropriate for learning the Arabic language. It is not enough to rely on only the eye, or only memory. These methods must be used together.

Our conversation continues in this way, moving forward, then folding back on itself for me to repeat his words to him to prove my understanding. He stresses that the point of literacy is that “learners get to know themselves. Literacy is of course the key for them to learn how to express themselves, but this means that they learn who they are.”

The focus on the self in Make Your Life is framed slightly differently than state programs, bringing together Hegazy’s teaching philosophy with the Life Makers ethic. The popular curricula Learn and Become Enlightened (It’allam Itnawwar) and Learn and Be Free (It’allam Itharrar), employ the national identity card in early lessons, instructing students how to write their names and to familiarize them with numbers as the basis for the students’ political participation. While KIP and Make Your Life similarly teach political participation, the curriculum taught that the best way to transform the subject into the Muslim citizen was through learning to identify and articulate their own lives, preferences and goals to others. Thus, while the national identification card appeared in the first workbook, it followed a section called “Introducing Yourself,” that begins with a lesson called “Our Dreams” (ahlāmnā) that sets the Life Makers tone of positive thinking and planning for the future.

The following chapter is “My Life” with each section taking up a different aspect of one’s life and prompting class discussion questions to generate new vocabulary and guide the didactic aims of the literacy program. In “I” (Ana) students were prompted with What is the importance of a national identification card?; “My Family” (usrati), How do
you become a happy family?; “My Home” (manzilī). What are the characteristics of a healthy home?; “My Day” (yawmī). Discuss with a partner how you can organize your life. Make Your Life extends the familiar themes of self-representation, health and hygiene, with Khaled’s and Life Makers lessons on dreaming, happiness and goal-setting.

In addition to practical reasons for learning how to read that are set out in national curricula, like reading street signs and identifying expired medication, Make Your Life attempts to be comprehensive. It is about improving one’s material life and cultivating a self-knowledge that can facilitate the self-actualization of the neoliterate.

Hegazy draws on Freirian education theory that situates the person at the centre of literacy development, where social change hinges on a particular notion of the self that must be remade. Autonomous reading, rather than public or communal reading practices, is a technique of individuation and self-discovery. Hegazy’s teaching philosophy elaborates the relation of writing to a particular notion of personhood. In other words, literacy development conceives of a self with an interiority best represented to the world with the communicative skills taught through literacy. In the final chapter I explore how this self-knowledge is supposed to be represented in the writing of factory workers as a sort of self-expression. The workers’ early writing experiments reveal how they negotiate between what they say and what they write, thus undermining the project of literacy as producing some sort of transparent presentation of the self.

I drove back to Cairo with one of the visiting education specialists. The return took nearly three hours in gridlock traffic. As the sun set over the fields, I reflected on the

---

63 See Cody (2013) on Freire’s influence on literacy pedagogy in the Enlightenment Movement. He observes: “In the Hegelian language favored by Freire and his followers, this theory of education argues that it is through processes of textual objectification that consciousness is externalized and turned back on itself so as to understand the true location of agency” (2013, 107).
centre as a monument to literacy’s promises, both the enduring developmentalist model from the 1950s and Hegazy’s model of the emergence of a new self. The centre depicts the ossification of a particular developmentalist literacy that aimed to remake the village. A place dedicated to modernizing Egypt’s agricultural regions, it now dwindles at the margins of contemporary literacy endeavors concentrated in urban centres. The savvy media campaigning of KIP, along with their plan to harness mobile technology as a teaching tool, vastly outpaces the dusty offices of ASFEC. And yet, my visit to ASFEC seemed to foreshadow KIP’s fate. While the optics have changed—with the focus on farmers replaced with urban living—the ethical necessity for literacy and the imperative of literacy for national development remain the same. The whole of ASFEC felt like a museum that Hegazy was desperate to renovate.

**Conclusions**

While this chapter traces the Islamic textual referrants of Islamic literacy development, it does so by demonstrating how the exegetical tradition is deployed to make autonomous reading a practice of worship. The former Mufti’s statement that the Prophet’s illiteracy was miraculous and the illiteracy of any other person is debased sets up the moral register of education and the social stigma of illiteracy that is central to Egypt’s literacy campaigning. I teased out variant modes of reading and their attendant social relations formed through those practices. I raised some of the theological debates that shape literacy ideology and suggested how a particular reading of the key moment in Islamic history—the first revelation, influence a fetish of the book in Egypt today. KIP sacralizes developmentalist literacy and makes reading a form of worship for Islamic reform. As I will demonstrate in the following chapter, not only Quran reading, but all
reading is made sacred. What, then, are the effects of Islamic literacy activism on Quran reading? In the following chapter I return to the ambiguous place of the Quran in Islamic literacy development by exploring the particularities of Khaled’s advocacy for reading as part of a project of cultural renewal. I examine Khaled’s vision for a literate nation through what I call his hermeneutics of success, which includes the reading hermeneutic he endorses in his preaching, as well as its connection with reading as a hermeneutical practice of the self. Together these chapters sketch literacy’s promises as articulated as an Islamic-civic project.
Chapter 2
Success: A Reformist Hermeneutic

An interview on a major Egyptian television network. Amr Khaled is appealing to unemployed youth. It could easily be an address he gave ten years ago, before he left Egypt for Lebanon and the United Kingdom, before the revolution. But it is spring 2011 and he is repeating a message that has become central to his preaching:

The word for today, the single word, for the youth is ‘move’ (ittḥarrak). Youth who are listening: the economy in the Middle East will not change. Don't blame it on the government. Look at what is happening in Greece and Portugal. And America! The rates of unemployment in France! People! Do not sit. Move! Travel in the summer. Yes, travel outside [of Egypt]. Don't sleep until noon. Move! Move!

And although this is not a media appearance related to his latest and most ambitious social development project, the literacy campaign Knowledge Is Power, he arrives at the subject of reading to prove his point:

Imagine, about the Quran, all we say is that we read it to receive blessings (baraka). May God, the Greatest, forgive us. We read it to know how to succeed in life (ingah fi al-hayat)! There is a chapter in the Quran called The Cave. In it there are three stories: the People of the Cave (Ahl al-Kahf); Khidr and Moses; and the Two-Horned One (Dhū al-Qarnayn). Are these stories and that’s it? What brings them together? Each of these stories is about a kind of movement. The People of the Cave move for the sake of religion. In the story of Khidr and Moses, their movement is for the sake of knowledge. For Dhu al-Qarnayn, movement is about bringing reform to earth. So movement is for the sake of religion, knowledge and reform. Please, read this chapter every Friday, to help with movement for the following week. We read the chapter of the Cave in the Quran every Friday to succeed in the week to come. We read it on Friday, and why Friday? Because it is a day of rest (agāza). And it helps initiate new movement. I mean: those who succeed are the ones who move.

Khaled brings together these three Quranic stories to encourage young people to take initiative and work for their personal success.64 He calls on his viewers to reflect on the

64 Khaled explains the meaning of The Cave in several of his programs and media appearances.
meaning of stories, and defines the contours of what he calls a reflective reading of the Quran in order to inspire a plan for living positive and active lives. At the same time, Khaled’s hermeneutic is not without reference to Islamic reading regimens, as he illustrates through the traditional practice of reading the chapter of The Cave on Fridays. The purpose of the ritual in his interpretation is to structure the week and bring about productivity for the days to come. His explanation (sharh) of the verses is part of Khaled’s broader reformulation of what constitutes proper Quran reading. He applies new meanings to old rituals. He draws on forms of ritual Quran reading, while repudiating other aspects of theological reading, in order to prune down ritual reading to a utilitarian practice that cultivates the Person of the Renaissance. He gives Quran reading regimens worldly justification. His explanation of the reason for the ritual regimen of reading the Cave departs from the explanations given in hadith literature. They describe how reading the chapter makes one immune from trials (fitna) for eight days. Another states that the person who reads the chapter will have a light shine for them until the next Friday; a third version states that the reader will be forgiven for their sins between the two Fridays. By reciting the chapter as set out in the tradition, it offers the reader protection. A slightly different version cites that memorizing the first and last ten verses of the chapter provides defense against the anti-Christ (Dajjāl). Khaled’s interpretation adapts a practice traditionally based on seeking protection, blessings, and forgiveness into a beneficial habit for a successful person.

The previous chapter brought together a history of reading as worship in the Islamic tradition with the fetishization of literacy in the Egyptian state in order to

---

One extended version of his exegesis can be found in an episode of Quranic Reflections (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k91AOPnKbLU).
demonstrate how qirā’a—with its multiple meanings of recitation, reading and proclamation—was given a singular settled sense of autonomous reading by Islamic literacy activists. In this chapter, I probe how the call for private reading is a major part of Khaled’s project for cultural renewal, as well as the proper way to “live with” the Quran, as he puts it. The chapter takes hermeneutics as its focus. By forging a conversation between the hermeneutics of the self (Foucault 1988) and Khaled’s textual hermeneutics, I show how technologies of the self and exegetical objectives are intimately related. I demonstrate how text practices are imbricated in piety and nation-building, with particular attention to troubling the categories of ritual and reason as they relate to reading. Khaled himself dismisses certain sorts of ritual reading “for blessings,” in order to promote a reading that gives meaning to one’s life, a reading that enables success. And yet, he does not do away with traditional reading practices. Khaled calls attention to traditional performative and embodied Quranic practices, such as daily reading/recitation regimes, while preaching the need to contemplate the Quran’s meaning. In this way, his hermeneutic disrupts a separation between so-called traditional oral and auditory practices and their accompanying notions of divine reward, and the distanciation of a modern reader reflecting on the Quran.

For Khaled, reading is about a particular kind of personal and national betterment; it is a hermeneutic of success. By referring to his interpretive method as one bound up in a concern for success, I do not understand him as merely interested in material success.65

---

65 See Lutfi (2005) and Haenni (2005) on Amr Khaled, the new Preachers and their role in promoting a culture of consumerism in Egypt and the Arab word. On Amr Khaled as a Protestant preacher, see Haenni 2005, Tammam and Haenni 2007, as well as Atia on Khaled and ‘pious neoliberalism’ (2013). More generally, see Roy (2004) on congruencies between Islamic and Christian themes of hard work and achievement. He stresses that Islamic preachers are not simply borrowing from Christian traditions, but rather that contemporary preachers shift stress of their preaching, and drawing from the
Instead, I emphasize his dual vision of this-worldly and other-worldly ambition and reward. This vision defines his approach to reading and his reformist program more generally. While Khaled’s programs clearly evidence notions of material achievement and success that can be read as neoliberal, my primary aim here is to read him as his audience does in order to grasp how they understand success in his teachings. Success is intimately related with his affective project of hope, happiness, faith and optimism. While in Khaled’s television appearance he uses *nagāḥ*, the vernacular word for success, his meaning resonates with the classical Arabic root *f-l-h*, used forty times in the Quran, meaning to succeed or prosper. *F-l-h*, typically connotes “recompense for an act of virtue,” as for example “He who gives charity prospers” (*qad aflaḥa man tazakkā*, 87:14). Vincent Cornell describes the meaning of *f-l-h* in this life as akin to John Stuart Mill’s utilitarian concept of happiness, where both are about well being and the fulfillment of human need. While *f-l-h* in this life is “morally ambiguous,” in the afterlife it is associated with salvation (and in that way is similar to *sa‘āda*, happiness). Muslims most commonly hear *f-l-h* in the call to prayer: “*hayya ‘alā al-falāḥ*” (Come to prosperity/salvation). Thus, Khaled’s hermeneutic of success is about preaching a form of virtuous living that carries with it God’s promise of reward. Khaled’s hermeneutic of success encapsulates a major theme in his preaching: the best way to live Islam is to have a goal in life that you pursue, to be of a good disposition, share your good feelings with others, and to live one’s life sincerely. His different programs and mediums advance particular aspects of these main themes.

This chapter has two central ambitions. The first and primary task is to situate

Quran and other Islamic sources, emphasize teachings that are similarly stressed in contemporary Protestantism (39).
reading within Khaled’s larger project of cultural renewal. The first half of the chapter examines the centrality of reading in Khaled’s reformist project that seeks to transform the self into a pious (mutadayyin), cultured person (muthaqqaf) and citizen (muwāṭin)—his Person of the Renaissance. I describe his online reading club, Reading Is Life, his publications, and his Quranic interpretive television programming, in order to demonstrate how reading is a practice of the care of the self involved in a reformist hermeneutic that seeks to transform the reader and their social relations through their textual encounter. I begin by examining the double meaning of the Arabic term adab, that draws together personal ethics and literature, in order to situate reading as an act of Khaled’s vision of bringing about an Islamic culture movement. I thus situate Knowledge Is Power within Khaled’s Islamic reformist project that promotes how to read, why it is that reading is virtuous, and what sort of person reading is supposed to create. In doing so, I situate KIP within Khaled’s call to make reading more than an ability, but to make it, as he described in one KIP telethon, as a hobby (hiwāya) and passion (gharām). In this way, I sketch the importance of reading to self-development beyond the scope of “basic literacy” to demonstrate how reading is part of creating the cultured and enlightened person.

In order to contextualize KIP in the broader realm of religiously sponsored literacy, in the second half of the chapter I turn to the Christian literacy programming of the Egyptian Bible Society (EBS). By drawing Khaled’s reading project into conversation with the EBS, I examine beliefs about how scripture should be read. The textual and literacy ideologies of Quran and Bible reading form relationships, frictions, and polemics with the religious Other. The EBS provides a fruitful counterpoint to KIP and Khaled’s
hermeneutic, while at the same time revealing ecumenical distinctions between Copts and Protestants. The Bible-centered curriculum of EBS is indicative of a literacy program that draws away from the state to form a strong Christian identity within Egypt, to teach literacy through God’s Word and to encourage Church life. This chapter thus extends my discussion of the culture of the book that I introduced in the last chapter, by exploring how EBS’s conception of “the Book”—one that is structured around the Bible—compares with that of KIP. Together, the reading projects of Khaled and EBS reveal how ‘the Book’ is both a metaphor and an object around which the pious life should be structured, and that positions reading as the activity that brings books to life. The Quran and Bible shape sometimes distinct and sometimes overlapping textual ideologies based on their respective theologies of logos. In the light of EBS, KIP clearly teaches reading as a sacred activity that expands beyond reading God’s Word. The comparison reveals how the call to read for the sake of the Quran draws upon the Protestant insistence on autonomously reading and contemplating scripture. As compared to EBS’ focus on autonomous Biblical reading, however, Khaled makes the reading of not only the Quran, but all books, an edifying act. The literacy program administrators of EBS envision literacy as a means to enable Coptic neoliterates to participate more fully in Church life. Thus, while literacy is a way to learn God’s Word, it is also a way to promote a specifically Coptic life. The religio-political project of EBS and KIP thus demonstrate distinctive ways of relating religious reading to religious identities within Egypt.

**Reading Is Life**

---

66 I use ‘Bible’ here to indicate the Second Testament, what is called the Injīl by my interlocutors and in the Quran.
Muhammad Mu’min was the model Life Maker. In his mid-twenties, he was an engineer, a highly respected profession among Egyptians, with a job at a major company. In the earliest days of the campaign, he quickly rose through the administrative hierarchy and became a KIP Director. Meanwhile, his wife gave birth to a baby girl. Mu’min was also a poet. His friends knew about his hobby, and Khaled who had taken a liking to this young talent, liked to call on Mu’min to perform his verses at Life Makers events. For the filming of an episode of *Tomorrow Is Better* in a Batn al-Baqara classroom with women from the neighbourhood, Khaled asked Mu’min to perform a poem (*qaṣīda*). The piece drew together nostalgic memories of a mythic Egypt. In one line he brought together the prophet Joseph with Cairo’s iconic Qasr al-Nil Bridge, and in another, the Nobel-Prize winning chemist Ahmed Zuwail with the prophet Moses, who both “sprung from the Nile.” Mu’min’s poetry, and specifically the *qaṣīda* he performed that day in Batn al-Baqara, exhibits the ideals of Khaled’s cultural program: that culture (*thaqāfa*) has the ability to raise spirits and give hope. Culture cultivates not only a *class*, but a *type* of person, one who brings together poetry and engineering, community involvement and family values. The relationship between literature and its effects on cultural producers and consumers is perhaps best illustrated in the term *adab*, which refers to both written texts and the cultivation of etiquette.

I employ the term *adab* to include Khaled’s emphasis on teaching Islamic manners and etiquette (*akhlāq*). He describes his own shift from *akhlāq* to faith development as the natural trajectory of his quest to revive the Islamic *umma*, one that starts from within the individual and leaves its mark on society. By employing the notion of *adab*, my aim is to illustrate how reading in particular is a central activity for culturing
the Muslim citizen. Indeed, factory management and literacy teachers explained to me that literacy’s greatest benefit is in how it can improve the behaviour of nonliterate, to civilize and culture them. So, while formal discussions of literacy’s benefits fit broader state culturing program, what teachers mean by *culture*, in the context of literacy is the immediate instruction of a heavily classed notion of behavioural norms.

Figure 2: *Amr Khaled and Muhammad Mu’min* in an episode of *Tomorrow Is Better in Batn al-Baqara*

*Adab* means good manners, politeness, formal etiquette, morals or morality; it is also the term for literature (Badawi and Hinds 12). In relation to the latter denotation, *adab* relates to the Greek notion of *paideia* (Allan 2012). Ira Lapidus describes the classical meanings of *adab*: “to imply learning and knowledge acquired for the sake of right living. It was a concept of what a person should know, be, and do to perfect the art of living” (1984, 39). His effort to promote culture is central to his call for a *nahda*, itself a reference to a
period of artistic and intellectual renaissance between 1860-1940.\textsuperscript{67} At this time, literature was central to modern notions of culture, where the reading, writing and discussing of literature was part of creating the cultured person.\textsuperscript{68} The association between literature and etiquette is not based solely on the text’s contents, but also on the very act of reading as a \textit{practice} that cultures, manners and educates. Literacy programs mobilize culture as a concept in distinctive ways. Suzanne Mubarak’s reading programs, were a part of a national endeavor to promote culture, one that included a particular version of Islam. At the same time, Islamic preachers similarly define their vision of culture. In other words, culture is not a secular concept that disciplines forms and practices of religion, but it is also employed as a term in Islamic discourse to identify proper tastes and practices of a cultured Muslim. Jessica Winegar describes how the state promotes a national high culture that also disciplines Islamic practices:

\begin{quote}
It is clear that \textit{thaqafa}—as defined in particular ways and created through certain government institutions and discourses—has become an important feature of state projects to manage Islamic practice and identifications. […] Islam is presented as only one component among many of that national high culture, and Islamic practice becomes the object of \textit{tathqif}, or the process of “making cultured.” \textit{Tathqif} also contains notions of cultural uplift, cultivation, training, or education, and is linked to the concept of gaining taste (\textit{tadhawwuq}). (2010, 190)
\end{quote}

Khaled, for his part, promotes culture as necessary for a thriving civilization. His programs seek to transform the ways that it is produced and consumed, to embrace fine

\textsuperscript{67} Khaled’s language beckons to the cultural awakening \textit{nahḍa} intelligentsia. After the revolution, the Muslim Brotherhood also mobilized the language of renaissance with a policy plan titled \textit{Mashrūʿ al-Nahḍa}, the Renaissance Project. Similarly other Islamic parties such as the Hizb al-Wasat referred to the political moment following Mubarak as ripe for the potential of an Islamic \textit{Nahḍa}.

\textsuperscript{68} See Khalidi (1994), Starkey (2006) on the development of the \textit{adab} genre. As \textit{adab} became associated with literature it was institutionalized as the modern discipline of literary study. In 1870, the Dār al-Kutub (National Library) was established. One year later, the Dār al-ʿUlūm established a literature department dedicated to the study of novels, poetry, and theatre. The Egyptian University followed in 1908 (Allan 181).
arts for the realization of the highest form of culture, one that is suffused with Islamic sensibilities. He argues against undiscerning Islamists that ban art in toto, while admonishing the sexually explicit images of popular music video clips.

He articulates the latest iteration of his cultural renewal program in his book, *Building the Person of the Renaissance* (*Bināʾ Insān al-Nahḍa*, 2012), where he describes the making of this person as the basis for the establishment of civilization. This was the first book he released following the January 25th uprising. In this period, he also produced, in addition to *Tomorrow Is Better*, the television series *ʿUmar: A Maker of Civilization* (*ʿUmar: Ṣāniʿ Ḥaḍāra*). “Civilization” is central to Khaled’s Person of the Renaissance, who is cultivated through faith, ethics, thought, skills and movement (2012). Again, the goal is not piety alone, but a figure who is cultured, well-rounded, and innovative.

One initiative to build civilization created by Khaled’s viewers was *Reading Is Life* (*Al-Qirāʾa Ḥayāt*), an online portal to encourage reading through the discussion of books. Khaled’s audience can access the portal from a link on amrkhaled.net. The main site is a comprehensive archive of all of his radio and television series, as well as video clips, written transcripts on television guest appearances, public keynote addresses, and so on. The webpage links to his comprehensive social media presence: Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Google Plus. In addition to being a resource for navigating Khaled’s productions, the site hosts discussion rooms where visitors can interact with one another. *Reading Is Life* is the product of a pilot-project reading campaign called *Ten Thousand Books* that attracted thousands to the portal and was then established as a permanent feature of the website. When guests visit the website, they are greeted with an image of
Khaled on the right of the page, and one of the novelist and Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz on the left, with alternating inspirational quotes. Participants are able to write posts about their most recent reading to a discussion board. Entries include an overview of the book’s main ideas, their own opinions of the book, and pose discussion questions to the forum. The aim is to “turn the reading process into a relationship between the reader and the book” (bi-ḥaythu tataḥawwalu ‘amalīyyat al-qirā’a min ʿilāqa bayna qārī wa kitāb) and to create ideas and projects that will be the basis for the Renaissance project. Through the portal, readers share books and create an online library that will cultivate the “habit of reading” (hiwāyat al-qirā’a), which portal administrators describe as near extinction among Arab youth.

*Reading Is Life* is illustrative of the civilizational and sacred pursuit of reading not only The Book (*mushaf*), but books. The site encourages participants to read widely through a wide variety of categories: Literature, Religions, History / Biography, Human Development, Politics / Economics / Society, Health / Sports, Sciences, Philosophy, Arts, and even Children’s Books. Again, it is truly the variety of books that demonstrates how Khaled has made reading a sacred activity. A promotional video explains the name of the program and why reading is part of making life:

What is *Reading Is Life*?
I don't know why it is called *Reading Is Life*
Maybe it teaches us how to live our lives?
Or to live with Ibn Battuta who traveled from East to West
Or to travel into the past
and to know our history (pictures of Alexandria light house, pyramids, Salahuddin, King Tut)
Our civilization (live free, social justice, image of Tahrir square)
Our future
But in the end, we read because one life is not enough

---

69 The portal can be found at http://www.amrkhaled.net/newsite/books-campaign.php.
Because reading teaches us life
So we called it Reading Is Life
(The Reading Is Life Project, Episode of Tomorrow Is Better)

The program is intended to expose the lone reader to worlds beyond their own, worlds that traverse time and geography and provide experiences that go beyond the scope of the single life, “because one life is not enough.” Together with KIP, these two programs demonstrate how reading is the foundation of life. While Reading Is Life fosters autonomous reading, it does so through the forum of an online community that participates in exchange and dialogue about books, so that independent reading is not meant to be so individualized that it precludes the experience of collective reading.70

Khaled’s Reading Is Life shares commonalities with Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club, although Khaled’s is admittedly a more modest initiative. Indeed, Khaled and Winfrey themselves are similar in their status as major icons whose television programming extends into a vast empire, and whose television audiences are transformed into readers. In Kathryn Lofton’s analysis of Oprah’s Book Club (2011), she observes how for Oprah “the idea of a book is scriptural” (155).71 Reading Is Life bears out this ideal where books are made sacred and the foundation of better living. And yet, in the portal’s structure, it is less about a love of the pastime, and more about the information that can be consumed through reading. To read as Reading Is Life prescribes, a book should be reducible to its summative abstract. In other words, even in reading, Khaled teaches productivity. While

70 See Hirschkind on how online threads commenting on YouTube khatbas does not confirm to Olivier Roy’s argument (2007) that modern religious movements individualize and desocialize religious practice (2012, 17). Like Hirschkind, my argument is that while reading, and in this case this use of the Internet, give forums for individualized learning, collective practices of reading and argumentation do not lead to atomized independent religious subjects. I will expand practices of collective reading in chapter five through the women’s Quran reading lessons.

71 On Oprah’s Book Club, in addition to Lofton, see Farr (2005), Farr and Harker (2008), and Roony (2005).
*Reading Is Life* praises and celebrates literature, it is not *literary*. Instead, the portal incites participants to become particular kinds of readers: goal-oriented ones. It is in this way that books are scriptural; literature, culture, and knowledge are all to be consumed by readers, shared amongst them and made accessible through the portal. What is more, *Reading Is Life* connects private readers together to create a shared experience of reading. Autonomous reading is made meaningful in (semi-)public exchange.

Like the online reading club, KIP ultimately seeks to do more than make literacy an *ability*; rather, it seeks to cultivate the *habit* of reading. *Adab* works in its double-meaning as both literature and *paideia*, since the habit of reading is supposed to cultivate a *habitus*, “an acquired faculty rooted in the soul” (Lapidus 53). Now central to our understanding of self-cultivation through the works of Asad (1993, 2003) and Mahmood (2005), Ibn Khaldun's concept of *malaka* in *The Muqaddima* refers to the “crafts and skills, but also spiritual qualities formed through *malakat*” (54). Foucault calls such practices the care of the self. Foucault’s hermeneutics of the technologies of the self are not so much associated with external manipulations, as the project of the individual’s working on the self to achieve a state in line with a specific quality or value. Individuals engage in “operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and ways of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, or immortality” (Foucault 1988, 18). Reading is such a technique. It is not only the content of what is read (joining Ibn Battuta on his travels) but the *act of reading* that is the care of the self. This is why, according to Khaled’s cultural project, reading “is” and “makes” life, even as it is both a disciplining technique of self-making, it is a technique with its own efficiency.
For Khaled what makes the act of reading and writing spiritually significant is not a matter of whether the word relates to God’s Word, or even exclusively to religious texts. The action itself has edifying potential. His hermeneutic of success is about not only the Word but any word. The technical skills of reading and writing cultivate the person’s malaka, enriching their character through the practice of the skill. At the same time, the benefits of reading must have public effect. While Reading Is Life celebrates the idea of reading, the effects of reading must be made tangible through online posts and sharing. Ultimately, however, reading is brought to stimulate public service projects. While reading is about engaging texts to experience a life beyond one’s own, it is not a humanistic celebration of reading, but rather, it is supposed to create movement for good works.

Umar, a volunteer teacher to whom I will return in chapters three and six, explained that it is important to be able to read, but that he rarely did so himself. One day after he finished teaching a class of shipyard workers, he joked with me:

You know, I don’t even like to read. I almost don’t read at all. Egyptians don’t like to read. I don’t like school. But I am interested in self-development (tanmiyya bashariyya). I like the books that describe different ways that we can do it ourselves. I don’t need a psychologist. These books teach us how to take care of our own problems. Once I felt like reading could help solve problems, then I was more interested. I am now reading Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus. These are the sorts of books that are useful.

As we discussed my interest in book culture and reading, he said that it is important that I distinguish between a “reading culture” (thaqāfat al qirā’a) that wants to produce a cultured person (muthaqqaf) versus one that wants to produce an educated person (muta’allim). For him the best thing that literacy programs can hope for is to provide a person with a minimum level of education that allows them to get by; to create, in other
words, a person who is mutaʿallim. A photographer with interest in the arts, he said that there are only few muthaqqaḥīn in Egypt today: “Egyptians do not read for pleasure. There is too much to do to allow for time in one’s day to read for pleasure. Even my professors read only for their profession, and still, they don’t read more than newspapers.” Another day, walking by a bookshop, he pointed at a copy of *The Secret* (*Al-Sirr*) in a shop window and recommended it to me. He told me that he has a copy on his mobile. His interest in self-help literature was echoed across Life Makers’ volunteers and in the tastes of *Reading Is Life* portal participants.

Life Makers’ offices also promote book reading. The front lobbies include books for sale as well as others to be leafed through while waiting. Small booklets of religious advice (*kutaybāt*) with titles such as *A Better Life* (*Aḥlā Ḥayāt*) or *For Girls Only* (*Lil Banāt wa Bas*) are kept on bookshelves. Although booklets are widely circulated at mosques and by *daʿwa* workers, as one of my interlocutors pointed out, they are rarely read. While they address practical life issues facing young Muslims, the genre of discrete written texts is less popular among volunteers than watching a television program, attending a religious sermon, or listening to one on the radio or a cassette. The primary role of such booklets seemed to be their sheer presence, and not whether they are actually read.

Even as aural/oral modes of communication reach larger audiences in Islamic *daʿwa*, the written word maintains a particular authority. Khaled’s media strategy is indicative of this phenomenon. His television and radio shows have audiences in the millions. After they air, they are produced into downloadable and online streaming videos and watched by thousands more. Still, following in the footsteps of ‘ulama’ before him,
he produces his lessons in book form for sale (and sometimes available for download). Even though the book is a less popular form of consumption, their production creates an aura of Khaled’s authority beyond that of a television preacher, as they associate him with the scholarly book form. An editor at Arij publishing house describes how the books are produced: Khaled submits a television script or his notes from a mosque lesson to his publisher who then checks all of his references with al-Azhar. This phase is important to ensure that there are no errors and that he is subjected to review by Egypt’s religious authority. His text is transferred into Modern Standard Arabic, another transformation that is essential to making his writing acceptable not only to a general book culture (which, notably, is increasingly employing hybrid forms of colloquial and Modern Standard Arabic), but more importantly, to be recognizable as a book of Islamic knowledge. His books are bestsellers, widely sold across the city from street book stalls to the Virgin store in elite shopping malls. Their sales peak during the Cairo Book Fair and around Islamic holidays. It is common for Arij to be into the third or fourth edition of a book within three years. Khaled employs the written format to guide readers, encouraging them to re-read particular paragraphs (Høigilt 82). In a manner also similar to the production of the works of great Islamic thinkers, Khaled’s audience participates in the translation and circulation of television programs and lesson series. One of the volunteer projects spurred by Life Makers was the online translation network Dar al-Islam that produces translations of Khaled’s media output into other languages.

Khaled often employs a writing technique whereby he is in dialogue with his reader. He refers to himself frequently and appeals directly to readers. He translates into his texts the sense of approachability that he embodies in his television programs and

72 For details, see Høigilt’s (2011) analysis of Khaled’s written works.
public appearances. He seeks to make a personal connection with the reader by alternating between the singular ‘you’ (anta) and the plural ‘you’ (antum). The reader is both a particular individual and part of a wider reading audience, both the autonomous reader and part of an imagined community. What is more, at other moments the narrative voice shifts to ‘we,’ situating Khaled among his readers. His emotional appeals on television, that include a quavering voice and sometimes crying, carry over into his books through a language of feeling where he speaks of love and the heart. He moves between guiding his readers to ‘feel’ ‘think’ and respond as responsible agents. Khaled’s books create an intimacy with the reader to teach his audience how to live Islam and forge a relationship with the Quran. His Quran interpretation television series demonstrate how he instructs an embodied Quran reading that invests in contemplating meaning. He calls on Muslims to lead lives that engage the meaning of the Quran in order to live correctly.

**The Hermeneutics of Holy Books**

Khaled puts the Quran at the centre of personal and national transformation. It is the focus of a number of programs, including *Quranic Reflections* (khawāṭir qurʾānīyya 2003) and two seasons of *Stories of the Quran* (*Qiṣṣa al-Qurʾān* 2008, 2009). His general message is to teach viewers how to live with the Quran. As Khaled explains, when applied to life, the Quran brings success to one’s education, marriage, and relationships. In this way, he turns the Quran into a meta self-help book. In the introduction to *Quranic Reflections*, he explains the impetus behind the television series:

> The idea behind this program haunted me for ten years, especially in Ramadan of each year, when Muslims all over the Islamic world dedicate their time to reading the entire Quran during this blessed month. However, I found it truly regrettable that this genuine desire to read the Quran was not associated with a clear understanding of each chapter’s objectives,
reasons of revelation, and the core message addressed to us. As a result, I found people reading the Quran and feeling that its meanings were somewhat alien to them. Some might even find them enigmatic or meant to be read without proper understanding of their essence or purposes. Others might grasp the meaning of the wording of the verse, but find no connection between one verse and the next, and instead consider them a series of unrelated verses in one chapter. They might even think that there is no main objective that links all the verses of the chapter. This is the cornerstone of this program. It is a humble piece of work that breaks the barriers between the youths of our umma and the Holy Book of Allah. (Quranic Reflections 2003b)

There are strong implications for the role of autonomous reading on the Quran that suggest the displacement of religious authorities in interpreting the Quran in lieu of the autonomous reader’s participation in understanding and interpreting it. Khaled’s appeal to reflect on verses of the Quran is not an alternative to the authoritative interpretive tradition (tafsir), which remains his reference point in his explanations. Yet, as his interpretation of the chapter of The Cave illustrates, his teachings adapt classical interpretations to support his hermeneutic of success. Khaled’s Islamic literacy is therefore distinct from some Protestant Bible reading hermeneutics that privilege the agency of the reader to create meaning in the text. Khaled’s ideal reader reads not only the Quran, but is in dialogue with a body of texts that situate and explain Quran.

Khaled aims to make the Quran accessible to youth in a way that emphasizes its overall meaning, and not isolated verses in the manner of what scholars like Muhammad al-Ghazali (d. 1996) call thematic interpretation (al-tafsir al-mawdu’î, which is also the title of his three volume work printed posthumously in 1997 and 1999). For Khaled, meaning is a coherent message in a Quran chapter, while it is also how that message ought to be lived. In his explanations, he uncovers the verses’ “objectives” (ahdâf). Like his advice to viewers to find goals for their lives, each chapter has a goal to be uncovered
and a message that enables the reader’s ultimate success. His interpretation seeks to create familiarity and closeness with the Quran.

In the opening episode of *Stories of the Quran*, he describes a man who used to wake every morning and read a verse of the Quran to guide his day: “See how this man lived with the Quran” (شَيْفُهُ وَالْقُرآن). The relationship between the reader and the Quran is supposed to infuse one’s daily life, through contemplation. And yet, his reading is not a disembodied one. The Quran works on the body, as Khaled explains: “When one reads the Quran, it enters (يَدْخَلُ عَلَى) the eyes, and the tongue, the heart, the spirit (رُوح). I swear to you, each day, read and concentrate (يَتَزكَّى) on the Quran, and it brings light to you, new light to your face.” For Khaled, embodied reading and a desire for meaning converge in how they make the Quran a part of daily ritual and contemplative life. In Ramadan 2013, Khaled sponsored *True Reading* (صحيح الأدقاء) on his YouTube channel. Each of the thirty-three-minute episodes offered tips on common recitation errors. The program was hosted by the Quran reciter Ahmed al Haddad in the Mosque complex of Sultan Hassan. He explained that ‘true reading’ is not just reciting with the rules of pronunciation and elocution (*تَجْوَیْد*), but follows the shari’a tradition. In this way, he makes such errors more than a mistake in a highly specialized technique, but a more serious deviation from the shari’a. As he recites, Arabic calligraphy crosses the screen, marked in red are the points that his lesson stresses.

Through *television* Khaled makes the Quran accessible to a broad audience and mediates between viewers and the Quran, exhorting viewers to forge a more direct connection with the Quran for themselves. The call to read the Quran is not to autonomously read and make meaning of the text independent of the authoritative
practices and figures of the Islamic tradition. In this way, the role of reading in Khaled’s reformism is more restrained than the leveling impact of the Bible’s adoption into vernacular. His reading project curbs the meaning-making powers of the autonomous reader with God’s Word. This creates a different link between literacy and the Quran from the direct potentials of literacy on Bible reading, as I will show through the literacy programming of the Egyptian Bible Society.

The Egyptian Bible Society

In Egypt, Muslims and Christians share practices of oral and communal recitation, as well as polemics about the authenticity of each other’s scriptures. These polemics are a fruitful ground from which to discern how reading practices rise out of complex social contexts, as well as are in interaction with the texts themselves, the Bible and the Quran. State literacy programming appeals to religiosity as a part of an Egyptian character and advocates that it is important that the neoliterates read their Holy Book, either the Quran or the Bible. By turning to a Christian literacy program, it is clear that this supposedly neutral position is perceived as anything but by Christian literacy planners who teach literacy not as a project of the state, but as a project of the Church. State curricula marshal symbols of coexistence, such as two hands raised in Muslim supplication beside another hand with a cross on the wrist. The call to read your holy book, however, flattens the distinctive pious practices of reading associated with the Quran and the Bible in lieu of a national(ist) call for literacy, without admitting how literacy shapes distinctive reading practices of different holy books, and differentiated approaches to God’s Word within religious traditions. The common historical experience of colonial efforts to modernize Egyptian education in the late nineteenth century similarly did not decipher the
significance of reading practices of either of religious community.\textsuperscript{73}

The colonizers’ efforts to transform their subjects through “modern” methods of education did not appreciate the epistemological distance of systems of knowledge and the corollary practices of learning that existed at the time (Mitchell 1988, Sedra 2011, Starrett 1998). In his account of Coptic education reform, Paul Sedra argues that Egypt in the nineteenth-century was a place of “epistemological warfare” in which two forms of knowledge were at odds, the written and the spoken (10). Protestant missionaries proffered literacy as the exclusive path to enlightenment,\textsuperscript{74} leading to the destruction of forms of knowledge and authority based on oral instruction shared by Muslims and Copts. Sedra argues that the elimination of an oral culture was thus essential to the project of fostering an abstract morality among Egyptians. Indeed, only with the elimination of an oral culture, with the depersonalization of authority, with the transfer of that authority from individuals to texts, could an abstract morality prescribing behavior operate across contexts, regardless of circumstances. (2-3)

Sedra situates the shift toward the “hegemony of the text” in the early twentieth century with the influence of Islamic reformer Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905).\textsuperscript{75} Abduh argued that “the Book” the Quran, should be central to Muslim life, with a rational appreciation of God’s Word to understand proper living. His Coptic contemporaries, like Orthodox Patriarch Cyril Kirolus IV, had a similar mission within the Coptic Awakening. The

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{73} A great deal of anthropological attention is given the role of Christian missions and their education programs, including the stress on literacy to read the Bible (Keane 2007, Handman 2011, Engelke 2007).

\textsuperscript{74} See also Sharkey (2008) on American Evangelical missionaries and their literacy work, particularly as they promoted reading the Bible.

\textsuperscript{75} Charles Adams (1968) argues that Abduh played a leading role in establishing “Muhammadan modernism” in Egypt, a theologically motivated reform movement that shaped literary production, as well as an emergent nationalism.
\end{flushleft}
twentieth century thus gave rise to a textualizing impulse among Egyptian Muslim and Christian thinkers and their prescription for education.

As a national project closely associated with religious missionizing and *daʿwa*, religiously-sponsored literacy is central to community building, religious education and more specifically, how the reader should decipher God’s Word. Religiously-sponsored literacy reveals a modern religious sensibility that measures proximity to text as proximity to God. In what follows, I sketch the mission of the Egyptian Bible Society (EBS, *Dār al-Kitāb al-Muqaddas*) in Egypt to elucidate how literacy is part of a broader aim to locate mediums to circulate God’s Word effectively.

The EBS’s literacy program is a particular instance of Christian literacy programming that centers on the Bible as the purpose and goal for literacy, as well as the instrument for teaching. The curriculum is made up of excerpts from the Bible. In this way, they are distinct from the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS), another major Christian programmer for literacy in Egypt. CEOSS is one of the country’s largest social service organizations. It began as a literacy project in rural Egypt. Their own literacy program is more similar to KIP’s than that of EBS, in that their lessons resonate with state-centric curricula, teaching ideals of citizenship. EBS’s literacy serves as a productive counterpoint to CEOSS, KIP and Khaled’s call to reading that goes beyond the pages of scripture. Their programming suggests not only religious difference in literacy sponsorship, but how scripture is situated within religious projects of creating literate pious subjects.

EBS is headquartered on a quiet residential street in Heliopolis. In addition to their offices, a book store on the first floor opens up to the street. The other attraction that
brings visitors to the center is Book World, an interactive exhibit that teaches youth the history of the Bible’s transmission. The EBS’s outreach includes public marketing on highway billboards, as well as stalls set up for Saint’s days (*mawlids*) and book exhibits, including the Cairo International Book Fair, where I first met Nabil. With a large camera draped around his neck, Nabil walked around the EBS stall that sold Bibles and Biblical literature. He greeted visitors and photographed the exhibit. When I told him about my interest in religiously-sponsored literacy, he described their literacy initiatives. He believed in the necessity of literacy in order to understand God’s message. He gestured towards CDs and DVDs of Coptic recordings of the Bible and explained that this sort of listening was not enough, since it promotes a passivity that is, importantly, distinct from the sort of contemplation that reading prompts in readers. He invited me to meet with him and the head of the literacy program at EBS headquarters.

The EBS is part of the United Bible Society, based in Scotland, which is the arm of the Bible Society’s global reach. It is one of 140 Bible Societies throughout the world. Established in 1884, the EBS is the largest publisher of Arabic Bibles in the world, as well as the largest producer of visual and audio recordings that transmit the Bible. The EBS produces Bibles for all denominations and churches in Egypt. The original society established in England and now located in Swindon was established in 1804 to “increase the circulation and use of the Scriptures” through programs that encourage independent reading (“Bible Society” About Bible Society 2014). On their website, the hyperlink “read it for yourself” brings one to the Bible. One of their programs, h+, is an introduction to “make good sense of the Bible,” while another, Lyfe, is about “connecting the Bible to everyday life”:
Bible Society is working to circulate the Scriptures across the world, in the church and through the culture just like air conditioning circulates air through a building. The strategy of Bible Society (how we achieve our mission) centres on Bible availability, accessibility and credibility. It’s what we call the ‘lifecycle’ of the Bible. These strategic approaches encompass all of our activity: translation, production, distribution, literacy, engagement and advocacy. (ibid)

The Society aims to be a part of “contemporary culture” in each of the contexts in which they work. Each of these aspects of their global agenda is a part of their work in Egypt.

Two weeks after I first met Nabil, we sat with the literacy program director, Yusry, in the EBS headquarters. Nabil decided to act as a translator. I suggested we speak in Arabic, yet he continued on in English. While he did not translate my words to Yusry, he insisted on translating Yusry’s words to me in English, even though he could observe that I followed Yusry from my note-taking and responses. This practice led to moments in our three-way conversation when I spoke with Nabil “privately” in English. It became clear that Nabil wanted to stress ideas to me that differed from Yusry’s. Our language tangle foreshadowed my day at EBS with its commitment to translation in order to create understanding of an original meaning.

Yusry previously worked at a diocese as a deacon (shammās mukarris) before he came to head-up EBS’s literacy program. He had planned to live his life as a deacon, but changed his mind and married. Shortly after he began working with EBS, he took over from the Egyptian-British curriculum designer of the program Read Your Book (Iqra’ Kitābak). Nabil clarified: “Book means Bible—Read Your Bible.” The program started in 1999 as a post-literacy program, since literacy itself fell under the purview of the GAAE.

---

76 They explain how their aims in England are drastically different than they are in other places in the world, since nine out of ten Britons do not read the Bible. See Engelke (2013) for an ethnography of the Bible Society’s mission, particularly the publicity of the Bible to a secular audience.
EBS established the post-literacy program so as not to compete with the implementation of the state’s programs. In 2004, Yusry felt literacy should not only be for adults, but should also be extended to children who were not properly taught in their regular day schools. He and Nabil criticized the Egyptian education system as a place where children are afraid of teachers, and are forced to learn “by rote.” When Yusry used the word *talqīn,* Nabil hesitated in his translation. He contemplated the word. It was a word that a Life Makers campaign administrator had also made great efforts to ensure that I properly understood. Associated with teaching, *talqīn* means verbal prompting, to prompt one to recite or respond with something they already know.

Yusry and Nabil explained how the goal of literacy is to make the Bible accessible. Difficult words are explained with simple ones. The curriculum employs small white stickers placed in notebooks below challenging vocabulary, and students are taught a simpler synonym to write on the sticker. Challenging vocabulary is thus made clear to learners in familiar colloquial language. Yusry explained that this activity makes Biblical language relatable to the lives of learners. The use of synonyms was a striking departure from how I observed Quran lessons in Egypt, including Khaled’s, where the particularity of the word is central to a verse’s meaning. It was common for Muslims to tell me that no word can be substituted or used as a synonym, since any change would pervert the text’s meaning. This was part of how they understood the richness of the Arabic language as a vessel for revelation, which is the doctrine of inimitability (*iʿjāz*) of the Quran that I raised in the previous chapter. The assumption is that the Muslim must bend towards the text, and not the other way around. By this, I mean to say that that which cannot be made immediately understandable to the reader should not be made to
accommodate him or her. In fact a number of Muslim references explain that the learner can only understand up to their individual capacity.\textsuperscript{77} According to a dominant Muslim textual ideology, EBS’s use of synonyms obscures the text.

Nabil offered to take me on a tour of Book World, a three year-old exhibit typically reserved for school trips and church groups. We met Joseph, the tour operator, who gave me an entry passport. He likened Book World to a Disney ride. The brochure he gave me read: “The visitor will travel by himself to this world and recognize and discover himself.” This independent journey is to teach that the Bible was never distorted by showing the various stages of the Bible’s transmission. Joseph pressed a button and the door opened to the first room where a spotlight shone on an Arabic Bible. This was the Inspiration Room, where visitors learn how the Word of God was relayed to Humanity. Advanced sound and light technology facilitate the story of the Bible, a story that highlights how advancing technologies of writing enhanced the Bible’s circulation. Nabil explained: “There are only a few of these exhibits in the world, one in Australia, and a traveling exhibit in the Netherlands. Each one speaks to the context of the country’s culture.” He used the English word ‘context’ several times to explain the exhibit. At the EBS headquarters in Heliopolis, ‘context’ means, in part, the defense of the integrity of the Bible against Muslim charges that the Bible is inauthentic. In Muslim-Christian debates, it is common for Muslims to allege that the Bible was tampered with, and to cite differences in Arabic translations as evidence of the Bible’s inaccuracy and fraudulence.

The Scribe Room displayed different mediums of writing, and what Nabil pointed out were pre-Islamic copies of Bibles. An audio track of a Greek recitation of the Lord’s

\textsuperscript{77} For example, it is common for a teacher of Islamic knowledge to tell their student: “each context demands its own distinctive form of speech” (\textit{li kulli maqām maqāl}). This teaching is in line with the role that knowledge plays in forming strong social hierarchies. See Messick (1993) especially 160-5.
Prayer played over the sound system and was written on the wall in Arabic and Greek. Nabil remarked that it would be silly for an Egyptian to say the prayer in Greek, and so it must be translated into languages so that people understand the meaning of their words. He stressed the necessity of understanding and explained that this is why translation is so important. He contrasted the Christian commitment to translation for meaning with Muslims who recite Arabic verses they do not understand.

We crossed a drawbridge to the Qumran Room. After a video explaining the scroll discoveries, holes in the walls lit up. I extracted a papyrus and leather scroll for a decoding activity. In my passport was a guide to link the Greek and Hebrew letters to Arabic letters and decipher words. The final room was Spreading the Word. Bible pages were plastered to walls and a large construction made to look like Gutenberg’s printing press occupied most of the space. Joseph and Nabil encouraged me to make an impression on a sample page to complete the visitor experience, which I did.

My tour of the EBS concluded in the book shop. Nabil told me that daily life at the book shop is generally quiet. As I browsed the books, he began to speak more personally. He told me about his days in America. Reactions against Arabs following September 11 threw him into a crisis that prompted him to enter seminary. He paused in his story to point out a Bible where the pages were split into two columns for two Arabic translations, the Cornelius Van Allen Van Dyck version and an Arabic rendering of the King James. The edition depicted the EBS’s effort to desacralize the preferred Van Dyck translation by including their own preferred King James Version. The reading practices of EBS literacy were not only in conversation with Muslim reading practices, but were very much part of the ecumenical frictions of a Protestant program appealing to a primarily
Coptic audience. Nabil was frustrated with the Copts’ exclusive use of the Van Dyck Arabic translation. For the last one hundred and fifty years, the Van Dyck translation, has been the authoritative edition and according to Nabil, “holy in its own right.” He emphasized that the EBS does not teach doctrine, but instead teaches how to decipher words so that learners can read for themselves. These words do not need to follow a single authoritative translation, since what is important are the meanings they convey. For him, *Read Your Book* teaches a ‘transparent’ hermeneutic where fidelity is to meaning and not language. For Nabil, a Protestant commitment to the meaning of words is not a theological position, but rather a self-evident understanding of transmission. As he explained, the point is to teach Egyptians how to read the Bible, not how or what to think about it. Despite his desire to embrace other Bible translations and shift away from Coptic ideas of authentic scripture, his larger aim was to create Christian readers who come together around the Bible.

Nabil described how he moved from the difficulty of living in Saudi Arabia as a Christian, to living in America as an Arab. “Theological school was a very liberal place and they said harsh things about the Bible. It was a real test of faith. You know, these scriptures, they cause problems.” He let the sentence sit between us for a moment. He waited for me to ask him why he left his life as a New York City architect to promote the Bible in Egypt, if he believed that scriptures cause problems. He went on: “Naguib Mahfouz and Taha Hussein, they said things about the Quran, you know. For me, reading

---

78 Commissioned in 1847 as a collaboration between the Syrian Mission and the American Bible Society, Cornelius Van Allen Van Dyck was the head of the team of translators that produced this translation. See Griffith (2013) for a history of the Arabic Bible.

79 I borrow the term from Kevin Reinhart’s analysis of how Arabic language is referred to by some Arabic speakers as a purchase on its determined meaning. In Reinhart’s usage of the term, he argues that certain Arabic speaking Muslims, namely Salafis, situate their understanding of the Quran as based on their direct comprehension of the pristine Arabic.
Taha Hussein on Jahili poetry was electrifying from the first page to the last.” Taha Hussein is famous for his literary history of pre-Islamic poetry in his book *Fī al-Shīʿr al-Jāhilī* (1996), which caused controversy because some read it as an argument that the Quran should not be read as an objective source of history. Hussein is a prominent figure in Egypt’s literary approach to the Quran, with thinkers such as Amin Khuli, Muhammad Ahmed Khalafallah and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd elaborating on his project. These interpreters draw on literary tools of the *nahḍa* to bring modern literary theory to bear on the Quran. He prodded me to contemplate a literary approach to the Quran and in doing so, continued a hermeneutical debate (with me and an imagined audience of Muslims) in a different line. Unlike the Muslim invective that argues against the *authenticity* of the Bible, Nabil argued against the ways that Muslims *read* the Quran, by hinting towards Hussein’s literary-historical approach to prove the impact that *adab* has had on understanding the Quran. In this regard, Nabil and Khaled share a critique of how Muslims come to read the Quran. At the same time, Nabil’s critique laid bare the limits of Khaled’s reformist reading project. The value of *adab* is not as an interpretative tool, but rather, as a mode of self-making, and his call to autonomous reading of the Quran does not diverge from an Islamic tradition that reveres the authority and even sacredness of the exegetical tradition. While Khaled speaks of reorienting Muslim reading practices, what he actually calls on is his own particular meanings, his call to seek success.

The EBS works to make God’s Word understandable and relatable to Christians in Egypt, a goal that seeks to reform Coptic encounters with the Bible. At the same time, Nabil and Yusry explained that they saw literacy as a way to support Coptic life in Egypt,

80 In the original edition, he argued that the mere mention of the names Abraham and Ismael did not necessitate that such figures existed in history, but rather that they were references to the Biblical stories (64).
by helping the neoliterates participate in Church life. Literacy is part of their larger aim to transmit the Word of God. The EBS departs from state programs in their post-literacy curricula that go beyond symbolic identifiers of piety to teach reading through the Bible as a way to translate Jesus into the lives of Christian readers.

Conclusions

While Khaled calls viewers to the text, he does so primarily by other means of mediation. Unlike Abduh, he is himself, despite his publications, a profoundly untextual figure. The result of this is a cultural renewal program that speaks of reading as a tool to bring about desirable outcomes, namely as a practice of self-improvement. In this chapter I elucidated the particular form of KIP’s Islamic literacy development by situating reading as a focus of Khaled’s project of Islamic reformism and cultural renewal. The chapter elaborated a central theme of Khaled’s preaching and aim for religious reading, his hermeneutic of success. Through an examination of various forms of his media, including an online reading portal, his book publications, and television programs interpreting the Quran, I showed Khaled to be an advocate for a modern and pious form of reading that is central to cultivating the Muslim citizen. In order to highlight the particularities of his form of religious reading, I employed the Bible-centered literacy programming of the Egyptian Bible Society as a counterpoint. The contrast underscores how Khaled’s call to contemplate the Quran is reined in by particular rituals and textual ideologies that highlight the agency of the text over the agency of the reader. While KIP’s Islamic literacy development aims to bring neoliterates towards contemplative readings of the Quran, it redefines religious reading to be a technique to manage one’s life. The Quran is a major goal of literacy, but what makes KIP literacy development Islamic is
about a larger transformation of the person through the abilities and habit of reading and the cultivation of a particular etiquette for the neoliterate.

What does bringing together the hermeneutics of the self with textual hermeneutics do for our understanding of the relationship between the body, the reader and the text? Khaled’s endeavor to create the Person of the Renaissance is not so much a secularization of Quran practices through autonomous reading that seeks understanding, but rather the intertwining of bodily, affective and cognitive practices that make up reading as an act of worship. How, then, does literacy as a project of faith development get implemented on the ground? In the following chapter I turn to examine the ethics of Khaled’s faith development among Life Makers volunteers. In doing so, I consider how faith motivates voluntarism for literacy. In the second half of the dissertation, I trace how Khaled’s hermeneutic of success animates the ways that volunteers teach reading and writing as a tool for pious and material improvement.
Chapter 3
The Politics and Ethics of Islamic Literacy Voluntarism

Work without sincerity or direction is like traveling with a suitcase full of sand: heavy, with no purpose.
~Quote of the month (March 2012), Amrkhaled.net

Two Scenes on September 21, 2011

It is World Literacy Day. Inside the Nile Hilton, UNESCO is launching a new national program called Reading Together. They invited all of the major literacy organizers in the country to coordinate under their banner. As the Chairperson of Life Makers, the lead organization of the country’s most visible national campaign, Knowledge Is Power, Amr Khaled takes the stage as the day’s keynote speaker. Our programs read that he will talk about literacy as the first goal of the revolution; however, as he takes the stage, he corrects the title of the talk. He explains that he will instead speak about the potential of youth volunteers to carry forward the revolution by eradicating illiteracy. He describes how the best approach to the “catastrophe of illiteracy” is to engage youth as solutions to the problem. Egyptian youth proved themselves in the 25th of January revolution and should be part of building the new Egypt. The room of literacy experts, development workers, NGO and government employees applauds.

On that same day, across Tahrir Square, Egyptian teachers picket in front of the parliamentary buildings. Some 40,000 teachers from across the country gather in Cairo for the first teacher-organized strike in history. One group of teachers from Beni Sueif are dressed in burial shrouds and stage a funeral carrying a false corpse. Their placards read:
“The teacher died” (\textit{māt al-mu'allim}). Seventeen million students in more 54,000 schools are affected by the strike. Led by the newly formed Independent Teachers Association and other teacher coalitions, their list of demands include the removal of the Minister of Education, whom they call a remainder, a minimum monthly salary of three thousand pounds (about $500 CAD), an end to temporary contracts, an increase in money earmarked for education, and redress to what they call the degrading treatment of teachers. The strike lasts two weeks before officials promise to consider their demands. Since this day, under both SCAF and Morsi governments, smaller teachers’ protests echo the demands of the first ever strike of Egyptian school teachers.

The simultaneous and distinctive mobilization of young people and teachers in these two scenes crystallizes the sometimes painful contradictions raised in planning for the new Egypt. Khaled articulates how KIP is a campaign that solves two pressing social challenges. The recruitment of voluntary teachers aims to occupy bored and what he regards as potentially dangerous youth, while at the same time creating the necessary manpower to mobilize a national literacy initiative and address an education crisis in the country. This chapter observes two significant features of voluntarism as a modern adaptation of traditional alms practices.\footnote{See Ibrahim (2013). \textit{Khayr}, or good works organizations correspond to NGOs. Although there is an Arabic equivalent for NGO (\textit{munazzamat ghayr hukūmā} – a direct translation of the English), it is seldom used; the language of Egypt's grassroots social service providers, many of whom operate with Islamic guiding principles calls our attention to how \textit{khayr} orients, motivates and mobilizes alms, care, development and solidarity. Coptic social development and charitable organization also use the term \textit{khayr}, while others use the Christian notion of service (\textit{khidma}). See Nikolov (2009).} The first relates to the political backdrop of Life Makers voluntary work. The politics of voluntary literacy activism undervalues literacy workers and educationists in Egypt.\footnote{Not only do volunteer teachers support the state...}
through their unwaged labour, they promote civic duty through their call to pious responsibility. However, to approach literacy voluntarism exclusively through a political lens would obscure how volunteers engaged and directed the campaign. The second and primary focus of the chapter therefore examines how faith development situates properly oriented voluntary labour as a form of worship.

Within the first three weeks of an intensive media campaign to promote KIP and recruit volunteer teachers, the campaign enlisted 70,000 volunteers. The high number indicates the desire, particularly among unemployed youth, to translate the aspirations of the revolution into concrete action. Volunteers understand faith development as superseding traditional Islamic ways of caring for the poor. They do not regard it as exclusively “Islamic,” but rather by framing their labour as motivated by “faith.” At the same time, international development and corporate ethics discourses function as critical reference points for Life Makers alongside Islamic narratives that reflect development priorities, values and methods.

Historical instances of literacy campaigns reveal the central role of unwaged teachers in bolstering the move for mass education. Indeed, a number of scholarly works that explore twentieth-century literacy campaigns analyse the role of volunteers (sometimes called activists or revolutionaries). By focusing on literacy activists in particular among a variety of khayr work in Egypt today, I explore the politics of volunteer teaching as a particular way of continuing the revolution. This chapter therefore

---

82 For a discussion of the neoliberalization of Egyptian education through private schools and the deleterious effects on social equality and the teaching profession, see Herrera and Torres (2006).

83 For example, in Russia Clarke highlights the role of the members of the Bolshevik youth organization in the Down with the Illiterate Society (1923-27) campaign. In southern India Cody (2013) describes volunteers of the Enlightenment Movement (1990-2009) as intellectual activists.
Asks: What is faith development and how does it shape voluntary action? How do volunteers’ conception of sincerity shape notions of interiority, as well as relationships with their students? I show how volunteers’ notions of self-development—that guide not only their role as volunteers, but their larger worldviews—include how their self-transformation will directly impinge on the progress of Egypt. As volunteers maintain, it is only through the betterment of the individual that Egypt will improve. What is more, change, both personal and for Egypt, hinges on optimism during a time of turmoil. To this end, I ask: What does it mean when Khaled and Life Makers speak of “building life”? And what affective pedagogies are used on and through volunteers? Volunteers’ efforts to be successful in this life and the next lead many of them towards an ethical predicament: how can one dedicate their actions to God through service to community? They attempt to resolve this problem by insisting on a proper intention (niyya) that gives their work sincerity (ikhlās). And yet, what constitutes good intention and sincerity is a matter of debate and disquiet among them. In order to tend to these questions, I open with the ethic of action first developed in the television series *Life Makers* that led to the establishment of the transnational organization. I trace how Khaled appealed to youth through a conception of faith as an apolitical and therefore authentic expression of true Islam. 

Volunteer profiles reveal how Life Makers understand their ethic of action, not only in terms of their ideals but also in terms of the tensions and struggles that emerge from Khaled and Life Makers’ teachings. I argue that while their labour points to the structural constraints of an Egyptian neoliberal state that leaves them little room for gainful employment, they paradoxically turn their unemployment into an opportunity to “do good”—for the sake of God and a system that failed them.
The Politics of Doing Good

During fieldwork, I regularly visited two Cairo Life Makers offices, one in the low-income, densely populated district of Imbaba, and the other in Saad Zaghloul, a middle-class quarter in close proximity to several important state institutions in downtown. Life Makers can be characterized by its whirr of activity, and the varieties of its activities in their grassroots organizing. I joined Life Makers in meetings and religious lessons (durūs), as they scripted class plays, and organized media promotions. During my time in their offices and at various teacher training seminars and social events, I met volunteers working on different projects, from a campaign to stop school drop-outs, to a revival of the anti-drug campaign that first established the organization. The largest of the projects by far was Knowledge Is Power.

I refer to voluntary action, in distinction to work, which is what paid teachers do. While I use the terms work and labour interchangeably, the volunteers’ ‘good works’ is what Hannah Arendt calls action (1959). For Arendt, action is made meaningful through its performance with and among others. In the case of Life Makers’ ethic, I add that meaning is also derived from an intention to dedicate one’s efforts to God. My purpose is to highlight the distinction that volunteers draw between the value of voluntary and paid work, where volunteers seek Godly recompense through their labour that is the foundation of an Islamic-civic project.

Volunteers were mostly college students and unemployed graduates. They volunteered at a moment of high national unemployment, felt particularly by those under the age of thirty-five. According to Egypt’s Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS), unemployment rose to 13% at the end of 2012, up from 9.8% at
the end of 2010. The growing number of young people entering the workforce, particularly those with a higher education, increases national unemployment figures annually (Assaad 133). My own foray into international development as a CIDA youth intern involved working on a program that specifically targeted youth unemployment as a demographic problem, and sought to transform it into one of the country’s major assets for development. The United Nations’ International Labour Organization (ILO) and their subgroup, the Youth Employment Network, isolated the social and economic challenges of unemployment faced by youth. In Egypt, these international organizations adapted to the defined category of youth (shabāb) as extending from eighteen to thirty-five years of age. As fewer young people find jobs and are thus forced to put off marriage for a number of reasons (including limited funds to afford its high associated costs), the period in one’s life known as “youth” extends into and through one’s thirties. Omnia El Shakry traces Egypt’s “youth crisis” to the fallout of student demonstrations in 1935 and 1936 that spurred a discourse of treating youth as a social problem in need of regulation. “Adolescence” became a psychological stage, a “collective temporality and a depoliticized individual interiority” (2011, 592).84

Khaled’s appeal to youth speaks to this unemployment phenomenon by frequently invoking the dangers of losing bored youth to extremism and thuggery. His preaching, and particularly the creation of youth-driven programs, reaches out to harness the time and energy of his audience to transform frustration and boredom into “doing good.” While Khaled frequently praised the youth who brought about the revolution, he

84 Following the earliest events of the Arab Spring, the focus on Arab youth spurred journalistic and scholarly attention on young people in the Middle East. For scholarly works, see Deeb and Harb (2013) Jung, Peterson and Sparre (2014), Sukarieh and Tannock (2014), as well as the collected essays in Khalaf and Khalaf (2011). For an overview of the anthropological study of Arab youth, see Joseph (2013).
continued to follow his line of reasoning that youth must be rescued from idleness, largely through finding and creating opportunities for them.

The majority of youth that I met enrolled as volunteers in February 2011 or later, and described their desire to join as a yearning to do something to continue the revolution. In the early months following Mubarak’s ouster, Egyptians asked themselves and each other: *What is the best way to act now? What is the best course of action?* Volunteers continuously explained to me that it is through their exhaustion that they were energized. For my interlocutors, the organization was a major part of their lives. They spent their free time with other volunteers, often in Life Makers offices and social activities like visits to historical sites, and Ramadan dinners (*ifṭārs*). In this way, an organization that regarded youth as a demographic problem gave them the space to work and socialize. Through voluntary work, they gave of the main resources that they possessed: time and knowledge. They did so in a climate of ambivalent attitudes towards activism and protest.

Other activist responses in the weeks and months following Mubarak’s ouster included calls *not* to move. An election boycott that was particularly strong for the presidential elections, called the *Muqāṭiʿ īn* promoted either spoiling one’s ballot or abstaining from participation all together. In winter 2012, amid anti-SCAF protests, a movement called *Kāzibūn*, screened footage of military violence against civilians as a way to educate Egyptians on the military actions through the power of the image. The revolution sparked a variety of reactions, differently articulated as liberal, Islamic, liberal-Islamic, sometimes drawing on Quranic references, and other times citing Che Guevara. In addition to their opposition to the regime (*al-nizām*), another common target
of complaint for these diverse movements was what they called the Party of the Couch (*Hizb al-Kanaba*), in mocking reference to the vast numbers of Egyptians who remained at home in front of their televisions watching news and talk shows. Khaled’s effort to turn his television fame into a message for action, then, reveals an effort to transform television watchers into active Muslim citizens. While many revolutionary activists critiqued his positive action-oriented approach as apolitical, and too Islam-focused, others seemed simply weary of his fame, and so turned to new leaders, ideas and movements in the immediate aftermath of the demise of the old regime.

KIP gains momentum by mobilizing the youth of the revolution as the leaders of the literacy movement. The dual goal of cultivating citizenship through literacy and voluntarism is illustrated in campaign targets rehearsed at meetings and across various campaign media: “The program will run on a five-year plan, increasing its target literacy rate and number of volunteers along the way. Year one, 2011, targeted educating 100,000 people through 2,500 volunteers; year two aimed to reach 2.7 million through 42,500 volunteers; year three, 3.4 million through 85,000 volunteers; and the fourth year aims to educate 5.1 million so that by the fifth year they will reach 17 million.” Volunteers were both campaign targets and implementers. During intensive campaign recruitment days, different sets of numbers circulated with daily goals. Numbers were supposed to show the clear vision of the project, they were goals to strive towards and represent the campaign. That the numbers could not contain the picture on the ground was not a problem, since that was not their purpose for volunteers.

The rivalry between Islamic NGOs and the secular state (Abdelrahman 2004; Sullivan 1999, Zaki 1995) does not preclude the many ways in which the two work
together. Foucault’s writings on civil society make clear the relationship between state and civil society through what he calls a transactional reality of government technology where civil society is the “re-centering/de-centering of government reason” (2008, 311).

The most notable example in Egypt is the major philanthropic role of the Muslim Brotherhood under Mubarak. Under Mubarak, the organization was banned as a political party, while their philanthropic services were tolerated. In many ways, the Brotherhood flourished as they offered healthcare and food stuffs that the state was unable/refused to provide.85 There are other ways in which the dichotomy between Islamic NGOs and secular state is misleading. The economic restructuring of the country that created a neoliberal order is a mode of governmentality that permeates social organizing. Mona Atia situates Islamic charities at the intersection of piety and neoliberalism, employing Life Makers as an example of “the production of pious neoliberal subjects” (2013, 139). For Atia, Khaled teaches a neoliberal subjectivity through soft skills training he describes as integral to Muslims. She describes pious neoliberal subjectivity as a blend of “religion, self-reliance, and business principles” (136). Khaled encourages his audience to learn the “value of success” and responsibility, and to develop confidence in themselves. I would add here that it is not only that Vodafone Foundation is the financial source for KIP that entangles the campaign in pious neoliberalism, but it is the central role of volunteer teachers who are enrolled in a program that is, structurally speaking, a substitute to the failings of Egyptian public schools.

Khaled calls for volunteers to recognize their responsibility to fix the problems

---

85 The Brotherhood’s wide appeal as a political party from 2011-12 is widely credited to their philanthropic role in the country that gave them a wide base of support. Their critics accuse the Brotherhood of buying votes with their charitable services, while supporters contend that they provided the services while the government abandoned its people.
facing the country, a call clearly articulated in the media campaign *You Are the Responsible* (*Inta al-Mas’ūl*). In other words, I situate Life Makers voluntarism within the socio-economic milieu to understand their labour as something more than their structural support for neoliberal logic. It is for this reason that I speak of the politics *and* ethics of their action, in order to explore the ethical challenges of volunteers, as well as their contradictions. Khaled calls for productivity among an audience that is searching to discover what productivity means outside of gainful employment. He creates ways to be “gainfully unemployed,” by calling for actions that aim to replace the humiliation, frustration and boredom of unemployment with the purpose, dignity and righteousness of voluntarism. The friction between unemployed youth who will teach without wage, while low-paid teachers advocate for their professional rights illustrates youths’ abandonment of Gamal Abdel Nasser’s promise that all university graduates would be guaranteed a job with the government.\textsuperscript{86} It is by skirting state institutions, of which volunteers are distrustful (and that no longer deliver on their promise of decent work), that volunteers are able to carve out a meaningful engagement with the state. Highly educated unemployed youth teach literacy as a salve for personal and national crisis, despite their own education not giving them access to work opportunities.

Khaled’s disciplinary techniques that draw on management training are broadly appealing and his influence extends far beyond elite circles.\textsuperscript{87} Life Makers volunteers came from different neighbourhoods and socio-economic backgrounds, including

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{86} Adly (2014) describes the political predicaments of the use of Nasserism as a political strategy in contemporary Egypt. He describes Nasserist policies like free university and guaranteed employment for university graduates as central to cementing support among government workers, and students.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{87} Cf. Moll (2010), Shapiro (2006), Sobhy (2011). Also, see Clarke (2004) for a reading of class in Islamic social institutions and activism. Her analysis focuses on the role of middle class activists.}
economically depressed Cairo neighbourhoods, a number in close proximity to the Imbaba office where they volunteered. Nearly all of my interlocutors went to public schools and did not speak a foreign language, two distinguishing features between social class categories in Cairo. Some supported the Muslim Brotherhood and Morsi, others posted stickers of the Salafist Nour party to their folders, while still others tried to convince friends to vote for the 2012 presidential candidate Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh. Most were, to varying degrees, followers of Khaled’s programs. In other words, to listen to Khaled did not negate involvement with other organizations and following other Muslim teachers. Volunteers represented a fairly diverse cross-section of mostly single Egyptians. A more accurate picture of Khaled’s audience gives us a more precise understanding of his influence, and complicates our understanding of class in Egypt.

**Faith: Ahmed and Mona**

Ahmed is a twenty-two year-old engineering student. When he shows up for work at noon, rail-thin and looking as though he has not slept, I mistake him for another volunteer. He slips into an office, and some minutes later I am told that the director of the Life Makers Giza branch is ready to meet with me.

In 2006, Ahmed began his work as a volunteer at Life Makers in his local Imbaba branch. With the launch of the literacy campaign, senior organization administrators called on him to take a leadership role in the Giza branch. Despite being a student, he took on the job. This was going to be a major project, larger than anything the organization had worked on before and he wanted to be a part of building it. He mentions that UNESCO is holding a three day conference that will start the following day. It will be the first time the regional office will be meeting since the revolution and they planned
to launch a new regional initiative.

You might find it interesting. I won’t be there. I have a lot of other work to do here. We are conducting interviews and starting our mapping days. UNESCO, it is an organization that is separate from the people. They don’t know who the people are. We are the people of the country (ahl al balad) who will get things done for Egypt. Some of the best people I interview are the poor and illiterate, they are the ones who know best how to help others.

When I ask him what he looks for in an interview, he explains: “Someone who believes in the idea (mu’min bi-l-fikra).” He explains how their work in literacy is part of a new vision of good works (khayr) that supersedes “old fashioned ways” (taqlidi) of doing good, like the traditional, obligatory distribution of alms. He gestures to his body, he is tall with a fragile build, his hair is thinning and his eyes are set in tired black circles:

I am used to this sort of work, but it was never on this level of magnitude. These sorts of goals are a new thing for us. We are supposed to have 600 classes in six months. I don’t exhaust myself just to offer a sack of food that won’t do anything for these people’s future. I am doing all of this, sacrificing my own education—I haven’t been to class in weeks—to build something for Egypt, something with real impact. That is what we are doing here. We are creating Egypt's renaissance, through the spread of knowledge.

Volunteers move in and out of the office. Some retrieve papers on their own, and others require Ahmed’s attention. Maha, twenty-one and also a native of Imbaba, is another long-term volunteer of five years. She passes me a clipboard with a general volunteer registration form and asks me what I can do to help.

The three of us talk about Life Makers’ early days. The two had met in an anti-drug awareness campaign and like many young Egyptians, were in a long engagement as they and their families sorted the details of the material necessities of married life.

Ahmed said that after the revolution the organization needed to change its strategy. They wanted to do something with real impact. For Maha, the project gave people the chance
to participate in the revolution: “There’s no renaissance without deep thought and that can’t happen if half of the country is illiterate. We want people to do more than read, we want to create the innovative person (shakhṣ mubdi’), who can think and act and create on their own.”

Ahmed: “We are not a religious organization. We are faith development (tanmiyya bi’l-īmān). Not religious (dīnī).” Maha added: “Most people work here to please God and enter paradise.”

Ahmed elaborated: “Some organizations call themselves Islamic and they are for Muslims. We are not like them. Our goal is to improve society. We’re a mix of different groups and different kinds of people.”

When Ahmed says it is not a religious organization he is not saying that it is not Islamic. Ahmed, like other Life Makers volunteers who emphasized the distinction to me, contrasted the Islamic vision of the organization from other khayr organizations that he rebuffs. He described Life Makers as grounded in particular Islamic conceptions of effort and reward, and enmeshed in practices of self-formation common in other sorts of daʿwa characteristic of Egypt’s Islamic Revival. He articulates faith development as superseding traditional (taqlīdī) ways of performing good works, associated with donation and distribution of goods. It is through their exegesis of Islamic sources that they interpret the turn from alms to development as the modern and effective way to improve society. As Life Makers leaders, this distinction was significant to them, whereas newer volunteers often articulated giving their time as similar to that of distributing goods, so long as they were performing good works for their society.

In a similar rhetorical positioning, Khaled often distinguishes himself from
traditional scholars who preach an Islam that he criticizes as “faith for faith’s sake,” rather than what he argues is a truer faith that seeks to develop. This quarrel as to what constitutes faith extends from the classical period until today. The elements of what makes an action an act of faith is the subject of debate that turns on the question of internal conviction (taṣdīq bi-l-qalb), verbal expression (iqrār bi-l-lisān, or qawl), and the actual performance of the deed (ʿamal) (Gardet 2012). Islamic intellectual historian Jane Smith describes Islamic faith as outlined in the authoritative texts and their interpretations:

Faith in God is both trust in God’s mercy and fear of the reality of the Day of Judgment. It also means that it is incumbent on those who acknowledge these realities to respond in some concrete way. The details of that response, and thus the relationship of faith and action, have been the subject of much debate in the history of Islamic thought. (Smith 2002 163, my emphasis)

For Khaled, faith in God requires the obligation to respond in traceable ways not only through obligatory ritual, but in action for others that he situates as acts of worship. He underlines the phrase “those who believe and do good works,” repeated throughout the Quran. Khaled’s notion of faith development is grounded in the Quran’s close association between ṣāliḥāt (good deeds) and ʿīmān (faith). In his teachings, he speaks of the ḥāqq—or the right—of the poor and the obligation to respond to their need. This is a move outside of the Islamic concept of alms (ṣadaqa)—what often gets translated as “voluntary charity” and resembles more closely the language of obligatory charity, zakāt.

Voluntarism cannot be called zakāt, since zakāt must fulfill specific amounts and modes of distribution to qualify. Still, ḥāqq, corresponds more closely with that which must be given. Khaled’s website encourages its visitors: Pay your zakāt, donate by being a volunteer (idfaʿ zakātak, tabarraʿ taṭawwaʾ). Volunteers extended the language of khayr
beyond an exclusively Islamic framework to include the conceiving of one’s volunteer experience as transformative. By situating voluntarism as a modern practice of almsgiving, Life Makers distinguished themselves from traditional *khayr*, as well as understood the volunteer experience as part of their self-formation.\(^{88}\)

What can we make of Khaled’s insistence on faith and Ahmed’s explanation that Life Makers is not a religious organization? Ahmed and Mona’s refusal of the term Islamic or religious to describe the activities of Life Makers anticipates the sorts of sentiments that became increasingly common in the Egypt following the election of Mohamed Morsi and the consolidating of a wide disapproval with his performance and that of the Muslim Brotherhood. The appeal to faith rather than religion is part of the organization’s effort to appeal to all Egyptians, including the country’s Coptic population that makes up 10% of the country. Life Makers attempt to mobilize faith as a unifying force and make frequent references to churches and the Bible. In March 2011, the amrkhaled.net site featured a story about a Coptic volunteer in Upper Egypt. Despite these gestures of sectarian unity, I did not encounter any Copts involved in KIP during my research. Nonetheless, the inclusive appeal to faith is a distinctive feature of Life Makers’ call for religious co-existence. In the context of heightened sectarian conflict and a growing cynicism of Islamist politics, Life Makers’ call to faith, as well as sincerity and optimism, was crucial to many volunteers’ self-understanding and conception of their work.

The adoption of *īmān* rather than *islām* as the guiding ethic of action is illustrative of the ways that volunteers conceptualize and renegotiate the roles of faith and Islam in

\(^{88}\) See Bornstein (2012) on the “voluntary experience” as a secular practice that promises a transformative experience and that resembles the sorts of self-transformation as religious practice.
their lives. The relationship between faith and religion is a matter of great attention in the study of religion. Talal Asad’s critique of William Cantwell Smith’s analytical framing of “religion as faith,” (2001) offers a fruitful intervention to carefully trace theories of ritual emic to a religious tradition. And yet, Life Makers is illustrative of notions of interiority and authenticity that come together in their concern over sincere action, a concern that both resonates with and differs in its articulation from Christian conceptions of sincerity that today shape modern religion (Alphen et al 2009, Seligman et al 2011). Asad argues that within the study of religion, the shift to faith over religion emphasizes inner states without proper attention to practice. His clarification of faith in the Islamic tradition is helpful to understand how volunteers situate their actions in relation to God and others. Volunteers are involved in what Asad describes as faith realized through practice. However, as I illustrate, while action is central to their self-understanding, their emphasis on sincerity reveals equal attention to interrogating their inner state. They emphasise the role of proper intention in order to express the Godward orientation of their activities. In what follows, I trace the ways that faith cleaves to an ethical self-interrogation regarding whether one is in a state of sincerity. I argue that volunteers’ efforts to be sincere have less to do with anxiety over the transparency of language as representative of an interior self, than it does with the affirmation of God’s oneness through action.

**Sincerity Is a Difficult Thing**

Hundreds of volunteers gather at the National Council for Youth and Sport. Life Makers is celebrating its ninth anniversary. To mark the occasion, they have coordinated an event to recognize the major initiatives underway. Video clips with emotional soundtracks narrate their endeavours. Coordinators give speeches of appreciation to
fellow volunteers and speak about the number of obstacles they overcame together.

Young men and women pose in photographs together; they clap and cheer for each other. Khaled appears in a video address, encouraging volunteers to celebrate their achievements on this day and to continue to work for their ultimate goal. “Change for Egypt depends on you,” he tells them. Then, a volunteer from the crowd dressed in a robe and the red turban that marks him as a student of al-Azhar, walks to the stage. It is not uncommon for such an address at a Life Makers event. Volunteers do not only take religious lessons from Khaled, but often educate each other—sometimes in spontaneous didactic lectures given in the middle of meetings, other times in everyday exchanges through advice. The celebratory tone of the event shifts as the young khatīb—the person who gives the sermon—leads with a question to the audience: “Who of you has prayed ṣalāt al-maghrib today?” Only a couple of hands rise in an auditorium of a couple hundred. The celebration was running long and the call for the fourth prayer of the day passed twenty minutes ago. The young man admonishes his peers for celebrating their work and neglecting their prayers. He speaks for some time about the importance of prayer and cautions them against getting carried away in their celebration. “Sincerity is a difficult thing,” he tells them and goes on to tell a story from the life of the prophet Muhammad.

One day, one of the Prophet's companions, Abdullah bin Umar, a man of knowledge who feared God and was a man of piety (waraʿ) and virtue (fadl), sat crying and was asked why it was that he shed tears. He said that if he knew that God would accept a single one of his prostrations in prayer, his heart would be soothed, but sincerity is precious (‘aziz). Sincerity is a difficult thing. Are you working and exhausting yourself only? Do you know a person who is sincere? You need to live your life with this worry. You need to think about this in all of your endeavors: what are you doing? Do you follow me? Are you happy just to do something sweet (good, ḥilwa)? People will thank you and smile in your face, you
will feel like you are doing something. But you don't realize that you live alone and that all they say are only beautiful words. And then what?

Be aware that there will be a bridge that carries people to paradise and that will cast people into hellfire and there is none greater or more powerful than God (wa lā hawla wa lā quwwata illā billāh). It’s not a guarantee that just because you do great work (shughl kabīr) and because you carry many responsibilities and because of all of your movement (harakāt) and production (intāg) that God will accept your actions.

Self-interrogation is a part of the process of aligning oneself with proper intentions and is necessary to be able to ask oneself if one is sincere. While volunteers taught literacy as a way of creating self-awareness, they themselves tried to practice self-awareness through an interrogation of their inner states. To work for others may be nice, or ‘full of sweetness,’ but it is ultimately empty if not done with sincerity for God. He cautions volunteers from listening to the kind words of appreciation that can lead them astray and reminds them that these are “just words.” Those who benefit from the good works, are not pivotal to the cultivation of sincerity: the responsibility of sincerity is completely on the shoulders of the actor. While Life Makers volunteers invest themselves in action, the young preacher warns against movement that is without meaning and that meaning must be in the ultimate goal of pleasing God. He describes an understanding of sincerity that both informs and troubles volunteers. The problem of sincerity is not simply that it is difficult, but that it confronts volunteers with challenges of temporality and relationality that I elaborate on below.

The expression of faith as the essence of Islam is central to Life Makers’ call to sincerity. Their conception of sincerity and their effort to be sincere constitutes their strongest departure from a Protestant notion of sincerity, one that is saturated by a modern view of unity and wholeness (Seligman et al 2008). In *Sincerity and Authenticity*
Lionel Trilling illustrates how the Protestant genealogy of sincerity left its mark on broader understanding of what sincerity is: the correspondence between an interior and words that describe that interior world. Trilling loosely defines sincerity as “a congruence between avowal and actual feeling” (2, my emphasis). Webb Keane ethnographically renders this language ideology through the practices of sincere speech as a way of moral reform among converts to Protestantism in Sumba, Indonesia. He describes sincerity as part of a language ideology whereby words must accord with interior thoughts. But Trilling’s conception of sincerity differs from that of the young khaṭīb’s notion of interiority and distrust of words. For the latter, sincerity is about reforming the subject, but not through aligning thoughts with words, but rather by directing intentions towards God. In other words, self-formation is involved, but it is not about the sovereignty of the subject, as Keane describes in the Protestant case, rather, it is fidelity to a singular intention for all acts to be for God. It is about subjecting oneself to God’s sovereignty, and never being sure that one is sincere enough to merit God’s acceptance.

In their description of the inescapably modern triumph of sincerity in religious civilizations and movements, Seligman et al explain: “Sincerity morally privileges intent over action” (105). The mark of sincere action is Godward orientation, which must be part of the statement of intention. It is this singularity of intention to which volunteers aspire. And yet, whereas the volunteer’s sense of ikhlāṣ is not about a truthfulness of words, it does reveal a notion of intention that must enunciate itself (sometimes in one’s mind or heart, and other times to be stated aloud, such as when volunteers begin a day’s work with a supplication.) In this way, for volunteers, intention was an illocutionary act.
The concept of intention in the Islamic tradition is based on the hadith: “Actions are only judged on the basis of their intention (niyya). Every individual will only have [as a reward or punishment] what he has intended” (Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ, vii, 55).

The fiqh tradition came to judge an action based on the intentions of the doer. While niyya is not found in the Quran, the interpretation of ikhlāṣ, resembles good intention, where sincerity is the basis of all worship. Asad explains the role of intention before a rite:

The niyya is therefore an integral part of the rite itself. Imān—usually translated into English as “faith” is not a singular act that one performs naked before God. It is the virtue of faithfulness toward God, an unquestioning habit of obedience that God requires of those faithful to him (muʾminīn), a disposition that has to be cultivated like any other, and which links one through mutual responsibility and trust to others who are faithful. (218–9)

Asad also raises the question of the relationship between interiority and action that has to do with intention rather than transparency of language as representative of thoughts and intentions.

The Arabic term for sincerity, ikhlāṣ, can be translated as truthfulness, which can also be called and is related to ṣidq. But this sense of truthfulness does not correspond to Keane’s Protestant concern, or Trilling’s more general European history of sincerity as a moral necessity. The rendering of ikhlāṣ as truthfulness invokes an ultimate truth or reality, that of God. The goal is therefore to act for God, to be closer to God and to act for the next life. For the Azhar student lecturing the attentive crowd, this final step, the effort to act for the next life, is the ultimate challenge when tempted with the worldliness of social development. As he explains, it is easy to act for others, to feel good about oneself because people express gratitude, or to feel good because one has extended oneself. But
this is to miss the purpose of good works. In this way, his lesson diverged from Khaled’s
drawing together of sincerity and optimism.

In Khaled’s preaching he stresses the importance of sincerity as Godward
orientation and intention, where intentions are articulated as working goals. In the
television program *Journey of Happiness* (2010), he begins the metaphorical journey with
properly aligning one’s intentions: “The first step is to draw your line towards paradise
(*janna*). Make the correct start. Start life with sincerity; all your sayings and actions are
solely to please God. We succeed by being sincere to God, and must set our goals for the
sake of God.”\(^{89}\) Khaled’s rhetorical strategies adopted from corporate training are applied
to organizing intentions. Success is not in contradiction with sincerity, it comes from it.
While Khaled sets up sincerity as the measure of one’s deeds, his audience evaluates the
effectiveness of his preaching based on the sincere emotions of his programs. In Yasmin
Moll’s analysis of Islamic televangelism, she describes the authority of the New
Preachers as being rooted in their sincerity (2012). She refers to her interlocutors’
discussions of *ṣidq* (which Moll translates as sincerity, and that I here differentiate from
sincerity as truthfulness). While the terms are intimately related, I argue that the
volunteers were concerned with problems of sincerity distinct from that of transparency
(Keane) or truthfulness (Moll). Moll examines how viewers evaluate whether Khaled is
*mukhlis*, which she renders as truthful. Her intervention is illustrative of Keane’s point
that “we’re all Protestant”: how Protestant moral problems are prevalent in different
religions with distinct genealogies and moral anxieties of their own. Still, I suggest that
while viewers may question the authenticity of Khaled’s emotion, we would be remiss to

---

\(^{89}\) Khaled’s UK-based organization that has the same mission as Life Makers is in fact called
Right Start, a reference to the significance of intention in carrying out good works.
discount Islamic conceptions of sincerity that relate sincerity not to transparent connection between interiority and exteriority, but rather to notions of fidelity and purity that inform conceptions of sincerity in Muslim Egyptian piety.

Through brief sketches of two volunteers, I clarify how conceptions of sincerity guide, motivate and challenge volunteers in their relationships with their students as well as their effort to spread positivity. While Amal describes the idealized teachings and ethical goals of Life Makers volunteers, Umar is ambivalent about the organization’s ethos and his own contribution to it. In different ways, both are illustrative of how optimism is a guiding affective goal, not only for their participation in the campaign, but in their lives. Their effort to be optimistic sheds light on their understanding of faith and sincerity.

An Illustration, Or the Lawyer who Wanted To Be a Teacher

Late May 2013. A few blocks from Tahrir Square there is a street called Saʿd Zaghlul, named after the former Prime Minister, and revolutionary hero against British imperialism. His old house and mausoleum are the landmarks for finding a nearby Life Makers branch. The neighbourhood bears the marks of a sputtering revolution. On the other end of the street from the mausoleum, a concrete wall and chicken wire block the entry from the major thoroughfare, Qasr al-Aini, as it meets Tahrir Square. A group called Tamarrod (Rebel) is collecting signatures demanding President Morsí’s resignation. They want more signatures than the number that voted him in one year ago. Power outages punctuate the day unpredictably, long lines for fuel snake through streets. It has been nearly a year since I last saw Amal, a teacher who I worked with closely in Batn al-
Baqara. She is twenty-nine and was among the first teachers to volunteer for KIP. She graduated from the Faculty of Law at Ain Shams University eight years ago and has since been unemployed. She lives with her mother and two brothers in El Marg, a low-income neighbourhood at the end of the metro line. Her family lives on the remittances sent from her father still in Saudi Arabia. Her work is to tend to her mother who suffers from migraines. Amal wakes for midday prayer to start her day.

We hug and greet each other warmly and settle into an empty storage room, the only space available in the busy office, to drink coffee and catch up. I am surprised by how she opens the conversation. She asks: “Are you optimistic?” She watches my face, studies it for my answer. I stammer that it is a question that I have been thinking much of lately. I tell her that I would like to be. I have the sense she knows my answer and finds my tentativeness weak. She goes on. “I’ll tell you something: we are. We are optimistic and we are the only ones. We know things will be better, we know how much good there is, how much good there can be. Others don’t see it like us.”

She tells me how she was recently engaged to another volunteer, a fellow I knew who gave religious lessons at the office during Ramadan. They read the first chapter of the Quran, the Opening (al-Fātiḥa) (a ceremony announcing the intention to marry, usually conducted among family members), but explained that she hadn’t yet received her shabka (a ring or jewelry typically given by the prospective groom as a statement of intent to marry). “He is still a student and can’t yet afford all of the costs of marriage. It will be another two years until we marry.” She was disappointed by the long wait. For a moment, we sat with her frustration. She said: “These sorts of rules are something bad about Egyptian culture. But time moves quickly and we’ll be married soon.”
She asks how my studies are progressing and I tell her that I am working on a chapter about the volunteers. I tell her that I am trying to understand what they mean by sincerity. She nods. “Yes, that is very important. You have to write about that.” She asks for my notebook so that she can explain. She draws a straight line from the bottom of the page to the top and makes an arrowhead at the top. She writes “Allah” above the arrowhead. She points to the word. “That is our purpose (ghāya). God is our purpose. It is always God. And to reach our purpose, we have goals. And to accomplish our goals, we must have a method.” Beside the arrow on either side she draws wavy lines. “These are all of the distractions, the things that keep us from our purpose, like worrying about what others say about us. It is when we are focused on our purpose that we are sincere.” Below God, she writes the word mukhlīṣ, sincere, and circles it.

To follow our purpose, we must be a true believer (mu’min). God wants us to take care of earth, he calls us to vicegerency (istikhlāf). This concept of vicegerency is on us. The umma has fallen because we have not taken this responsibility. If we don’t take on the call to be responsible for earth, than we are no better than cows. This is what God tells us in the second chapter. If we have strong faith, we can make things possible. We believe in the small things, and change in an individual. One person can make real change. This is sincerity. And it depends on intention. It is not just for the work I do here, it is for everything. Sincerity in the way I treat my future husband or my mother. That everything must be for God. It is that directness. Do you understand? You know, it is clear in Arabic. Ikhlās is what you are left with when you remove all distractions and impurities. It is that sediment. And it is the process.

She does not directly share that she has not held a literacy class in several months, nor that none of her students have yet written the exam. Instead she explains how she has been busy with the engagement, a trip to visit her father, and a new Life Makers campaign that organizes school presentations to create a culture of creative grassroots development projects. Our reunion ends when someone notifies her that a trainer has not
shown up and she will need to lead a seminar. She apologizes and we say goodbye. Our reunion concludes as most of our meetings together usually did, with Amal rushing off to tend to another organization responsibility.

Figure 3: Amal in front of a classroom at the community centre in Batn al-Baqara

**An Architect without Work, Or the Avid Photographer**

Umar is a twenty-four year-old graduate of the Faculty of Architecture. He is a photographer and a consummate observer who struggled to make decisions. He volunteers in the Arab Contractors’ shipyard, teaching factory workers. When we first met at the shipyard, he had graduated but was waiting to be called to serve in the army, a rite of passage for Egyptian men. His life offers a counterpoint to Amal’s embodiment of ideal Life Makers’ qualities. While she quotes Khaled and describes a work ethic based on optimism and sincerity, Umar is less confident, less certain. He is caught between wanting to do something for his country and not knowing the best thing to do. We used to talk on the long minibus commutes from the industrial zone back to the city. For him,
volunteer work is for society and the afterlife. “It is good to please God and get closer to Him, but that doesn’t need to be formalized through an organization.” He described how he tried to make the intention to do work for thawāb (reward), but concluded: “People say God gives great thawāb for many reasons, not just one, so it shouldn’t be a problem how I make my intention.” For him, Khaled is someone he listens to when he is down and wants to feel better.

Umar was ambivalent about Egyptian politics and often complained that they were too complicated and that everyone seemed to be self-interested. “I’m not good at politics. I’m torn between opinions. I can understand so many sides and think that I agree with them, even if they contradict each other.” He laughs at himself. “On January 28th, I photographed people on the bridge praying, I was not protesting, I was there for photography. I didn’t know the best thing to do, so I was there to see it and record it.” Later, after Mubarak resigned, he volunteered for Life Makers and another volunteer organization based in his neighborhood. “I wanted to help the country after the revolution. I asked myself: should I continue to protest with others? Distribute clothes? I thought the first step should be education. There is poor etiquette (akhlāq) among the lower class, and literacy can help with this.”

Umar distinguished between the work he did in other volunteer community service programs. When he worked with the a small grassroots organization called Ma‘adians and another established khayr organization, Resala, he met other people like him, who lived in similarly comfortable neighbourhoods and went to similar sorts of private schools –better than public schools, but not as exclusive as international language schools. With these volunteers, Umar sorted and distributed food bags, but had limited
interactions, if at all, with the people they donated to. Through his work with KIP, he explained, he met people from different classes, and got to know them. He described how teaching the workers at the shipyard was an experience that marked him, how he learned how to work with people from “different levels.” At Arab Contractors he was a favorite teacher, known to be patient and friendly with his students. He asked his students to stop using ٍعَتَّازٍ (sir, often used for teachers) to speak with him and for the first time, he was part of a place that did not use titles to address each other.

Almost one year after the shipyard classes concluded, Umar and I met at a coffee shop not far from his home. He was given a three-year postponement of military service. While it was likely that he would not have to serve at all, he was still ill at ease. For Umar, time was a burden. Unable to find work, he offered to volunteer on a construction site to gain experience. Even though he studied design, he thought the practical on-site experience would be useful. He was looking for work and spoke of wanting to travel to a place where he would be respected. He began with his usual cheerful disposition, but as we spoke, it was clear that he was worn from his job search. “It’s hard to do anything when I am searching. It is hard to think of anything besides the search.” We talk about the men from Arab Contractors and he tells me that even though the experience changed him, he would not return to volunteer for KIP.

I know I am a different person today because of the campaign. Even though we felt lost at times, like we didn’t know how to teach the men what they needed, it still created hope. That’s what action can do, create good feelings.

But it has been very difficult. We didn’t know what we were doing. It was an experiment for everyone. And for me, that was very stressful. I learned a lot from it. It was good to do something other than worry about the army and work. But you know, I was so anxious. So afraid to meet with them and make a mistake, nervous that they would not learn. I tried to get to
know them and for them to get to know me through photos. So I showed them pictures that I had taken and I brought my camera and took their photos.

Umar’s ambivalence complicates the story of Life Makers as pious volunteers in the service of God and nation. Although he opened all of his classes with a short supplication that the worker-students recited with him, blessing their efforts and work, he did not speak of sincerity as a goal.

Figure 4: *Umar (center) with two worker-students, Abd el Nabi (right) and Rady (left) at the Arab Contractors' Ma'sara Shipyard*

Amal and Umar and so many of Life Makers volunteers live in worlds where time feels stubbornly sluggish, time that requires their busy activity to move it along. They feel stuck waiting for jobs and the resources to marry. Even Amal who illustrated ideal volunteer sincerity as an orientation toward God, was frustrated by the sense of stasis in her life. Together, the two depict the trope of self-development so common among Life
Makers, where their community service—through proper intentions—is an act of worship. Amal and Umar’s attention to optimism and “good feelings” illuminates a further aspect of the volunteers’ ethic of action. As Umar explains, action can create good feelings. Unlike the khaṭīb’s sobering lesson at the Life Makers anniversary event, Amal and Umar understand action as optimistic and future-oriented. Rather than being at odds with Islamic sincerity, optimism is supposed to be motivational. The question is not whether one truly feels optimistic; instead, optimism is a way to rally faith work.

Optimism and Death

Buoyed by a commitment to optimism, volunteers are illustrative of Islamic pedagogies of affect that promote happiness and optimism. On the one hand, Khaled’s promotion of optimism resembles self-help genre of literature, yet at the same time, his description of the pursuit of happiness as an ethical imperative to cultivate good draws on the Islamic tradition. This optimism applies to this world and the next. Khaled mobilized optimism as an Islamic ideal productive in shaping character. His affective pedagogy contrasts with Islamic preaching that employs the fear of God (taqwā) and fear of the afterlife (tarhīb) through detailed images of death and punishment (Hirschkind 2009). Life Makers thus draw our attention to a different set of emotions that occupies interest in affect in Islamic preaching. Raymand Baker (2003), as well as Jane Smith and Yvonne Haddad (2002) describe how modern reformist shifts in Quranic interpretation downplay the rhetoric of the fear of death, a trend that represents Khaled's Islamic reformist style.

While at moments Khaled employs sadness and mourning as a part of his affective

---

90See Rudnyckyj (2010), especially the chapter, “Governing through Affect,” where he argues that affect mobilized neoliberal reform. He details scenes of weeping, and displays of shame, fear and joy. In other words, his interest is not in the particular affect, fear, happiness, or otherwise, but rather in how affective enactments were integral to spiritual reform.
repertoire, the ultimate goal is to create happiness and optimism, faith and hope. He articulates his message as a critique of a widespread rhetorical use of detailed images of punishment to instill fear of Judgment. However it is important to understand that Khaled’s happiness pedagogy does not displace the significance of death. As Charles Hirsckind aptly observes: “The acknowledgment of death that animates much of da‘wa preaching does not preempt worldly engagement but rather gives it direction and purpose” (181). He explains, how “seeing the world through dead eyes” offers distance from the world we are in, so that it can be more clearly apprehended. For Life Makers, death talk is not only about death, but is deeply involved in rethinking how life ought to be lived.

The afterlife was ever-present in volunteer conversation. However, rather than associate death with the torment of punishment, volunteers spoke enthusiastically and longingly to meet the beloved Prophet in heaven. On one occasion when a volunteer narrowly missed the chance to speak with Khaled by telephone, after he called a team leader to encourage their activities, she comforted herself saying that she would soon meet him face-to-face in heaven. These more common references to paradise were in distinction from the young khatib’s more traditional eschatological imagery of bridges leading to heaven and hell. As Hirschkind describes among cassette tape listeners, “the world of the hereafter now permeates one's sensory horizon” (181). He elaborates:

By learning to adjust one’s life to accord with death, one’s actions come to inhabit the temporal plane of eschatological time. In this way, life is undertaken not only as a preparation for death, as action geared toward a telos in the hereafter, but as a task of bringing the future into the present, the next world into this one, through one’s ethical actions. (184)

It is precisely this temporal view that animates the problem of sincerity for volunteers.
Hirschkind’s temporality of ethical action does much work in explaining the problem of achieving goals in the afterlife and the present life. The effort to live for both underlies how “making life” is a project for both this life and the next. As Smith and Haddad observe:

…it is perhaps not too extreme to say that the distinction between dīn [religion] and dunyā [worldliness] itself is sometimes hazy for the very reason that modern Muslims put such emphasis on the continuity of life in this world and the next and on the direct cause and effect between actions now and circumstances to come. (125)

This orientation towards the afterlife is what for many volunteers gives the present its meaning. Khaled advocates against terrorism, in lessons that teach youth to embrace and even celebrate life. Recall from the introduction that during violent clashes between police and protestors, a group of volunteers saw the best course of action as giving blood. The protection of their own lives and the donation to try to extend the lives of others was another instance of what they saw as making (this) life.

Life Makers affective pedagogies are not dissimilar to other programs for happiness in Egypt and the Middle East. Following September 11, 2001, American and international development organizations established public relations campaigns to address the charge that Arab and Muslim cultures were obsessed with death. Mayssoun Sukarieh describes how such a “culturalist way of thinking about the Arab world” structured messages like the 2008 “Culture of Optimism” campaign launched in Egypt. She argues: “In the simplistic terms of these campaigns, reform is not about promoting a particular form of development (that is, neoliberalism), but moving the Arab world from death to life, pessimism to optimism, and despair to hope” (2012, 116). While Sukarieh describes a culturalist understanding and practices that reinscribe orientalist notions of
Arab fatalism, I suggest that these dichotomies are not as stark as campaign publicists or even her own analysis may admit. Life Makers ethic of action mobilizes much of the language of The Hope Crusade, although the organization is not explicitly a part of any internationally sponsored program. Happiness and its pursuit through self-help are part of wider currents of the popular self-help genre, as well as related to notions of happiness, satisfaction and character building that Life Makers trace through the Islamic tradition. Volunteers are illustrative of how positivity does not replace death, but creates new orientations toward it.

Volunteers articulate a variety of vocabularies and practices for their desire for constant improvement. Many are avid followers of popular psychology that coach individuals in self-development. Arabic translations of English titles such as *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (*Al-Rigāl min al-Marīkh wa-l-Nisā’ min al-Zahra*), as well as *How to Win Friends & Influence People* (*Kayfa Taksib al-Asdiqā’ wa-Tu’aththir fī al-Nās*) are widely available in bookshops and street vendors. Arabic titles that Islamize popular English self-help texts are also bestsellers, such as ‘A’id al-Qarni’s *Don’t Be Sad (Lā Taḥzan)*. Al-Qarni employs self-help literature on happiness, as well as Eastern philosophy alongside stories from Muhammad’s life and those of his companions. Instruction in such programs for happiness is derivative of the Islamic tradition’s expositions on happiness and satisfaction. For example, the most notable of such works on happiness is the twelfth century philosopher-theologian al-Ghazali’s *The Alchemy of Happiness (Kīmīya al-Sa’āda)*. He concludes the section on self-examination with the prophetic saying: “Happy is he who does now that which will benefit him after death” (2012, 70). Al-Qarni describes an early morning regimen of meditation, following the
performance of prayer that should include reflection on the preciousness of time. He explains how one must vigilantly guard over their body to instruct it in good action.\textsuperscript{91} Self-examination is thus a disciplined living in the present, where happiness is the satisfaction that right living will bring reward in the afterlife. Lessons like al-Ghazali’s were part of a bricolage of happiness citations. These books often came up in conversations with volunteers, who offered me a piece of advice, or explained their thoughts on a topic by citing one such title. When teachers stress the importance of reading to improve life, they often share that they were too busy with school or family responsibilities to have time to read, although they make time for books that are beneficial (\textit{mufid}). This is not, however, to say that all efforts for self-improvement were weighted equally. The desire to improve oneself, whether through a better use of time, or the expression of particular affects, is often made in reference to achieving God’s will on earth. This is what makes sincerity the ultimate criteria for judging action and what is particularly ‘Islamic’ about faith development as it works on and through volunteers. The faith development that guides Life Makers is about developing the faith of volunteers just as much as it is an example of developing others based on a commitment to faith. A central theme of how volunteers benefit from their participation in the campaign was the intersubjective dimension of their work, how in doing good for others, they gained much from their students.

\textbf{Acting \textit{For}/ To Be Acted \textit{Upon}}

These forms of self-development invite us to reflect on what Amira Mittermaier

\textsuperscript{91} Islamic philosophers, especially those responding to Aristotle’s writing on \textit{eudaimonia}, have written much on happiness. The topic has also entertained Persian poets and storytellers. For example, see Sa’di’s (d. 1290) chapter, The Superiority of Contentment, in his \textit{Gulistan}. 
calls the paradigm of self-cultivation in the anthropology of Islam (2012). Mittermaier employs the dream to depict the “limits of intentional action” (249). Indeed, the sub-field is defined by influential works on the deliberate practices of self-making (Mahmood 2005, Hirschkind 2006). Life Makers demonstrate similar attention to intentionality and the disciplining practices of self-formation that are the subject of these works on self-cultivation, however the relational dimension of their voluntarism suggests an effort to go beyond the self through their teacher-student relationships. The volunteers’ idealization and struggle to form bonds with their students offers a promising way to expand our understanding of techniques of self-improvement. Mittermaier deploys the dream as an example of the ways that people can be acted upon, therefore expanding our understanding of practices of self-cultivation beyond the self. Unlike the dream in which the person is acted upon by the divine, volunteer work is acting for in a way that is distinct from philanthropic notions of acting for others as the ultimate good.

The khaṭīb highlights an ethic of personal accountability to God alone and is ambivalent, even cautious, about the sorts of personal relations cultivated through khayr. While volunteers debate what it means to dedicate their actions to God, they are less adept at describing how sincerity should mark their relationships with students. Amal and Umar attempted to create meaningful relationships in the classroom and spoke of their connection with students as testament to their personal transformation. As Umar pointed out, this aspect of volunteer work was new to young volunteers whose previous khayr did not create relations with the recipients of food bags and clothing. While there was a burgeoning conception of the value of the teacher-student relationship—particularly as a site of spiritual edification from the “noble poor”—this was generally maintained at a
rhetorical level, as volunteers struggled with unfamiliar and uncomfortable conditions of poverty in the neighborhoods where they taught. Still, most reproduced teacher-student relationships of authority that they experienced in their own education. Volunteers sought to interiorize and authenticate the volunteer experience as one of actualizing their Islamic faith. Yet, they were challenged by the realization of their self-transformation that depended on the relations forged through their labour.

Building relationships in the volunteer experience is part of the effort and obstacle in transcending differences between volunteers and those whom they try to transform through literacy. Erica Bornstein observes how voluntarism heightens the distinctions between different categories of people (foreign/native, wealthy/poor) even as volunteers attempt to transcend these very categories (2012). Volunteers frequently remark that they learn more from their students than they teach them. When I asked Amal and Umar what they learned, they each admired the faithful patience and satisfaction (ridā’) of those with so little. Amal remarked that her students in Batn al-Baqara are the “real Egyptians,” with the generosity and hospitality that most urban Egyptians have forgotten. Umar praised the men in the factory for their commitment to work and their sacrifice for their families. They also described the nonliterate as especially sincere, leading lives less cluttered by insignificant preoccupations that allow them to see God more clearly. In other words, they saw in their students what they strived for through their participating in KIP.

---

92 The Quranic ideals of ta’arruf (understanding and knowledge of the other) and ta’āluf (social amicability) indicate an ethic of approaching the other that was not a part of the description of their action that I encountered among volunteers or as a part of Khaled’s teachings.

93 Recent works on Christian voluntarism focus on moral aspects of volunteer worldviews. Rebecca Allahyari describes “moral selving,” which is the emotional work of drawing the volunteer not only “inward but outward” through their volunteer experience (2000, 108). In addition to Allahyari’s moral selving, Andrea Muehlebach describes the particular forms of care of the “moral neoliberal” in Catholic and neoliberal Italy (2012), while Omri Elisha details the “moral ambition” of Tennessee Evangelical youth (2011).
While Khaled’s fame attracts volunteers to Life Makers, it similarly draws harsh criticism. Some critiques are based on a complete rejection of Khaled, while others dismiss Islamic khayr organizations in charitable and social solidarity works. I met Hany at an open-air café over tea with mutual acquaintances. He was the same age as most of the volunteers I worked with and was also a recent graduate engaged to be married. His fiancée described her plan to visit an orphanage the following day with a khayr organization. He expressed his skepticism of joining community projects with Islam. He described how he tried to participate in a khayr organization at his university, but their work was delayed because of seminars that taught them to have an “intentional contract” (ʿaqd al-niyya). Hany explained that the Islamic focus of the work blurred the volunteers’ intentions because it made the work about the pursuit of paradise and not the goal of the work itself. For Hany, any sort of Islamic intention can be interior, but it should not be confused with the task at hand.

The next afternoon, I used these comments to provoke Ahmed, the director of the Imbaba Life Makers office, into conversation about criticisms of Life Makers. Ahmed was well acquainted with critiques and was ready to respond. For him, separating intention from work is impossible, since all works in this life correspond to a compensation (agr) from God. The quality of the work corresponds to the quality of the connection (rābiṭa) with God. When I explained that seeking reward for doing good can be construed as selfish, he offered his explanation in Arabic proverbs:

*Al-dunyā mazraʿat al-ākhira* (This world is the field of cultivation for the afterlife). We cannot see two things that are together as separate. There is another that may help you: *Khayr wasīlat li-dhāt* (Goodness is a tool of the self). Yes, good works make us better, but this idea of self does not get in the way of effectiveness. Personal development is part of the advancement of the social good. How can we hold these things apart?
Trying to develop oneself is not selfish, it is about going beyond oneself. When you are working on yourself, you are a servant to others. And here is another: *Khayr an-nās min ihtirāk ka al-shama‘ li-yarā al-akhirūn* (People’s activity in good works is like a candle that enables them to see others).

The centrality of the other in the volunteer experience was pivotal and yet elusive. Volunteers were ready to *act for*, but did not perceive the ways in which they could be *acted upon*. In the many ways that volunteers discussed their relationships with their students, ultimately learners were the ones to be transformed through literacy. Volunteers enacted their own transformation through their Godward orientation, not through the interpersonal bonds of their labour. For volunteers, the struggle to enliven in the campaign a sincere encounter with the other was at once rhetorically significant, and yet seldom realized.

**Conclusions**

In this chapter I shifted from questions of genealogy and hermeneutics of Islamic literacy development to examine the politics and ethics of Life Makers’ volunteer teachers. Through profiles of volunteer teachers I demonstrated both the ideals and ambivalent commitments of mostly young and unemployed university graduates who responded to the revolution through literacy development. Volunteers occupy a peculiar position of extending the promises of education to their students, while simultaneously unable to find decent work with their own education qualifications. Let down by the state’s promise of employment, volunteers paradoxically skirt state institutions to perform their Islamic-civic responsibility. This hyphenation of the “Islamic-civic” captures the project of making life in this world and the next. It also presents ethical challenges to volunteers who endeavour to develop themselves through their faith development.
Islamic literacy development in revolutionary Egypt is illustrative of how *khayr* engages the grammars of self-fashioning through an orientation towards action that privileges sincerity. The challenge to be sincere brings to the fore that not all good works are sacred, but that sacrality corresponds to the condition of the heart of the actor. Sincerity is a central goal that challenges volunteers as they struggle to properly orient their intentions in work that challenges them in their encounters with poverty and in the difficulties of teaching. *Life Makers* voluntarism expands the horizon of how we think about self-cultivation as we consider its relationship to those who are the objects of development. Volunteers involved themselves in practices of self-development that resonate with other practices of self-formation current in the Islamic Revival, yet in distinctive ways that open up new ways of thinking about self-formation through *khayr*. Through a discourse of positivity, optimism is an end and a means to be a productive volunteer. Finally, I argue that their commitment to faith rather than religion is indicative not only of an effort to uncover authentic Islam, but also of a distrust of Islamist politics. Volunteers maintain that Egypt’s improvement starts with them, not only as they reach out to develop the lives of others, but through their own rigorous self-improvement. It is in this way that volunteers act as Muslim citizens. Their desire to work for Egypt and the afterlife, their effort to cultivate faith in themselves and make it legible on others, is the model of Muslim citizenship they seek to embody as well as teach to their students. The first part of the dissertation has sketched the genealogies, ideals and hopes of *Knowledge Is Power* as a project to build life for all those involved through the salvific and culturing powers of reading to the virtues of the labour involved in *teaching* reading. In the following part I turn to examine ethnographically how the campaign unfolded to observe
the varied responses of the campaign and how students sometimes took up, negotiated, forgot and critiqued their literacy lessons.
Part III:
Il/legible Subjects
Chapter 4
Development and Desire in a Cairo Slum

The gamʿiyya (society or association) is a small complex located among the narrow alleys of Batn al-Baqara, with its three-story buildings that edge the sometimes muddy, sometimes dusty, ground. The complex includes separate prayer rooms for men and women. Outside of the women’s area are a few square meters of playground with a swing and a well-worn teeter-totter, where children play and quarrel as their mothers make supplications. There are three classrooms with short desks for children, and a room with a carpet loom as part of a microenterprise project run by a small NGO. The gamʿiyya is the centre of the social world for many Batn al-Baqara residents. Following the revolution, as new services were introduced to the neighbourhood, a schedule of daily activities made out of construction paper was posted in the courtyard. A grid with the days of the week and different lessons: kindergarten, life fundamentals (taʿṣīs), Quran, and literacy (mahw al-ummiyya). The name of the teacher and the time of each class were positioned in the ordering of life at the association.

On occasion, the courtyard is transformed into a medical clinic with plastic wicker mats strung up to create makeshift check-up rooms. While a couple dozen men gather for each prayer, this is primarily a space for women and their children, whose various activities and lessons draw them out of their cramped homes into a space where they plan and pray, imagine and act in a chorus of programs directed at their improvement.

94 Note that the history of the gamʿiyya has a distinct genealogy from khayr. Pollard observes that the emergence of associational life in the mid to late nineteenth century “provided Egyptians with novel ways of organizing, mobilizing, and forming group identity” (241). In Batn al-Baqara, the gamʿiyya’s space hosted the activities of organizations from outside of the neighbourhood.
The literacy classes are held in the kindergarten classrooms where the women perch on small chairs built for children. On the pale blue walls are posters of fruits and vegetables, each image with its name written below. A cartoon caterpillar creeps along the wall as a colourful border, a letter in each circle that makes up its body spelling out the alphabet. Women meet here three times a week in the late afternoon for their lesson. When their teacher Amal arrives, word passes through the streets from one household to the next and the women gather for class.

Today, Amal is teaching the letter ٔن. She writes on the board: ٔن (people). She points to each letter and the women repeat after her. They repeat the letter with different vowels following it, practicing how to recognize the difference between short and long vowels. Amal teaches them to connect letter sounds, and not to memorize words as whole units; she instructs them to independently decipher letters to build words. Amal writes different words with the letter ٔن shifting the letter’s place in the word and asks them to identify if the letter is at the beginning, middle or end. She tries to call on individual students and instructs them to raise their hands and not call out. They see the lesson as a group activity and call out the answers together, laughing at Amal’s frustration.

In this chapter I situate literacy within the broader context of good works (khayr) projects in Cairo’s historic Fustat plateau, in an informal settlement. Literacy development is among a broad range of charitable and social development activities within Batn al-Baqara; it offers a plan to imagine better futures by attempting to cultivate desire (raghba) for education among women, particularly through the figure of the ideal mother and, as a result, the Muslima citizen. Through participant-observation fieldwork in the women’s literacy lessons, and other association activities, as well as their daily
lives beyond the classroom, I examine how literacy is an expression of, as well as a
program for, hope. However, before the campaign can teach literacy as a program of hope
for the future, the teachers and campaign administrators discover an ambivalence towards
literacy among the women that they seek to address by teaching them to desire their own
literacy. The chapter moves in three parts. First, I examine how Life Makers’
implementation of literacy development conceives of literacy as a form of khayr that is
meant to develop the individual and their material conditions. In doing so, I examine how
traditional forms of khayr are adapted to fit logics of international development, namely
models of human development. In the second section, I examine motherhood as a trope of
literacy programming in Egypt since the 1950s and distinguish how current iterations of
ideal motherhood stress motherly responsibilities as a condition of her place in the nation.
The responsibilized literate mother performs her civic duty by educating her children and
therefore taking up where public schools fail. In other words, she becomes a Muslima
citizen precisely when she relinquishes expectations of state services. The mother’s
education is valued in how it is passed on to her children. In this way, similar to the
discourses of youth as potential, the mother is a site of futurity. In the final section, I
examine the ways in which desire for literacy—and more broadly, for development—are
assumed, directed, articulated and silenced. Ultimately, I argue that women were taught
to imagine and desire better lives through the transformative effects of literacy on the
mind and body. While KIP and other Egyptian literacy programs attempt to measure and
recognize success through government issued exams, certificates and statistical data, a
close look at literacy in one neighbourhood illustrates how the frequent failure of literacy
activism to alphabetize new learners leads to the promotion of literacy as an ethical
obligation with innumerable benefits for a person’s life and the country.\textsuperscript{95}

The KIP campaign established its first five classes in Batn al-Baqara in March 2011. A wide range of activities were underway there during my fieldwork, all run by young volunteers whom I came to know through various social development projects. This part of Old Cairo is notable because of its proximity to historically significant sites, including some of the city’s oldest mosques and churches. It is also the centre of the city’s kiln and casting industry. As such, among the neglected city slums, Batn al-Baqara is often the focus of media attention that attracts small scale and typically social development projects. Over the early months of the campaign, the number of literacy classes multiplied so that there were classes offered every day of the week at different times. Residents grew familiar with the new faces of the volunteer teachers and the literacy classes were weaved into the schedule of \textit{gamʿiyyā}’s activities. While I attended different classes and participated in a number of the centre’s activities, I closely followed a single class that met three times a week. Some of the dozen women in this class became my closest interlocutors. They are neighbours and extended relatives who live on the streets surrounding the \textit{gamʿiyya}, originally from Fayoum and Beni Sueif and settled in Cairo a generation ago. There were a few mother-daughter pairs, as well as cousins and relatives through marriage and when everyone came together, the older generation was often indecipherable from the younger one.

This is the first of two chapters that revolve around reading programs at the

\textsuperscript{95} My own focus on desire in the practices of local development programs differs from Hafez (2011), who examines the heterogeneity of development workers’ desires (5). While Hafez is instructive in demonstrating the intertwining of Islamic and modern-secular genealogies of the development workers’ subjectivities, my point is to underline desire as a development goal in itself. Hafez explains that she understands “desire to be an ongoing process rather than an ultimate objective” (ibid.), while I approach desire as both an ongoing process and an affective aim to cultivate ideal subjects for development.
In what follows in this chapter I situate literacy classes within development projects in Batn al-Baqara, while in the following chapter I turn to their longstanding Quran lessons to probe how the women’s oral practices involved particular conceptions of how the Quran works in their lives. I observe how the two classes reveal distinct reading sensibilities, as well as practices and expressions of reading as a pious activity. Moving between literacy and Quran classes on alternating days, I adapted my role as a participant-observer in each of these settings. In literacy where I began my fieldwork, it was a challenge not to be regarded as an authority. Volunteers worked in pairs, and I regularly attended classes with their teacher, Amal. Each pair included the primary instructor and a second, referred to as the ‘observer,’ (murāʿiba) who supports the class by observing and following-up with students to ensure they are following the lessons. To students then, my fieldwork in the class aligned me with Life Makers. The Quran lessons, by contrast, allowed me to dissociate from the volunteers and situate myself among the learners. In the Quran lessons, I struggled with some of the same sounds and rules of pronunciation as my interlocutors and fellow learners. My susceptibility to error and frustration provided me with a learner’s perspective and cultivated a sort of easiness with the women that eventually found its way into literacy class and my relations with the women beyond the gamʿiyya.

I appreciated the women’s candor, their frankness and wit as I spent afternoons with them on building stoops in the alley, their children playing nearby. One afternoon, I sat drinking tea with Umm Hazim and her neighbour, each of us telling stories about our families and the places we were raised. Umm Hazim: “See,” she said referring to my presence in Egypt and dislocation from my parents, “you are like us. You are living in a
place you were not born.” To Umm Hazim, this was comparable to her own move from the countryside to Batn al-Baqara. We were most familiar to each other when we sat reciting verses of the Quran together, when we stumbled over the same passages. Other times, I disappointed them when I did not understand a joke, or I would be surprised to see a gentle friend harshly discipline her child. This dance of discovery and the effort for intimacy stands out in my memory.

**Literacy Development as Beyond Khayr**

Following an afternoon lesson, I leave the neighbourhood with two volunteer teachers. Down the main road from our familiar corner of Batn al-Baqara, a cluster of high-rise apartments is under construction. Unlike the uneven edges of Batn al-Baqara's streets with their slouching roofs, these new blocks are several stories high, symmetrical, perched on the plateau overlooking their older neighbours. I ask the young women if this development is considered a part of Batn al-Baqara. Sarah tells me it will be called New Fustat, but it will likely resemble the place we are in. She says that a slum is not a neighbourhood (bi-manti‘a), it is a state of mind (bi-fikr). The other teacher agrees, but is disturbed by her own pessimism: “How can they change if they can’t even live as human beings (banī ādamiyyīn)?” We walk together quietly for some minutes, past the ceramics and pottery vendors that line the road, through a cloud of burning refuse and eventually, as we make our way to the metro station, they begin to talk about the day’s lesson.

In Cairo, ‘ashwā‘iyya, which literally means ‘random,’ refers to a ‘slum’ or ‘informal settlement.’ The word conjures images of poverty, overcrowding, chaos, lack of infrastructure and access to clean water. While I alternate between the two, I find the term ‘informal settlement’ vague in Cairo’s urban context in which much of the city’s living
quarters, not to mention its commerce, transportation and employment, can be deemed ‘informal.’ Marked by their informality and impromptu infrastructure, a variety of settings are commonly referred to as ‘āshwā‘iyy. I understand the slum-place as a product of political and social invention that contributes to the construction of a political category that in turn produces spatial division and excludes citizens from urban participation. National development programs and NGOs that work in informal settlements regard slums and slum residents as abnormal and non-modern. In this way, literacy is a normalizing project that seeks to make the people who live in slums identifiable to the state. The ‘āshwā‘iyyas and the people who live there are the focus of efforts to rebuild the country. I do not use the English term slum-dwellers, a term I generally find to be part of a discourse of objectification that suggests that “dwelling” is a deprived parallel to others that “live.” In Egypt, the terms used to refer to people living in slums are miskīn, (poor), ghalbān (wretched), and often even ummī (illiterate).

Literacy development makes the slums and those who live in them into what Timothy Mitchell calls “objects of development” (2002). The teachers’ remarks that day reveal how volunteers understood their work in the physical space of the slum and the relation between the place and its inhabitants. Sarah’s comment depicts how the slum is inscribed on the body of those that live there. She sympathizes with her students, and works to transform “the slum-mind” as key to revitalizing their space. Mitchell describes how objects of development are conventions for apprehending seemingly natural phenomenon. The object is taken for granted and never questioned, instead objects “are

---

96 Of the city’s 17 million, 11 million, or about 63% live in informal developments built since the 1960s (Sims 91). Sims employs ‘informal’ in his analysis of Cairo’s urban planning, seemingly because the term slum is employed to discuss urban margins in a globalized talk of urban planning that associates Cairo’s informality with vastly different conditions in other major cities of the South.
partly formed by the discourse that describes them. The more natural the object appears, the less obvious this discursive manufacture will be” (210). A person in a slum is a different sort of person and requires a particular sort of pedagogy. Discourses of national development and urban planning reveal how both the space and the people who inhabit informal settlements are elided so that Sarah’s comment—that the slum is more than a place, but a state of mind—is an observation that in fact naturalizes the relationship between the minds of slum residents and their living conditions.

Despite the relative ease of locating the community center from the main road, one volunteer produced a map of the area. We met at a volunteer meeting, and when he learned that I was conducting research in Batn al-Baqara, he was keen to share his map with me. The image he produced was about more than navigating the neighbourhood, but it demonstrated his knowledge of it and his own skill in its creation. The map rendered how he, Sarah and the other volunteer teachers sought to make their efforts legible to themselves and others through recognizable indicators of progress like the ordering of the neighbourhood. At the same time, the map revealed their conception of their roles in Batn al-Baqara to transform minds, bodies and ultimately spaces. The map marks the neighbourhood’s major streets, identifying the gam ‘iyya simply as ‘mosque’ (masjid) in grey in the bottom left corner. Mapping Batn al-Baqara revealed the ways in which volunteers conceived of literacy as a way to make life, to build a neighbourhood by educating its residents. The making of the map showed the prominence of space in the volunteers’ ideas of their undertaking.
Figure 5: Map of Batn al-Baqara produced by volunteers

Literacy development in Cairo’s slums promotes the abilities of reading and writing as the key (muftāh) to developing the mind and individual, with broader aims of developing the spaces they inhabit. The eradication of illiteracy (mahw al-ummiyya), is similar to state (and) media discourses surrounding the eradication of slums. Until recently, Cairo slums have been largely neglected by government policy that privileges rural programs. The country’s Social Fund restricts development activities to rural areas. They explain the direction of resources to villages as a response to the most severe cases of poverty and also argue that urban interventions would accelerate rural to urban migration. Such a policy is not supported by statistics, but appears to be part of a preconceived understanding of “third world poverty,” which contradicts the Egyptian case (Sims 2012, 21). Since the beginning of national literacy programming in the 1950s,
literacy planning has focused on rural and peri-urban parts of the country. 97 The image of the illiterate person was that of the farmer (fallāḥ) in galabiya, residing in a village and working the fields (recall the ASFEC video in the first chapter). Teaching materials taught with the vocabulary of farming implements and livestock. The KIP campaign, however, focuses on urban slums. The KIP curriculum, Make Your Life, reflects the shift from the rural farmer to dense urban living. A shift in vocabulary to words like alley (ḥārra) and streetlight (ishāra) are designed to represent the context of the lives of learners.

The recent turn towards targeting slums in literacy programming is part of a broader national effort to take up of the cause of urban development. The rapid construction of informal settlements in Cairo began in the mid-1960s (Sims 2010, 11). They now house over half of Egypt’s population. The 1992 earthquake caused major damage to informal neighbourhoods and raised the profile of the need to address urban poverty. While Cairo’s slums have expanded over the last thirty years, it was not until 2008 that presidential decree established the Fund for the Development of Slum Neighbourhoods (FDSN). Both the FDSN and the GAAE are similar in their function as government bodies that address “failures” of national planning, one in urban planning and the other of adult education; they each operate as a back-up emergency body for the Ministry of Planning and the Ministry of Education, respectively. In their capacities to produce policy and programming they remain future-oriented in the ways they speak of ‘eradication,’ and plan for the future. For example, a February 2013 newspaper headline in the major daily newspaper Al-Masry Al-Yawm read: “Executive Director of Slum Fund:

97 See Abu Lughod (2005) and Khamis (2004) on literacy among women in rural Egypt, particularly on the literacy instruction as a way to teach state developmentalism.
Egypt without slums by 2017.” Discourses and representations of slums and slum development centre on state security as well as the security of persons in housing susceptible to dangers such as rockslides. With security as the basis for intervention, slum removal programs are couched as benefiting those in the neighbourhoods, as well as being in the service of the greater good of Egyptian urbanites whose own safety is threatened by the existence of unchecked urban squalor.

During my research, some residents of Batn al-Baqara were already relocated to a new desert suburb, Sixth of October City. Within the neighbourhood, debates surrounding these relocations revealed conceptions of development at odds with official policy. It was clear that among the women in the literacy class, they did not see their participation in the campaign influencing their material development. KIP volunteers taught that education promised “real” development, a discourse that echoes trends in international development that downplay economic advancement to highlight dimensions of “social progress,” “freedom” and “security,” as outlined in the UNDP’s human development index. Principles of universalized human development have thus become influential in khayr organizations, such as Life Makers who put their faith in reading and its abilities to change not only the minds of nonliterate people, but the nation itself.

The participation of the poor in their own development is meant to be self-empowering and therefore enduring. It is in this way that literacy development was bound up in notions of self-help. This vision of development calls on the individual to participate and take on a roll that not only improves their condition, but that also molds the subject into a citizen. Barbara Cruikshank argues that self-help serves “as an example

---

98 Egyptian newspapers frequently run stories on the persistent dangers of rock slides, crime and disease slums. In the three years following Mubarak’s, ouster newspapers generally report on the general worsening conditions and failures of bureaucratic endeavours at relocation.
of how the individual citizen is instrumentally linked to ‘society as a whole.’ Moreover, it is a philanthropic technique that is exemplary of modern government; it is both voluntary and coercive” (Cruikshank 1999, 48). As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, voluntarism is a practice of the teachers’ own self-help, where faith development is an opportunity to improve themselves. In a similar commitment to self-help, they teach the nonliterate that they are fundamentally lacking, and that they must be a part of the process of ameliorating their own deficiency. In this way learners are drawn into their self-improvement in a form of khayr that replaces traditional Islamic practices of giving, with the pedagogy of self-help to instruct Muslim citizenship.

International development discourse bares its mark on conceptions and practices of Islamic care for the poor. For example, Ahmed, the Life Makers branch director from the previous chapter explained that traditional methods of giving cannot solve the deep issues facing Egypt. His position captures shifting conceptions of how to care for the poor. A burgeoning body of literature on Islamic charity and philanthropy in Egypt traces the particularities of a culture of giving shaped by national and private institutions as well as Islamic discourses. Among these works, Adam Sabra’s historical examination of poverty and charity in the Mamluk period stresses the significance of the relationships between the giver and the recipient, and how this relationship was both based on and influenced by Islamic conceptions of alms (zakāt). Sabra explains that while on the one hand, the poor were treated with contempt by upper classes, they were also endowed with spiritual merit. By assisting the poor with alms, the upper classes could gain reward.

Mine Ener’s social history of the poor, Managing Egypt’s Poor and the Politics of

---

99 While he uses the word charity, he is careful to explain that the term is Christian and that the Islamic framework called for a different sort of care. The requirement to give alms is an obligation, thus distinct from the Christian concept of karitas (Sabra 2000, 4).
Benevolence, 1800–1952 (2003), is particularly helpful in contemplating the ways that the Egyptian state and emerging social societies regarded, treated and managed the poor during a period of Egyptian modernization. Her close attention to the shifting institutions and agencies is instructive, as she demonstrates how ruling powers and Egyptians at large perceived of and cared for the poor, tracing the vocabularies and ethos of giving and acting for the poor. She observes the ways that religion informed conceptions and practices of care that interacted with the state and modernization efforts and argues that “rational and secular” thought created a shift in the perceptions of the poor. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, amid rising nationalism, religious associations joined government and private efforts to assist the poor. What was once a call of religious obligation was instead replaced with building the nation and cultivating citizenship (98). The post-WWI/1919 Revolution period brought about new charitable and often religious associations. In 1928, both the Muslim Youth Association and the Muslim Brotherhood were founded. These organizations not only responded to increasing need, but were also a part of competition among elites to promote their causes and visions for Egypt. In 1939 King Farouk’s government took control of the expanding and active private associations by establishing the Ministry of Social Affairs. The argument made at the time was that the needs of the people required a “rational and unified” approach, one that has shaped state approaches to caring for the poor and defined social development until the present. The shifting ethical and institutional practices of giving and care for the poor has given rise to new modes of khayr that replace the distribution of goods with principles of human development that are enmeshed in Islamic notions of knowledge and education as virtue. This makes literacy development an ideal form of Islamic faith development. In what
follows, I describe the ways in which literacy was taught as essential to responsible motherhood, and how the women encountered the gendered instruction of Muslima citizenship.

**Responsibility in the Making of Motherhood**

Two posters. The first: A black and white image displayed in an exhibit at the Literacy Museum at ASFEC, in Sirs al-Layyan, Menoufia. The museum is a display of mounted wall placards, photographs, paintings, textbooks and dioramas that tell the story of literacy in the Egypt starting with the establishment of the United Nations and UNESCO. This image comes towards the end of the exhibit, among half a dozen similar black and white posters from a literacy campaign in the late 1950s or early 60s. A woman in a galabiya, the traditional Egyptian everyday dress, with a bandana tied around her hair.

Figure 6: Poster from literacy campaign in the Literacy Museum, Regional Centre for Literacy in Rural Areas for the Arab States (ASFEC), Sirs al-Layyan, Menoufia.

Figure 7: Vodafone media on Knowledge Is Power in Investor magazine.
sits with her son at her side, reading to him. The caption reads: “Ummī laysat ummiyya.” The wording plays on the similarity between the words umm, mother, and ummiyya, illiteracy. The poster reads in modern standard Arabic: My mother is not illiterate.

The second: A brochure for Vodafone’s CSR activities in Egypt. The publication reports on the successes of the company’s social responsibility accomplishments and is distributed to Vodafone investors. A CSR employee gave me the pamphlet on one of my visits with the KIP management team. The publication focuses on KIP. An entire page is dedicated to a woman I recognize from Batn al-Baqara. It is Umm Ahmed, and her son sits on her shoulder as she writes on a whiteboard. The words naḥnu (we), insān (people) among other new vocabulary are in front of her. In colloquial Egyptian, the caption belonging to the image reads: “This woman was able to learn to read and write and now helps her children with their studies.”

The language of the posters is telling. Vodafone’s colloquial “this woman” (as-sitt dī) is distinct from the formal language of the black and white poster, one created at a moment of Gamal Abdel Nasser’s pan-Arabism, when literacy became a national project to promote everyday expression on the one hand, and on the other, to enlist modern standard Arabic as a uniting and culturing force. The posters tell the story of shifting language ideologies of literacy in the Arab world, as well as shifting sponsors and promoters of literacy and its promises. Vodafone’s “this woman” speaks the language of the women themselves, but most importantly speaks the everyday language of Vodafone, employing the vernacular of telephone calls and text messages. KIP literacy seeks to bring the illiterate into a conversation, one of political participation and responsibility, emerging markets and citizenship. The second word in the caption, “‘adrit” (is able to)
refers to the mother’s new ability, which gives the sense of her empowerment through literacy. The woman’s empowering ability to read is part of a major current of gender-based development.

While the black and white poster offers an idealized image of a mother reading her child a story, the Vodafone image supposedly captures a moment of learning. The photograph captures her own lesson, while the caption projects how this lesson will enable her to use this skill for her children. Both images promote literacy through the bonding of mother and child. In the first, it is the voice of the son that proudly narrates that his mother is not shamefully illiterate, while Vodafone’s promotional material is narrated by a third party. In neither case do the captions attempt to capture the voice of the newly literate. Her literacy is instrumental. As I will make clear, the ends of a mother’s empowerment are ambiguous, while her literacy continues to be part of a larger project that makes her development necessary for the progress of the family and nation.

In what follows, I examine the ways that literacy perpetuates the agenda of educating mothers found in modern developmentalist approaches in Egypt, and illustrate the ways in which this articulation of motherhood promotes a particular form of Muslima citizenship, one that bonds maternal responsibility to one’s civic duty.

Literacy perpetuates the agenda of educating mothers found in Egypt since modern developmentalist approaches to national literacy. As Omnia El Shakry observes, “[b]oth secular nationalist and Islamist texts on proper mothering and child rearing identified women as both a ‘locus of backwardness’ and a sphere of transformation essential to the nationalist project” (2007, 174). The teaching of motherhood has been a hallmark of Egyptian nationalism since Nasser’s family planning programs sutured
domestic relations with the “health of a body politic” (Baron 2005). In Laura Bier’s analysis of family planning in Nasserist Egypt, she argues that since the nineteenth century, the family “has been an increasing target of state intervention and reform as notions of modernity, politics, and the emergence of “the social” as a category produced new linkages between domestic relations and the health of the body politic” (2010, 410).

Similar to the goals of family planning, literacy attempts to create modern families by focusing on the woman, and particularly the mother.

The posters depict how the Egyptian family—particularly the relationship between a mother and her son—are not the private domain of domestic life, but rather, the site where the family interfaces with the public sphere. Today’s literacy development centres on mothers to create modern families. In Batn al-Baqara this pedagogy came out in lessons on the proper ways to care for families. Volunteer teachers, usually single and without children of their own, instructed the women on the best ways to raise their children. Amal instructed her class not to spank, and to instead use persuasive language with a gentle tone. Literacy campaigns turn to the mother amid the failure of state institutions to provide education for their children. The mother replaces the state and becomes the salve for the nation’s problems. The children were enrolled in public schools where classes were only a few hours each day, and they often did not attend. Samia explained that they didn’t learn anything there anyway. This meant that the responsibility to watch over children fell to the mothers. Amal encouraged the women to bring their children with them to lessons, so as to avoid any excuse for missing class. The children were a part of the class, as well as a regular distraction and source of frustration for Amal. Self-help directed towards women aims at taking over from the responsibilities of the
state. KIP taught that the best citizens expect little from the state, just as the women had low expectations of their children’s public schools, and for mothers to take on the role of educators themselves. Paradoxically, literacy teaches that the best way to perform citizenship is to not make demands on the state. In this way, the Muslima citizen supports the state by taking over its role in education. The motherhood dimension of the campaign raised the stakes on the moral imperative of literacy: failure was not just a personal matter, but meant the sacrifice of one’s children, and family.

My interest in the cultivation of the literate mother lies in how her literacy is supposed to cultivate intimacy within the family unit through the activity of reading. The mother is not a mere stand-in for the state; by reading to her son, she is involved in the fuller sense of education (ta‘līm) that is associated with upbringing—tarbiyya.100 Recall from the second chapter, Suzanne Mubarak’s unpublished memoir is told through the lens of reading bedtime stories to her grandson. Read Me a Story thus continues the tradition of pedagogical-didactic treatise of tarbiyya, in this case through the intimate genre of memoir and the relationship between a grandmother and her grandson.101 What is more, the memoir was a maternal call on the nation to turn to reading. Suzanne Mubarak was sometimes affectionately referred to in the media as “Mama Suzanne,” such as in her guest appearances on the Arabic Sesame Street (‘Ālam Sīsim), where she promoted the cause of reading. In this way, her literacy advocacy was that of a mother to her children.

100 Timothy Mitchell describes the shift to employing the word tarbiyya to mean education, more generally: The word tartib, meaning such things as ‘arrangement (into ranks), ‘organisation’, ‘discipline’, ‘rule’, ‘regulation’ (hence even ‘government’) was replaced in the field of learning by the like-sounding word tarbiya. Until perhaps the last third of the nineteenth century tarbiya had meant simply ‘to breed’ or ‘to cultivate,’ referring, as in English, to anything that should be helped to grow—the cotton crop, cattle, or the morals of children. It came to mean ‘education,’ the new field of practices developed in the last third of the century. (1988, 88)

A responsible Muslim mother and citizen is formed not through a direct interface between individual and state, but rather, through one’s relations with and obligations to her family. The role of the mother is distinct and given greater emphasis than the literacy of men, who are not taught to be responsible fathers, but rather are taught to be efficient workers, a role I will discuss in the following chapter. The family is unevenly produced within the role of the mother and in the relative absence of the father. Umm Ahmed described the residual problems associated with social programming that targets only women. She explained how literacy classes sometimes put her at odds with her husband. She knew if she tried to save small sums of money, as Amal encouraged, her husband would intervene and spend it as he wished. She was concerned that through their lessons, the women became more “aware” or conscious (waʿā) than the men that resulted in household frictions.

Moving between the homes of women, including both those with husbands and those without, it was clear that the families did not adhere to the ideal forms of the family unit modeled in literacy lessons. Instead, their kinship attachments beyond the family unit, as well as reliance on neighbours, disturbed the roles and responsibilities of the gendered family taught in social development. Two women in Amal’s class raised their children without fathers. Samia was a divorcée, while Umm Hazim was a widow. In each of their homes and within the building they shared with extended relatives, I observed how the lessons on motherhood were ill-suited to the realities of their families and households. Samia was the woman who held the keys to the gamʿiyya. She finished the sixth grade, but, as she put it, she didn’t learn anything there anyways. While her female neighbours and cousins did not work—few of the men had jobs either—Samia was paid a
small sum each month to lock and unlock the front gate between prayers and activities. It was a job she inherited after her husband left her and her two children. Samia was thirty years-old. She moved to Batn al-Baqara from Beni Suief with her family when she was young. Much of her extended family also made the move, and in Batn al-Baqara, several of them lived in the same lane. She lived on the third and top floor of a building that housed one family in a one-room apartment on each floor. Her son had a physical and mental disability. Although he was four years older than his five year-old sister, she defended him and took care of him when he became the target of childrens’ games. Samia explained that there was a special school for him, but that it was useless and not worth the bother of making the long trip to drop him off there. She intimated that her husband was not to be allowed near their children, but that she took them to visit their paternal grandmother who lived nearby. When I returned a year later, Samia had moved to a nearby neighborhood. She married a widower there who also had two children. Her family and neighbours in Batn al-Baqara were happy for her, saying that she had found a good match for her situation and that the children would be better off.

Umm Hazim was Samia’s maternal aunt and lived on the first level of the same building. She had two daughters and two sons ranging in age from her eleven year-old son to her thirty-three year-old daughter. Her husband had died ten years prior, and she lived in her apartment with her only unmarried children, her two sons. In his mid-twenties, the older son, Hazim, sometimes worked with neighbourhood artisans at the kilns. He was usually out whenever I visited, and on the couple of occasions that he arrived home while I was there, he stood at the doorway to talk with me, so as to maintain an appropriate distance where he could be seen by others in the building. One time he
arrived as his mother was preparing tea and joined us. She scooped water out of a plastic barrel into a small metal kettle and pulled out a gas burner on the floor where we sat to place the kettle on it. She poured equal amounts of tea pellets to sugar into two cups, one for myself and one for Rady. He asked me if there were any plans to make literacy classes for men. There were already five classes at the gamʿiya, all for women, and I was not aware of any plans to open any more. I told him that I would mention interest to a Life Makers coordinator. He laughed: “Maybe they think the men are too busy at work.” His pants were stiff with clay from the kilns. Umm Ahmed had told me that the men were having difficulty selling any of their goods.

**Ambivalent Desire**

During my field research I found myself asking: “Why do you want to read?” Some of the responses I heard were taught in the early chapters of literacy curriculum, others could be gleaned from promotional materials, and still others from the ways that illiteracy is stigmatized. The first response I heard came straight out of an old literacy workbook that the women began their studies with that included an image of a sick child: “I want to read so that I can tell if my medication has expired.” Another: “I want to read because I want to read the Quran.” Or: “Because I want to help my children with their homework.” What I did not immediately realize was that by asking this question as an opening I played into the repetitious scripts of motivation echoed throughout the literacy campaign. What is more, our question—Why do you want to read? —not only assumed that people want to read, but it also put their personal desire to do so at the centre of literacy as a national project. I abandoned the assumption of the learners’ desire for literacy, to examine the ways that teachers attempted to produce this desire in their
students. The women remained deeply ambivalent about the good that literacy could produce in their lives—an ambivalence I will elaborate on below—and yet continued, on and off, to put faith in literacy as transformative.

Literacy classes in Batn al-Baqara teach the desire to read as essential to making a better life. Teaching desire is the most frequent trope of not only literacy development, but of a plethora of preachers and self-help coaches that teach reading as integral to self-improvement. In Batn al-Baqara where basic material needs are more tangible and pressing, the teachers’ case is a difficult one to make. Literacy development is therefore an intriguing program for development: it is seldom what is asked for, and yet it is a priority among khayr organizations. Literacy aims not to fulfill the desire of the person to be developed, but rather to teach them how to desire the correct things. It is not only that addressing the material needs, such as garbage removal, access to water and safe housing, is more expensive than running literacy classes; more importantly, it is due to the power of literacy in the imagination of development programmers and its confluence with volunteers eager to serve, that literacy is given such priority. Many of my conversations with experienced state literacy planners and teachers revolved around how the greatest problem for literacy in Egypt is that the nonliterate do not want to read. Yet, the desire to read is taken for granted and widely understood as self-evident. As a new form of khayr, what volunteers distribute is not alms, it is not even the abilities of literacy, but literacy becomes a goal that adheres to hope for literacy’s promises to transform and revitalize life.

Following the revolution, Amr Khaled’s first television program was *Tomorrow Is*
*Better*, a series he described as building optimism for Egypt’s future in a time of worries and fears. In one episode, Khaled visits Batn al-Baqara. He tours the famous kilns of the neighborhood and one-room apartments, and speaks with people on the streets about their daily troubles. Khaled distinguishes the reality of what he sees “from the heart of the slum” with their cinema depictions and other negative stereotypes. Sad music plays as he evokes pity from viewers. He praises the men’s hard work at the kilns and blesses their hands, commending their honourable labour. He says that it is a sin when proper work does not lead to bread at the end of the day. The thirty minute clip is a peak into the life of an ‘*ʻashwā’iyya* that concludes with upbeat scenes in a literacy class, with an assortment of women from various classrooms brought together for the filming. Khaled sits among them, and a teacher writes on the board. He asks: “Why did you want to learn to read?” Some women offer a line, each over top of the other and not a single word of theirs audible. Khaled appears pleased with the scene. He smiles at them and the camera. The clip ends with a message of hope for Batn al-Baqara, particularly through the works of literacy.

For Khaled, the necessity of literacy is transparent and the question that he poses to the women is rhetorical. *Why did you want to learn to read?* He focuses on their desire for literacy, but his assumption of their responses, a crowded room and perhaps a busy itinerary, make it so that the viewer cannot hear any of the responses. For Khaled and the viewers, we are not left wondering why the women wanted to learn to read since the answer is supposedly so obvious that it does not need to be articulated. And if we could hear their responses, especially in front of a camera, they would have been the trained responses of literacy’s promises. I discover that I ask the same question as Khaled. He
and I, and all of the viewers of *Tomorrow Is Better* hear the women’s answer, and it is a rackety-silence.

Despite Khaled’s question, the filming of this scene suggests that what the women want is unimportant. There are a variety of reasons that lead people to literacy classrooms that cannot be articulated as wanting to read. It is not only that the question is coercive, but it is a question out of place, a supposedly straightforward query with much more to it: with the assumption of desire. The untold story of the episode is that this desire to read is the subject of daily lessons that aim to teach the nonliterate why they should become literate. This is the enduring lesson of literacy.

**Producing Desire for Literacy**

It is early morning in late November. Tahrir Square is quiet, although there have been protests against the upcoming SCAF-run parliamentary elections. Among a group of graduate students from Cairo University, I meet Yusry, a longtime literacy teacher who works in Cairo and Mansoura. He is organizing an online campaign to revoke the voting rights of nonliterate citizens. When he senses that his listeners do not support his cause, he explains that he was once illiterate himself. From a village in Upper Egypt, he worked as a fisherman with his father, work that disrupted his schooling. He explains that for years he lived as a “blind man” until he ended up attending a literacy class by chance. His friend’s older sister was a teacher. He describes how the lessons enthralled him; he went on to finish his education from home and then on to post-secondary education in Arabic language at the local university. He says he knows from his own experience that literacy classes are only about the appearance of a class, but they do not get at the problem. “The problem is not learning how to read and write, it is about creating the desire for learning,
creating a passion for knowledge.”

His words were later echoed at an event to recruit KIP volunteers. Noha Saad, Manager of Vodafone’s CSR team and Vodafone Foundation Egypt, explained how KIP came to be, its accomplishments and its challenges along the way. She explained:

We never imagined that our most basic challenge would be to attract illiterates to the initiative. At first we imagined that when we would tell people we have a literacy campaign, any person—I mean it’s very natural to believe—we thought that anyone given the chance to learn—it is self-evident—that he would participate. But the reality was much more difficult. The greatest difficulty is that they feel they must “keep up the costume,” as they say. They do not want to admit their weakness. So, the illiterate person requires a catalyst, requires something to overcome the awkwardness they will feel in their family, with their children, when they go to learn, at the age of thirty and forty, how to read and write. We found the difficulties we faced strange, but they opened our eyes to the experiences and reality of development life in Egypt that we didn’t previously know.

How were learners taught to want to read so that literacy classes were not “only for show” but could create genuine desire for literacy? Literacy teachers attempted to cultivate desire by directing students to envision a better future. In Batn al-Baqara I discovered that desire is often conflicted, silenced and only selectively revealed by women who know what they ought to desire and what they actually want. I turn to a conversation with a woman from the neighbourhood where she articulates what people in the neighbourhood “really want.” I argue that while the women lived in the present, literacy class was an escape from routine life and gave them a space to imagine better futures. Still, after months of classes, they were ambivalent about the sorts of good that literacy could bring to their lives and families.

***

“When you are bored, time can be a burden.”
This is what Amal explains as we walk from the metro station to Batn al-Baqara. She goes on: “But there are things you can do.” She tells me that when she first started teaching the women, she focused on discussing matters of personal development (tanmiyya dhātiyya), and that her goal was to teach culture: “At the beginning they used to ask to focus on the alphabet. But with time, they came to enjoy our discussions. It makes me feel useful.”

She sought to stir their desire to read through lessons and experiments that encouraged reading for Islamic knowledge and helped them to imagine better lives. In one lesson she called ‘Book,’ she described all of the good things that can be found in books and how the women should aspire not only to read books, but to try to collect them. In another, she told the story of the prophet Joseph. As she tried to tell it, the women kept interrupting her to finish her sentence or offer a detail that she missed. Amal admonished them for their additions, saying that those were not details found in the Quran. They all laughed.

“But it is in the film!” Umm Ahmed insisted. Amal scolded them for corrupting the details of the story and used their additions as evidence of the necessity to read: “Only through reading the text yourself will you know the true story.”

One day, Amal refuses to let the children run through the classroom as they normally do and insists they play in the courtyard. She shuts the door. She is excited by her lesson plan. “Close your eyes and listen to me.” This is not the usual sounding out of letters and writing of new words on the board. Some women close their eyes, others put their hands over them. Umm Hazim is the only one who watches Amal. I close my eyes. Amal starts:
You wake up in the morning and wake your children. You review their homework with them as you prepare breakfast. The news is on and you can read the words at the bottom of the screen. You take your children to school and then go to the market. You can read the cost of tomatoes and can count your money. You know how to pay the right amount for everything.

The day, according to Amal, goes on. By the end, she has the women starting up a small microenterprise project and making money of their own. They go to bed tired. Then we are told to open our eyes. I see Umm Hazim grinning at the exercise. This is her third time to register for a literacy class. She knew the sounds of some letters before she began her latest effort. But the others are almost exhilarated. They tell Amal they never thought about these sorts of things, or have these sorts of conversations, until they met her. They remember how at the start they only wanted to learn how to read and write. But here they are now, and they know that they are learning much more. Amal smiles at them and looks at me to make sure I have recorded the value of today's lesson in my notebook. What I write is this: They each imagine that they have become a different woman, but with the same children and the same husband, in the same room where they do their cooking, their sleeping, their gossiping, their visiting. But they have each become a different woman: a woman who can read.

Amal’s visualization attempts to create the desire to read by presenting the women with the vision of their transformed selves. She is teaching a culture of optimism, teaching the women to desire a better life, one that is more clean, with dignity. Through Amal’s visualization, the women momentarily see this new self. This was one of those days when the women put faith in the power of reading to transform their lives. So with thin notebooks and a lot of practice, they could be more supportive mothers, more efficient managers of their home economics, better informed Egyptians who could vote
and participate. Still, they did not see how reading would change their material worlds. Their friends could not sell the small kilims they produced on the gamʿiyā looms. Their husbands could not sell their casting work. Despite flashes of optimism, the women were ambivalent about how literacy would change their lives.

Amal has her own dreams and plans for her future. That day when we return to the metro together, walking past the mechanics who revive the most tired of the city’s taxis, she asks for my feedback on the day’s lesson. I tell her that many of the women seemed excited by the scene she depicted. She takes this as praise and tells me that she wanted to volunteer because she always thought she could be a good teacher. And as we continue to walk, she asks me to teach her English, not just any English, but English for human resources management. She explains to me that this is the most useful training for her as it will assist her administrative work at Life Makers, and eventually improve her chances for finding work. Then her phone rings and she is making plans for a curriculum training meeting.

**What I Really Want**

I was known within the neighbourhood as a researcher (bāḥisa). Residents were accustomed to comers and goers who visited with different NGOs. In my early days, some asked if I was collecting information for the government. At first I worried that this meant they were suspicious of me; however I soon realized that some wanted me to be such a researcher in the hopes that I would report to the government their infrastructural needs. I was told by a couple of women that researchers had come to the neighbourhood before, asking questions about land and water. In a few cases I was mistaken as an NGO
volunteer, most often as a volunteer from an organization that assists residents in home repairs. Sometimes this case of mistaken identity was intentional. In Cairo’s damp winter months, the shifting mud on the street caused problems in some of the buildings’ foundations and the occasional light rain was enough to bring down roofs. During these months I was asked to visit homes and witness the destruction. I told them that the best that I could do is contact the organization that does repairs.

One afternoon I sat on Aya’s couch. She lived around the corner from the gamʿiyya and was a kindergarten teacher there. My conversations with her were more relaxed than with others from the class, since there were no children nearby to be disciplined. At twenty-two, she had spent her whole life in Batn al-Baqara. Three years earlier she married a man from the neighbourhood. They were unable to have a child. “I am taking medication, but still, nothing.”

Our conversation shifts. She tells me that as a long-time resident of Batn al-Baqara she knows well what she and her neighbours really need. She is precise in her descriptions and at some point her tone changes and I know that she wants to tell me so that everything can be recorded, as though it is not enough to state these problems in the darkness of her living room (there were no windows and we sat with no light). She tells me her stories thinking of me as the woman from elsewhere who could maybe change something, despite my effete refrain that I was only a researcher. I knew that it was important—for her to speak and for me to write—as some sort of formalizing conduit. Even if all that I felt I could do was take out my pen to show her that I was listening.

Aya wants an apartment away from Batn al-Baqara. She knows her place is nicer than most, that she has a good roof, a television. On the wall there is a wedding
photograph. She tells me the dimensions of her apartment, about sixteen feet squared. She knows a woman from a part of the neighbourhood that is under a mountain and declared unsafe; residents were relocated three months ago to Sixth of October and her friend hates it. She complains that it is empty, and the apartments are small. There is no market, no life.

“The first problem everyone here will tell you about is the sewage. It is a ditch that fills, and once a month a man comes with a machine to drain it. He takes 150 pounds. Sometimes, when we call because it is filled, he doesn’t come for days. Do you know how we know when it is filled? When it overflows.” She wants me to absorb this, the indignity. “But there are so many things!”

She stops to ask me about my research, who will read what I will write, and as I begin to respond, she moves on to tell me that they need a local oven for affordable bread, since the closest one is expensive. They also need a pharmacy. The cost of marriage is high and it is difficult for women to collect all of the things they need to start a household. Aya says that researchers like me and the people who work at the gamʿiyya are all painkillers: “The problems are deep. We would need to be powerful to do anything.” A neighbour stops by to ask to borrow a pair of jeans. She needs something other than her galabiya to wear for a one day trip to a nearby Red Sea beach. Aya agrees to give her something for the occasion and as she searches, she prompts me to ask her friend what the greatest problem is in Batn al-Baqara. Before I can say anything, the friend responds: “It’s the sewage.” Aya nods at me.

The development projects underway, including literacy, elucidate conflicting ideas about how to create a better life. Amid this complex desire for improvement, there is a
strong sense of ambivalence, not only about how literacy can help, but also about the new housing developments. Through literacy, the transformation of the person becomes the development plan, where the woman in the slum is supposed to develop herself and change her conditions. But the women of Batn al-Baqara tell a different story. They explain how their conditions make it impossible to live. They long to leave, or at least to live in a way that does not diminish their dignity. (“Do you know how we know the tank needs to be emptied? From the smell when it overflows.”) My presence lends legitimacy and significance to literacy. Aya saw me as someone who would represent them to a world that could then respond. But as she knew, there are so many ways to represent ourselves, but we need to wait for the right person, someone with power, to do something.

Conclusions

This chapter probed the implementation of literacy classes in Batn al-Baqara in order to understand the different and sometimes conflicting constellation of expectations of teachers and learners. Literacy teachers and administrators promote literacy as the ultimate key to developing the neighbourhood and improving the lives of the women and their families. The chapter traced how campaign teachers and administrators attempt to cultivate desire for literacy when they encounter ambivalence towards literacy and its promises. They stress the necessity of literacy to cultivate responsible mothers and the Muslima citizen. Instructing women to desire literacy becomes the main objective through lessons that teach the women to imagine and desire literacy as a step towards hygienic, pious and responsible living.

Literacy teachers seek to change the daily habits and desires of those they instruct.
Amal and Sarah and the other volunteers, attempt to introduce a new habit of reading into the learners’ lives, to remake the minds and lives of the women in slums through new desires. Yet, this future-oriented learning finds little traction among women with immediate material needs and even a skepticism of the kinds of change that development workers promote in their neighbourhood. In one math class, Amal encouraged the women to try to save money. The women laughed, so Amal tailored her advice: “Even one or two pounds a week.” They continued to laugh. As Samia said to me: “Tahrir is for people who have time to leave their lives behind but we are needed where we are.” Teaching hope for a better future was often a way to pass time. While it sparked the imagination in one moment, it was dismissed and laughable the next. While Amal seemed to live in Egypt’s better future, the women of Batn al-Baqara live in the stubborn present, but were still willing to experiment with the technologies of literacy as a technique of hope. The hope associated with literacy is about what could lie just ahead, the promises of literacy that are so often just out of reach. Hope erases end points, moments to evaluate success and failure. By the time of my departure, after eighteen months of literacy instruction—three times the official length of study needed to become literate according to national programs—the women varied in their abilities to sound out words independently. Attending literacy classes became part of their lives—not because reading or writing became routine, but because discussing its importance had. The movement from nonliterate to literate is not the end in itself—a movement that is itself not easy to quantify—because literacy’s promises are always greater, just beyond.
Chapter 5
Immediacy and Affirmation: 
*Quran in the Absence of the Muṣḥaf*

In Batn al-Baqara, the women gather for *Quran* on the plastic-weaved floor-mat of the prayer room (*muṣallā*) following the late afternoon prayer (ʿ*Asr*). The sound of birds chirping crescendos and the sun slants through the window. As the lesson moves along, the warm orb departs leaving us together in semi-darkness. For those who attend, Quran lessons punctuate their day and week. The lessons give life its rhythm. When the women say “there is *Quran* after ʿ*asr*” (*fī Qur‘ān baʿd al-ʿasr*) they refer to the variety of activities that take place in that class: the memorization (*ḥifẓ*) of short chapters and verses; attention to proper pronunciation and elocution (*tajwīd*); and instruction in the authoritative interpretations of key words (*sharḥ*). 102 In Egypt, Quran study is typically divided into different classes for each of these modes of learning. Other lessons include the reading of popular exegetical works (*tafsīr*), or advanced lessons in reciting with melody (*maqāmāt*). Lessons can also revolve around a teacher’s *khutba* on a given theme. Quran lessons are ubiquitous across the Muslim world and are a component of the turn to Islamic education, formal and informal, in contemporary *daʿwa* movements. 103 In Batn al-Baqara, the women had been rehearsing these chapters for three years, learning and

---

102 In keeping with the language of the learners, in this chapter, *Quran* refers to the women’s afternoon lessons, and Quran as the common general reference to the Muslim scripture; *muṣḥaf* refers to the physical object of the Quran. While the *muṣḥaf* is the written corpus, I use it here more broadly to refer to written forms of the Quran, such as the inexpensive imprints of individual *juz*’ (portions of the Quran, divided into thirty, or sometimes sixty sections) that widely circulate for reading in burial rituals, and more generally, for easy access. Harold Motzki explains that the post-Quranic term *muṣḥaf* was used to differentiate between “the individual’s copy of the Quran and the hypostatized notion of God’s speech[…] The term stems from the same root as the word *suḥuf*, “pages, books,” which the Quran sometimes uses for documents of superhuman Origin” (463).

103 Saba Mahmood’s study of the women’s mosque movement is the definitive work on women’s mosque lessons in Egypt’s Islamic Revival (2005).
relearning the verses from a local teacher, Maryam. She, along with a few other women and men from the neighbourhood, were trained by a student of the pre-eminent Sunni Islamic institution, al-Azhar, in a project to train teachers in local mosques.

Through the women’s Quran lessons, this chapter elaborates my discussion of theological reading. And yet, *Quran* is not an example of ‘traditional’ reading in contrast with the modern autonomous reading of literacy. Instead, the chapter illustrates how an Islamic modernization project distinct from Khaled and Life Makers—one led by al-Azhar—teaches a different sort of Quranic encounter through local teachers at the *gamʿiyya*. Both critics and proponents of the world’s foremost Sunni Islamic learning institution describe al-Azhar with recourse to the dichotomies of tradition and modernity, decline and renaissance, a coupling that ebbs and flows with the political context and the sometimes tense relations between al-Azhar’s ‘ulama’ and Egypt’s political leaders (Zeghal 2011, 70). The Azhar *daʿwa* project to extend Quran lessons widely at once disciplines “local Quran practices” (through authorized traditional interpreters, particularly those who have become increasingly common references, such as Ibn Kathir and al-Tabari) while also teaching the recitational arts. Thus, by ‘reading’ literacy classes and *Quran* side-by-side, I am not setting up a comparison between reformist reading and an authentic pre-literacy mode of Quranic encounter. Instead, both classes offer distinct approaches to Quran reading as a site of religious renewal, albeit with the diverging and overlapping reading disciplines that this chapter details.

---

104 Al-Azhar plays a major role in religious, intellectual and political life in Egypt. In addition to the mosque and university, over two million students attend their schools through the Azhar institutes (*maʿāhid azhariyya*). Since the 1990s the scholarship on the internal workings of al-Azhar and its international influence depict the institution as a mediator of state-sanctioned Islam, and yet also as a place of intellectual diversity. For a general overview of the history and social transformation of the institution, see Dodge (1961) and Inan (1958). On educational reform in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Ali (1974). For a socio-historical and sociological study of twentieth century Azhar, see Eccel (1984) and Zeghal (1996, 2009).
My participation in *Quran* helped me understand how one of the most pervasive reasons given for participation in literacy—to access the Quran—did not transfer to *Quran*. By invoking the Quran to explain their participation in literacy, not only did the women offer a pious response, but they also subscribed to the idea of modern reading, with its associated modes of reasoning and reflection, as the correct and desirable form of Quran reading. Still, rather than embrace the technologies of literacy to enable an autonomous reading of the Quran, the women read in the absence of the *mushaf*, in a practice that invests in the immediacy of the text, emotion, and meaning, as well as the affirmation of revelation by reflecting on Quranic teachings into their lives. While literacy teachers sought to make faith legible through the material effects of literacy—to transform the minds, bodies and neighbourhoods of learners—*Quran* worked in a different register, one where materiality was not only redundant, but a barrier. As this chapter depicts, while the women of Batn al-Baqara venerate the material object, the *mushaf*, in the context of *Quran* it was superfluous to the Recitation. This was not only because the women still hesitated to decipher texts, but rather because their Quran practices were based on understandings of how the Quran ought to be rehearsed and discussed that were not dependent on literacy skills. Although *Quran* is not explicitly opposed to textual reading practices, the distinction the women made between the reading regimes of literacy and *Quran* reveal how ritual orality, as well as collective reasoning, are given preference to the autonomy of literacy in the context of Quran education. While both classes taught that the effects of reading are transformative and can re-form the body, in *Quran*, the goal was indeed to embody the Quran itself. And yet, there was a strong tension regarding what it meant to embody the Revelation, and how this
embodiment was to form one’s life.

When I explained to Samia that I wanted to study Quran reading, she balked. “How can you write about Quran? You would need a machine to read what is happening inside us.” She understood my ethnographic object to be an interior process, that Quran reading is something that happens inside the body. For Samia, it was not that this endeavor was undoable, but that this knowledge was only knowable to an omniscient God, or perhaps a fantastical machine. At the same time, her description of Quran as internal skirted aspects of the lessons that left their impression on me—like the sorts of conversations interwoven within the lessons about mundane negotiations in life prompted by their discussion of a verse’s authorized meaning in Maryam’s explanations. The women negotiated the verses they practiced into how they reflected upon their lives; still, Samia conceived of reading as a practice that could not be traced. While she did not trust her own words to describe experiences of Quran, she discussed her life in relation to the Quran regularly. Yet, while she understood Quran to be internal, the lessons worked on the person in ways that ought to be recognizable in public and legibly mark the women within their community.

Affirmation is a mode of reasoning as well as a Quranic command. In the collective practices of Quran, the women relate verses to their lives as they focus on key terms made tangible through their experiences. The role of debate and discourse is a characteristic of Islamic education and broader modes of social reasoning (Bowen 1993, Mottahedeh 1985, Asad’s broader formulation of a ‘discursive tradition’ 1986). However, the women’s discussion of verses is a distinctive reckoning with the verses that is not about difference and debate, but rather, brings the verses into relation with their
experience that affirms beliefs about the Quran’s veracity, its *ḥaqq*. One way to understand affirmation as central to the women’s practice and as a response to the Quran’s own self-perception is by looking to an oft-repeated chapter that they studied together, The Declining Day (*Al-ʿAṣr*, 103). Made up of only a few short verses, the chapter commands readers to affirm truth and encourage good actions: “urge one another to the truth (*ḥaqq*) and urge one another to steadfastness (*ṣabr*)” (*‘illā al-ladhīna ʿāmanū wa ʿamilū a-ṣâliḥāt wa tawāṣaw bi-l- ḥaqq wa tawāṣaw bi-l-ṣabr*). The verses are among the first that Muslims internalize at a young age and the message is central to the practices of *Quran* as a site for such ‘urging to truth.’

The women’s Quran practices indicate how the language of *proximity* that literacy activists employ to promote a relationship between the reader and the Quran does not displace the immediacy of recitation, where the mediating technology is the body itself. The women’s particular forms of Quran practice eschew the technologization of religious experience that are a major part of Islamic reform, through mediums such as cassette tapes (Eisenlohr 2009 and Hirschkind 2006), television (Moll 2010, Öncü 2006), and digital media (Campbell 2010, Bunt 2003). Instead, the reading practices give the women a sense of direct encounter with God’s Word. Rather than embrace media technologies to facilitate or enhance their approach to the Quran, the women recite in the absence of the *muṣḥaf* in order to experience the Quran directly. They do not employ the technology of literacy to enable a modern reading of the Quran, since they experience Quran on their body and not on the page.

---

105 On religion, media and mediation, see de Vries and Weber (2001) de Vries and Sullivan (2006), Meyer and Moors (2006). Emilio Spadola (2013) examines how Sufi rituals of saint veneration and curing practices are modernized and technologized for a new staging of traditional practices. He demonstrates how mass-mediated videos of these performances call to a modern Moroccan community.
The place of the Quran in their lives recalls Matthew Engelke’s description of the Zimbabwean Friday Apostolics (2007) and their textual ideology that not only dismisses the Bible in its material form, but rigorously disputes the use of the material Bible in toto. In this regard, the Friday Apostolics position is further entrenched than the women in Batn al-Baqara. The Apostolics renounce the material Bible in preference of a ‘live and direct’ experience of the Word. They maintain that the textual encounter impedes one’s relation to God, while the oral one enhances it. As Engelke observes, the Bible is present in the absence of its material manifestation. As I will illustrate, *Quran* made little use of the *muṣḥaf*, and yet they did not describe this as “the proper” way to encounter God’s revelation, as did the Apostolics. This arrangement was not worked out as part of a defined textual ideology, but rather, it was what emerged from their practices in *Quran*. The argument I make about the materiality of the Quran as redundant is specific to the women’s Quran reading practice.

To this end, this chapter explores how authorized meaning is not *created* through discourse, but rather, is affirmed through it. I avoid a precise cognitive description or definition of understanding. As I will demonstrate, the felicity of the practice is measured in its mimetic reproduction of sound, and the discussion of key terms, at the centre of the *tafsīr* tradition. The disciplines of their practice are text-centered, in that they follow the rules of *tajwīd* as well as the authorized meanings of classical interpreters that are a part of Maryam’s lessons. Meaning is not something to be created by an agentive reader. The ritual text-practices give agency to the text over the reader, where the reader must subject themselves to the forms and rules of the text. To ask about understanding in this context is to ascribe meaning to ritual and assume a sincerity of action that is not involved in their
practices.

The women’s Quran practices reveal *qirā’a* as recitation and proclamation, not autonomous reading. I thus bring together the interrelated notions and practices of immediacy and affirmation that emerge from the women’s Qur'anic reading regime as a mode of Islamic reasoning distinct from Khaled’s reformation project. The chapter begins with a description of *Quran* in Batn al-Baqara that opens up an analysis of the mediation of God’s Word in a text-centered lesson that focuses on the isolation of words to learn their proper pronunciation and meanings. I then describe an episode of mispronunciation that depicts the limits of meaning in their disciplinary practices, underlining divergent notions of the implications of a word’s correct pronunciation. As a point of comparison, in the third section I describe a nearby lesson that sheds light on the notions of textual authority within Batn al-Baqara’s *gamʿiyya*. In the final section, I draw literacy and *Quran* into conversation in order to sketch how distinctive reading regimes situate the pious embodied reader within the world (*dunyā*) and in relation to the afterlife (*ākhīra*).

**What is the Meaning of “Small Kindesses”?**

In Cairo, mosques of all sizes offer Quran programs for men and women. Some mosques with more advanced programs, like Masjid al-Noor and Masjid al-Hosary, have daily programs of varying levels that include group classes and private lessons. The Azhar project to train teachers in small prayer spaces diffused al-Azhar’s program of Quran learning throughout the country in contexts in which other avenues for Quran learning might include mosque lessons offered by local teachers, private lessons in homes, and the historically significant *kuttāb*. The *kuttāb* was the earliest stage of schooling primarily made up of learning the Quran through memorization, dictation and
writing. Other subjects included learning the basic beliefs of Islam. Primary schooling replaced the significance of the *kuttāb* in early education, however, the state revived *kuttābs* in the 1980s as a way to encourage particular types of Islamic education (Starrett 1998). At the same time, the state began to sponsor some of the world’s most important Quran recitation competitions, drawing participants from across the world. The Quran recitation competition formalized the aesthetic appreciation and celebration of Quran recitation in Egypt. Competitions discipline the performances and modes of appreciation deemed appropriate for listening and responding to recitations.106

In 2009 Maryam was one of only a few of the women in Batn al-Baqara to train with Shaykh Omar from al-Azhar. She told me that before she became a teacher, she was just like the other women, “with very little knowledge.” One of the reasons she expected she was selected is that she is able to read the thin teaching manual that includes the chapters of the final section of the Quran along with selections from favoured *tafsīrs*. In Maryam’s lessons the women were not learning the Quran to master it or perform it publicly. They worked on the last of the Quran’s thirty parts, *guzʿ ʻamma*, particularly the final and shortest chapters. While most Muslims do not memorize the Quran in its entirety, it is often a goal to memorize the thirtieth part, also known as the Seal of the Quran (*khatm al-Qurʿān*). Maryam led her neighbours in their effort to memorize and revise these verses, depicting the Day of Judgment, the basic tenets of faith, and the attributes of God.107 In teaching these verses, she also taught the women to perform their

---

106 I am indebted to Ustaz Ahmed, a prominent teacher of Quran *maqamāt* in Egypt, who shared with me his concerns for the increasing control of Quran recitation by Muslim neo-traditionalists. The month I spent in his salon observing him and his students will be the subject of a future work.

107 In Michael Sells’ translation and commentary on these final chapters, he states: “The early Meccan passages draw the hearer into a world of elemental transformations. Rather than limiting themselves to describing a future event (promise and threat), these passages make present the event in...
daily prayers. Typically, the group finished a chapter of five or six verses every two weeks. Sometimes, Maryam instructed us to return to a chapter we had learned the previous week for review; this often led to returning fully to a chapter previously covered. After a few weeks of lessons, it became clear to me that this is how the previous years of instruction had proceeded, with the learning and relearning of the same chapters.

Maryam was in her mid-twenties and wore a long loose headscarf that reached her waist, unlike the others who wore galabiyas and tied brightly coloured scarves around their heads. Her two advanced students who sometimes remained after class to work on longer chapters also distinguished themselves with more conservative dress, one in a similar long hijāb and the other with a face-veil (niqāb). Maryam was serious about her responsibilities to the class and only missed lessons only under dire circumstances. One of her children, her two year-old son, Yasin, was sick for a prolonged period. She brought him to class but worried aloud about him and took advice from the older mothers on how to treat the scab on his nose that developed into a wound. She herself suffered from a kidney disease that went untreated. She complained that the cost of medications was taxing and began to bring cotton clothing to class to sell to the women as a business to cover medical costs.

During my fieldwork, her husband was in a serious motorcycle accident that left him bedridden for weeks. During the days she stayed home to tend to him, Badariyya warned me to stop enquiring about his health, since it would be perceived as improper. While Quran was a place where the women spoke frankly about their home lives, there were limitations I learned to navigate. The stories they told were circumscribed by the question. At the key point in the text, the language opens up around a semantic abyss. The event takes on immediacy. It is this immediacy that accounts for such diverse reactions […]” (27, my emphasis)
sorts of behaviors they thought ought to be informed by the Quran. Their stories were not chatter, or even the sharing of confidences; they were reflections on the lessons themselves.

After the late afternoon prayer the women gather in the muṣallā. Maryam arrives with Yasin on her hip, and in her free hand she carries a plastic bag that holds the notebook that she uses to mark attendance and track the progress of each woman. There is also a well worn booklet, a teacher’s manual that includes the verses with their full markings for proper recitation and in an expanded margin, the description of key words that she stresses to teach the meanings of the text. These manuals have a long history in the Islamic tradition and are the product of long-accepted techniques of recitation consolidated in the eleventh century that continue to circulate among learners of all levels (Denny 1988). Other than Maryam who carries her teacher’s guide, only one or two of her advanced students carries with them and makes occasional reference to the thin booklets of the final short chapters of the Quran.

Although the presence of the Quranic text was minimal in the gamʿiyya, the material practices of protecting it did not differ from the widespread Muslim reverence for the Quran in its material form. Egyptian mosques and muṣallās usually have a shelf of mushafs and booklets of supplications. These copies are kept clean, nothing is put on top of them and they are never put on the floor. When someone picks up a mushaf, they often kiss the cover. One day I noticed that an old desk drawer was lodged in a window ledge. In it were two mushafs and a couple of supplications booklets, as well as loose sheets of supplications. Although the books seemed to be worn and somewhat haphazardly added
to the space, the attention to the placement of the books in the drawer far above the floor where they could be sullied, demonstrated the effort put into protecting the *muṣḥaf*.

Maryam’s lessons gather between ten to twenty women, many of whom I knew from the literacy class. Women trickle in and she scolds them for poor punctuality. They laugh and make excuses about the laundry that needed washing and the stuffed vegetables that needed rolling for dinner. After an opening invocation (*duʿā*) to bless the lesson, Maryam reviews the last chapter from two days ago to ensure that we have not forgotten it. After the group completes reciting it to her satisfaction, she asks: “What is *kawthar*?” She prods us to recall the conversation from the last day about God’s abundance, *kawthar*, the bounty that is described as a river that will flow through paradise. A woman breastfeeds. Her child later climbs off of her lap to join the other children playing in the courtyard. We sit more or less in a circle. Maryam recites a verse and the group recites after her. We do this three times. She adds another verse. We repeat it three times. She adds two verses together and we repeat after her with the two verses. Children scream in the courtyard, but the women are focused. Badariyya, whom I know well from literacy, is almost unrecognizable, her face completely relaxed, solemn, focused, as she recites the verses. Even when she concentrates on sounding out a word in literacy class, she never looks like this. She hesitates at one point and tentatively tries out a word to see if it is correct.

When Maryam detects an error among us, she has all of us repeat the verse again together. When we falter in our pronunciation, she instructs us on where the sound should be produced in our mouths. Like Amal in literacy, she guides us on how to hold our tongues. Samia rushes through the words in an effort to see if she has actually committed
them to memory. She forgets to press the words out of her mouth in the way Maryam stressed only a couple of days ago. She laughs at herself when she stumbles, but she is frustrated. When a friend of hers walks in and sits down to chat with another woman, Samia becomes distracted. She moves closer to the teacher and tries to take in Maryam’s instruction to get past the place she continues to fumble.

At some point, Maryam is satisfied or exhausted of this chapter and begins the next, al-Maʿūn, Common Kindnesses. It is a familiar chapter, a short one that describes some of the characteristics of people who do not believe in Final Judgment.

\begin{verbatim}
bi-smillāh ar-rahmān ar-rahīm
'ara' aytā al-ladhī yukadhdhibu bi-l-dīn
fādhālika al-ladhī yadū 'a al-yatīm
wa lā yahuddu 'alā tāʾām al-miskīn
fāwaylun li-l-muṣallīn
al-ladhīna hum 'an ṣalātihim sāhūn
al-ladhīna hum yurā 'īn
wa yamna 'īna al-māʿūn
\end{verbatim}

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy
Have you considered the person who denies the Judgement?  It is he who pushes aside the orphan and does not urge others to feed the needy. So woe to those who pray but are heedless of their prayer; those who are all show and forbid common kindnesses (al māʿūn)

The words flow easily from the women today. Maryam explains that there is a valley in Hell for those who are heedless (sāhūn) in prayer. She explains multiple meanings of heedlessness in the interpretive tradition: those who are not regular or punctual in their daily prayers; those who pray to be seen, but do not maintain focus; those who are insincere. She stresses the problem of not maintaining regular prayers. The women joke about how they do not observe their five daily prayers. One shares that she usually prays
them all together in the evening, instead of at their appointed times. Maryam relates how she herself gets busy with the chores and children and often does this. Another woman, Malak, joins in: “Today, when I woke for Fajr (the early morning prayer) I was happy with myself. But I knew it was the Devil (shayṭān) who was making me pleased with myself, and I know that that’s wrong. The Devil comes to me to spoil even the good things I do.” Maryam takes the example to teach how we must dedicate our actions to God. She offers herself as an example and explains that if she comes to teach the Quran for the sake of the women who want to learn, then she has the wrong intentions. She reminds herself in front of us that she is here for God’s sake, to teach His Holy Book. Her comment on intention echoed Life Makers’ volunteers. In fact, the most striking resonance across literacy and Quran with regard to teaching was the attention given to correct intentions. Both Amal and Maryam saw themselves as responsible to God for the women’s education.

Maryam continues with her lesson: “And what are māʿūn?” When no one responds, she explains: “Māʿūn are the little things we do for each other, so small we don’t notice them, but when we aren’t aware, we think they are big. We are so far away from God in our bad habits and neglect that we can’t even do the very smallest thing for our neighbour.” The women discuss the simple gestures they can do for each other to make life easier and complain about the lack of small kindnesses that people in the neighbourhood seem willing to give. Aya who lives in a first-floor apartment beside a tuck shop has no space to hang her family’s wet laundry and complains that her upstairs neighbour refuses to let her use their clothesline. The others agree that this would be an easy thing to allow one’s neighbour to do. Others join in: one is agitated because her
cousin had been quick to strike her child. Maryam reins in the conversation: “So, what is māʿūn?” She calls on Umm Ahmed, who answers: “Māʿūn are the small kindnesses we forget to do for each other.” Maryam is satisfied and continues.

**Meaning through Mediation**

The meanings that emerge from *Quran* are related to the women’s practices there. While the women affirm classical interpretations, these conversations are contingent on how they bring their own experiences into conversation with the reality of the verses and their meanings that they are taught. My examination of ritual reading and embodiment in *Quran* builds on studies that probe the affects of aesthetic and bodily practices of Quran recitation (Gade 2004, Nelson 1985, Denny 1980a, 1980b) and longstanding debates on memorization and understanding in the anthropology of Islamic education (Baker 1993, Eickelman 1988, Hirschkind 2006, Zaman and Hefner 2007). While arguments for affective understanding are helpful in broadening our analysis of modes of reasoning, they continue to invest in a framework that associates practice with meaning. By bringing together work on the interpretive practices of Quran recitation with theoretical insights from the social life of the Bible (Bielo 2009, Crapanzano 2010, Engelke 2007, 2013, Harding 2010, Keller 2005), this chapter argues that the immediacy of the Quran in the women’s lives intertwines with their conception of its meaning. The anthropology of Christianity's theorization of the failure to create meaning through religious experience (Engelke and Tomlinson 2006) is instructive for ethnographic renderings of Muslim practice. Probing the “limits of meaning” takes approaches to discipline and power (Asad 1993, 2003, Foucault 1978) to be not at odds with meaning (Geertz 1979), but rather, as complimentary. Discussions in *Quran* do not give rise to an exploratory creation of
meaning, but rather respond to authorized interpretations in which the women are instructed that are then marshalled to reflect daily life. Like their recitation, their discussion affirms the truth of the Quran. Recourse to meaning in *Quran* informs broader questions that undergird my investigation of Islamic literacy development that probe what is at stake in the cultivation of autonomous reading on religious subjectivities.

In *Quran*, the women understand the text to be working on them—or in their own language, inside (*guwa*) of them. The distinction between the agency of the reader and the agency of the text is a significant one. Rather than locating interpretation as the act of a reader on the text, the women are acted upon by the text. The women’s affirmation, as seen in their conversation identifying small kindnesses in their lives, depicts their dialogic relationship with the Quran; their discussions are responses to the meanings established by religious authorities that they locate in their lives. While discussion was a central part of *Quran*, it was not a formal dimension of Maryam’s instruction. The time the women spent relating the Quran to their lives emerged from the process of their study. These discussions do not arise from Maryam’s study guide, but instead are part of the texture of what emerges from their discussions, and perhaps unintentionally, from al-Azhar’s effort to localize Quran instruction. Following the discussion of small kindnesses, Maryam returns to the authorized meaning of *māʿūn*, in search for the standardized answer she gave prior to the discussion. Still, tangential discussions do more than veer away from the lesson’s goal; they are essential to the women’s practices of reasoning. *Quran* was not a practice to discover truth, but rather to have the truth of the Recitation affirmed. This aspect of *Quran* is similar to what Michael Lambek describes as ‘certain knowledge’ in his observations on Quran recitation in Mayotte: “Correct
recitation creates changes in moral states. Beyond this, the meaning is always the power, certainty, truth, the reality of Islam itself, of which the recitation is an exemplification and an affirmation rather than a description” (1990, 27). Experience affirms the Recitation. The meanings as authorized by al-Azhar’s favoured interpreters are taken as axiomatic; the women’s experiences are thus read as affirmations of these standardized readings.

In their lessons, the women grappled with sound as part of their interpretive exercises. At the same time, they stressed the meanings of words and these meanings were a part of critical discussions. The lessons were thus comprehensive in their attention to sound and the meanings of key words. The ways in which the lessons bring together attention to sound, with authorized interpretations and explanations of verses sheds light on the women’s conceptions of meaning. The relationship between the Quran’s aesthetic performance with cognition and understanding animates lively discussion of Islamic education. In Dale Eickelman’s *The Art of Memory* (1978) memorization is indicative of the trope of a Muslim lack of understanding in traditional pedagogical methods that privilege memorization over understanding.

Former students emphasized that throughout the long process of memorizing the Quran they asked no questions concerning the meaning of verse, even among themselves, nor did it occur to them to do so. Their sole activity was memorizing proper Quranic recitation. It should be kept in mind that the grammar and vocabulary of the Quran are not immediately accessible to speakers of colloquial Arabic and are even less so to students from Berber-speaking regions. Former students readily admitted that they did not comprehend what they were memorizing until fairly late in their studies (cf. Waterbury 1972: 32). ‘Understanding’ (*fahm*) in the context of such concepts of learning was not measured by any ability explicitly to 'explain' particular verses. Explicit explanation was considered a science in itself to be acquired only through years in the advanced study of exegetical literature (*tafsīr*). An informal attempt to explain meaning was considered blasphemy and simply did not occur.
Similarly, Clifford Geertz describes the daily practice of “solat-ummat” as a “droning chant” (1960, 220). To address this singular understanding of understanding, James Baker who also works in Indonesia differentiates between “apprehension” and “comprehension” (1993). In contrast, Anna Gade’s approach to understanding centres on the embodied practices of recitation where the sense of piety that comes with correct and skillful execution cultivates self-understanding through practice—an affective understanding that focuses on the self rather than the text (2004, 42). The turn to the embodiment of ethical dispositions in the anthropology of Islam elaborates the interconnection of the senses with the cultivation of piety. For example, facility in *tajwīd* indicates a certain level of Muslim piety. Gade describes how the recitational arts of *tajwīd*, meaning “to be correct” or “to improve” is a way of explaining how the practice is meant to cultivate the individual through its mastery (2002, 373). In this understanding, *tajwīd* is not a mere ritual of perfected sound. For Gade, the practice of making correct sound is the embodied effort to cultivate piety. Similarly, while recitation is associated with the voicing of an ethical body, Charles Hirschkind describes listening as an ethical performance. He describes how “hearing with the heart” creates the conditions for what he refers to (in scare quotes) as “understanding” (2001, 624). It is this rendering of “understanding” that I refer to as the meaning and significance of the performance to the reader. Gade and Hirschkind’s interventions productively expand our notion of what meaning and understanding entails. At the same time, the women’s attention to key words, such as *kawthar* and *māʿun* indicate an attention to meaning not only through ethical practices of recitation and listening, but that are crucially formed by discussions of meaning in
relation to their lived experiences. In other words, while the body is central to their practice, this is not to the exclusion of the discursive practice of affirmation.

In *Quran*, the disciplines of recitation and memorization imprint God’s Word on the body rather than the page. While KIP and similar Islamically-sponsored literacy programs describe the ability to read as a way to understand and create closer proximity to the Quran, the women in Batn al-Baqara do not define themselves in relation to the Quran in terms of proximity. The language of closeness, barriers and proximity implies a separation between the person and the text, a separation that their specific reading practices do not recognize. While Khaled’s hermeneutic situates the text as a mediating object between the reader and the truth of the Quran (and is himself a mediator for the Quran’s meaning to his audience), for the women the material form of the text does not intervene in their recitations. While the text-object is of significant symbolic value, it is mediated through the body in its performance, as well as its discussion among a community of reciters.

While facets of Islamic education guide one’s comportment and daily actions, those lessons are typically found in the study of hadith, and shari’a, whereas Quran education is less about the details of Muslim conduct, and more about cultivating an awareness of God’s message. *Quran* emphasizes recitation as an essential component of the women’s prayer, and is also itself a form of worship. And yet their lessons remain distinct from the regulatory principles of shari’a. While the women learn of fatwas and other discussions of permissibility and impermissibility (*ḥalāl* and *ḥarām*) in conversations, on television and in other ways, jurisprudential matters of correct conduct are beyond the scope of their Quran lessons. Thus, in ways that are similar to Khaled’s
reformist reading project, the Quran lessons of the *gamʿiyya* teach the Quran to be a central reference point leading one’s life.

The practices of Islamic theological reading that I explained in the first chapter are a part of rituals central to *Quran*. While not obligatory, Quran lessons are a significant and central practice of Muslim communal life in Batn al-Baqara. The verses they memorize are supposed to be used in prayer, which further entrenches *Quran* as a site of ritual education. There, women are both schooled in ritual through basic instruction in how to perform *ṣalāt*, and practice a ritualized reading. In the following section I examine the (prescribed) connection between Quran lessons and the performance of prayer through a story of mispronunciation that reveals a divergence between Maryam and her students’ conceptions of embodied meaning. The episode reveals differing conceptions over whether a word’s meaning is attached to its sound, or to an understanding of that word’s meaning.

**The Case of an Improper “T”: A Story of Mispronunciation**

At the end of the lesson, Maryam calls on each woman to recite the day’s verses and she evaluates them. When a woman can successfully complete the recitation without Maryam’s prompting or corrections, she can leave. Each lesson is measured in this final recitation and recorded in Maryam’s notebook. The women argue over who will recite first and be among the early ones to leave. “My husband will be waiting. I still have food to prepare.” Sometimes they smile at their own petulance.

Today Maryam returned to the most repeated chapter of the Quran, The Opening (*al-Fātiha*). The chapter is seven verses in length and is the most repeated of all chapters.
because of its central place as the obligatory recitation of each prayer cycle (rakʿa) in a prayer. Samia and I are the last to leave. It is always Samia at the end, because she holds the key to the padlock on the wooden door of the women’s section. She is reciting the verses, but Maryam is distracted and not listening. Maryam says she realizes she made a mistake in the lesson, that she taught us to say “al-ṣīrāṭ,” meaning path or way, with a ‘t’ and not a ‘ṭ’. The incorrect letter changes the meaning of the word—it renders it as nonsense. I tell her that when she taught the phrase “ṣīrāṭ al-mustaqīm,” she cautioned us that the word “mustaqīm” was with the lighter ‘t’ and not the thicker ‘ṭ’; I show her the text and tell her she is fine, that there was no error. But she is bothered and insists that she should have made the correction on ṣīrāṭ as well.

Maryam: “If they learn it incorrectly because of me, I receive a sin for each time it is recited this way.”

Samia tries to reassure her: “Just tell them at the next lesson.”

Maryam: “It will be too late, they will be praying for days incorrectly.”

Samia: “None of the women pray anyway. They will not recite the chapter before our next class.”

She went on to name the ones who do, but Maryam was too focused on the error to follow up on this immediately. I laugh and ask how Samia knows. “I am the one with the keys. I know when they come and go. And when we’re in our homes, I see who moves to pray when it is time.” She names only three, the elderly women who attend the lessons.

But Maryam is certain of her responsibility, the graveness of the error she has made. She finally smiles at Samia’s identification of the women who pray and suggests
that we go to the homes of each of the women to make the correction. So we go to the front door of each of the buildings where the students live. They are surprised to see the three of us still together, but when Maryam asks them to recite the chapter, they do as they are asked. She makes sure that when they say šīrāt, they say it with the correct ‘ṭ’ sound. They do not appear to be bothered by the difference between the correct pronunciation and the incorrect one that Maryam stresses for them. After visiting half a dozen buildings and listening to the women recite the verses again, Maryam seems temporarily satisfied with the day’s solution and carries on along the path to her home. Samia returns back to the gamʿiyya to make sure she locked the gate.

What is at stake in a pronunciation mistake? Maryam believes that the incorrect pronunciation will nullify the women’s prayers and bring punishment down on her for her role in the inaccuracy. She understands her role as teacher extending beyond the class and into the women’s daily prayers. While a mispronounced T not only disrupts the sacred sound, and also alters the meaning, Maryam’s concern is that of pronunciation and how the error will be multiplied through prayer. She is so troubled by the mistake that even when she learns that they do not pray beyond the prayers that they perform together in the muṣallā, she is still focused on correcting the error. The episode reveals Maryam’s pedagogical priorities: Quran is about making the Quran properly performable. This is the sort of embodiment of the text at work in Quran. It is a different sort of discipline than the disciplining practices that Mahmood describes among women seeking to cultivate the desire to pray (2001, 2005). Mahmood illustrates how the desire to pray is not natural, but instead “must be created through a set of disciplinary acts,” by repeatedly
orienting one’s actions towards God” (2001, 832). Mahmood’s interlocutors (like Life Makers teachers who speak of intentionally directing their voluntarism to God) are indicative of a piety that expresses a desire for sincerity and coherence. Maryam’s Quran lesson in Batn al-Baqara indicates a different approach to the disciplines of Quran and as a site to teach the basics of ritual prayer. Maryam’s priorities reveal the text-centeredness of Quran, the necessity of precision in how the text’s sound is embodied, however she does not conceive of this embodiment as the internalization of the Quran’s meaning. The embodiment of the Quran does not mean that the women will perform their obligatory prayers, only that they are taught its correct performance. Maryam is anxious about the nullification of their prayer. She did not admonish or encourage them to pray as she stood on their doorstep. Maryam is less focused on the embodiment of virtue and corporeal understanding, and more attuned to the precision of the ritual itself because of her responsibility as their teacher. In this way, she had a different sense of what intention is than her students. For Maryam, intention was tied up in action—to correctly perform her role as a teacher, whereas for her students, they intended the correct meaning of the word, even if there was a slip of a letter. These different conceptions of intention have affect on the purpose and meaning of ritual and recitation.

The discipline of sacred sound that Maryam teaches is not taken up by her students. The women were not troubled by the substitution of a letter. While their literacy teacher, Amal, also stressed the differences between similar sounding letters, in literacy the error did not have the same significance as the attention to the sacred sound in Quran. The women’s commitment to Quran does not lead them to pray regularly and is a reminder of inconsistency. The women’s Quran reading is about more than the
embodiment of virtues. In the case of Quran in Batn al-Baqara, the goal appears to be to embody the text itself. To interpret the women’s lessons through the lens of ‘understanding,’ even an affective understanding, would be to submit them to a sincere interpretation of their actions, one in search of a coherent narrative of ritual and piety.

Together, these scenes from Quran bring to light conceptions of the sacred text as lived, adapted, rehearsed, forgotten and neglected. While the first example from the women’s Quran lesson highlights the interpretive practice of affirmation through their discussion of authorized meanings by listening attentively to the sharḥ and relating key terms to their own experiences, the incident of the improper T demonstrates how Quran is a significant ritual in itself and not only for how it inculcates specific virtues or fosters desire for prayer.

**Authority of the Text**

Badariyya worried that I was not learning what I needed to learn about Quran education by spending time in Batn al-Baqara. She and her mother, Umm Hazim, advised me to go to Amr ibn al As mosque to attend the lessons there. They referred to the historical landmark with familiarity as Gāmiʿ ‘Amr. About a fifteen minute walk from their own gamʿiyya, Amr ibn al As is the oldest mosque in the country, adjacent to several important historical Coptic sites. Few international tourists wander past the churches to the large complex. The mosque is most famous for Ramadan evening prayers (tarāwīḥ) when some of Egypt’s best Quran reciters lead the congregations that overflow into nearby streets. Badariyya insisted that if I wanted to study how the Quran is learned, it was best that I go to the real lessons at a major mosque, like the ones that she knew took place after Friday prayer there. For the women from the gamʿiyya, the lessons at Gāmiʿ
ʿAmr were more formal and therefore more authoritative than their own gatherings. They regarded the mosque’s location and historical import as a more official, more legible, Islam than their own practices. Badariyya expected that her own lessons, taught by her neighbour in a community center adjacent to her home, could not properly represent Quran education in a dissertation to be shared abroad at a foreign university. I decided to take her advice and go see how things were done down the street.

After the Friday prayers finished, women gathered around a teacher in her late fifties. She sat on a wooden chair, while the rest of us found a place on the floor in front of her. About forty of us gathered around one of the mosque’s grand columns, where wooden bookshelves were filled with Qurans, their pages subtly expanding in the cool damp of winter in the open air mosque. The lesson began with a supplication and then recitations. Some read the chapters from the Quran, but most of the group recited after the teacher. The sūras were al-Fatiha, Ayat al-Kursi, and selected short chapters from the final juz’. Although the verses were basic, the teacher kept the text in front of her on her lap. She recited them to a melody that we attempted to emulate. When she finished, she blew into her hands three times and wiped them along her body. The women wiped their hands over their bodies and the bodies of the people beside them. The woman to my right watched me, and told me to pay close attention to my chest, keen to make sure the supplications went over my heart. She recorded the lesson with her mobile phone.

A woman addressed the teacher with the day’s news, trying to elicit a comment from her. “Today there are protesters in Tahrir.” The teacher didn’t respond. Some asked what they should do now, whether it was ḥalāl or ḥarām to protest. The teacher said she had been running this lesson in this very mosque for seventeen years. The lesson she
planned to give today was one she gave fifteen years ago. She described how the paper was simply lying there on a counter in her home, and how after all of these years the paper had been preserved. The woman with the recorder asked me for a pen and readied to take notes as she anticipated the teacher’s delivery of the content of the day’s lesson. The teacher went on to tell stories about Muhammad in battle, and the miracles of his military successes. In one vividly depicted story, she described how one of the Prophet’s men lost his eye; it was dislodged from the socket and hung down his face. He called out for help, disoriented and in pain. The Prophet held the eye in his fingers and placed it back in his head. The man could see again, and his vision was better then before his injury.

I wondered if her lesson was an oblique reference to military snipers who shot at the eyes of protesters, but as she continued, it was clear that she was not in support of ongoing demonstrations. She mentioned the lack of security in the streets these days and problems with thugs. The women wanted her to elaborate, but she gave political matters of the day only a passing glimpse. She returned briefly to the Prophet before concluding the lesson with another sequence of chapters.

While the women of Batn al-Baqara saw the lessons at Gāmiʿ ʿAmr as more authoritative than their own because of the mosque’s historical and contemporary significance, it was only following my visit to that Friday lesson that the official mark of al-Azhar on the gamʿiyya Quran lessons became central to my understanding of Quran. The scope of Quran was meant to practically encompass all of Quran learning for a layperson. Through the contrast of the lesson at Gāmiʿ ʿAmr, I discovered how Quran was itself a manifestation of a modern sensibility of turning to the Quran and Quran
reading as central to Islamic learning. Quran lessons in Batn al-Baqara were text-centered, even as they were without reference to a physical text.

The Friday lesson at Gāmiʿ ʿAmr by the more experienced teacher echoed Samia’s conception of the Quran as working on the body; the supplication ritual starkly represented what Samia expressed through the reciters’ ritual movements of spreading the words over their bodies. Even the story of the eye injury depicted the Prophet’s ability to heal the body and restore vision. Yet, unlike Maryam who followed the guide given to her by her teacher from al-Azhar, the teacher at Gāmiʿ ʿAmr framed the lesson’s content as subject to the chance discovery of the old piece of paper with a previous lesson that was appropriate for the day. This teacher was guided by her own intuition as to how to lead the day’s lesson. I suspected that the supplication ritual and stories told that day would have been subjected to some scrutiny in Batn al-Baqara. Discussions occasionally arose both inside and outside lessons about the permissibility of particular practices deemed to not be properly substantiated as appropriate or ‘Islamic.’ For example, on the Egyptian holiday Shamm al-Nasīm, a celebration of spring that includes a meal of a pickled fish, fisīkh, Umm Hazim said that it is not a holiday for Muslims, but only for Christians. The comment revealed concerns of purging Egyptian culture of Pharoanic, foreign and generally “unIslamic” genealogies. While these concerns emerged only occasionally, I imagined that they would have disapproved of the Friday lesson down the road, with the blowing on the hands and wiping them over the body, and the lesson’s content driven by the prerogative of the teacher and not a guiding teacher’s guide, like the one Maryam employed. I suspected they would have judged it to be without reference to the Quran. While Badariyya and the others saw Gāmiʿ ʿAmr as a site of official Islam, their own
lessons at the local gamʿiyya were more resonant with official Islam, as theirs were an extension of the transmission of al-Azhar’s influence in local communities.

**Literacy and Quran in Conversation**

Studies of education in the Muslim world typically keep religious and secular education separate, even though historically, elementary education often included Quran recitation. Nelly Hanna argues that the emphasis on Quran education as rigid and dogmatic stresses the “religious dimension” rather than situating Quran education within a broader social context and history of literacy (2007). By bringing Quran into focus within a study of literacy development, we move towards a more flexible and nuanced understanding of literacy, attuned to the social context in which it takes place. I situate my argument within Cairo’s broader reading and recitation landscape where recitation is a significant mode of religious practice and feature in the Islamic Revival, among the literate and nonliterate alike. The persistence of the women’s Quran practices points to how distinct disciplines of reading have particular aims. Yet, despite their differences, where literacy invests in autonomy and Quran in ritual, both are indicative of the emphasis on Quran reading as key to religious reform.

In Michael Warner’s “Uncritical Reading,” (2004) he examines practices of trained critical reading by employing, as a counterpoint to academic forms of ‘critical,’ the example of Quran reading described by Mahmood. Warner argues that the women exercise a different sort of disciplining technique that is about the cultivation of a dilated temporality to interrupt mundane time and reframe daily routine. Recitation and audition, in other words, are taken to be in this context techniques or arts for the inculcation of virtuous habits—not as putatively primordial “orality,” that would be the residual other of literacy. The important point in Mahmood's analysis though, is not
just a different technique of text processing, or a different attitude about the text object, but a different kind of subject to which the technique is oriented. (19)

Warner points to how reading practices create different sorts of readers, different sorts of subjects. Literacy and *Quran* discipline distinct relations between the reader and the text. Islamic literacy development seeks to promote autonomous reading to reform how Muslims encounter the Quran. Khaled’s project enjoins Muslims to autonomously read the Quran in order to better understand and live its message. Yet, Amal’s lessons in Islamic literacy development do not transform *Quran*. Hanna’s rejoinder to situate the Quran in broader examinations of literacy is useful in thinking about how religious and non-religious modes of text-processing may share and differ in their techniques. But what is important is the orientation to which these techniques are aimed, the sorts of readers the practices aim to form. In other words, to approach religious and secular reading as distinct is to presume the distinction between the two a priori, and miss the ways in which reading—as an act—is made sacred. Yet, by turning to *Quran*, my interlocutors make the distinction between Quran and other texts. Of course not all Muslims encounter the Quran the same way as the women in Batn al-Baqara, for whom literacy skills do not transfer to *Quran* because of their ideas about how the Quran ought to be performed and embodied. They conceive of the significance of their particular Quran practice not as a result of their illiteracy, but as practices that facilitate immediacy and the correct reception of the Recitation, which is affirmation.

As distinct modes of reading as worship, literacy and *Quran* conceive of the responsibility to read in ways that relate the reader to different notions of time and the afterlife. KIP taught literacy to enable civic life, and that this familial and civic
responsibility is incumbent on the Muslim seeking paradise. The women are differently oriented toward the afterlife through literacy, so that participation in civic life—through reading practices that initiate the subject to a particular public, that of the Egyptian state—involves them in the development of the nation through responsibility and citizenship. The benefits of literacy are imagined and deferred into the future, in ways that are similar yet distinct from the temporalities of *Quran*. While the women discussed their lives in the present in relation to the verses, these discussions in turn rendered tangible the eschatological descriptions they rehearsed in the chapters, yet another practice of affirmation. For example, while working on the chapter The Backbiter (*al-Humaza*, 104), Maryam paused on a verse about punishment: “You will most definitely see Hellfire, you will see it with the eye of certainty” (*latarawunna al-jahīm thumma latarawunnahā ‘ayn al-yāqīn*) (102:6-7). In the discussion that ensued, Malak shared an analogy to make more vivid the torment of hell: “It is like when you are burned by oil when frying eggplant—that burning is cold compared to what people in hell will feel.” Malak made the afterlife palpable in a familiar register of domesticity. She sensed the heat of punishment with the “eye of certainty” the verse spoke of, in the tactile proof of a pan of burning oil, as a technique to imagine and experience God’s promise and warning.

While both the classroom and *muṣallā* were sites of repetition, the prayer room was also a site of immediacy, where they were not just learning a text, but inscribing it on themselves, though their internalization sometimes erred. While literacy included imagining new literate selves, these exercises and discussions were for *future* selves. By alternating between spaces of the *gamʿiyya* for literacy and *Quran*, the women structured how they moved between reading modes with distinctive ethical aims and conceptions of
mediation and time that drew on distinctive sensibilities and expressions of piety. The distinctive reading regimes were each involved in oral and bodily repetitions that aimed to cultivate specific subjectivities. The Islamic-civic project of literacy development emphasized the body through the emerging bodily techniques of reading and writing, such as how to hold pencils to properly form letters and to teach them to regularly carry notebooks. They were instructed to mold their bodies to new postures, and turn those postures into the habit of a Muslima citizen. The embodied literate subject was also formed through the moral lessons that instructed her personal hygiene and maintenance of her home. “Cleanliness is from faith” (al-nizāfa min al-īmān) is only part of a larger pedagogy directed towards the reading woman as ideal mother and Muslima citizen. Her literacy is supposed to be embodied through hygienic practices that distinguish her from other women in the neighbourhood. Teachers aim to improve the women’s material world, a connection for teachers between skills and the ability to materially advance that the women do not share.

_Quran_ works on the person in ways that are challenging for the women to describe (Samia: _You would need a machine to see inside of us_). They reflect on the relations and the responsibilities they form with each other, teacher-student, relative-to-relative, and neighbour-to-neighbour. While not a civic project like literacy, _Quran_ is of public consequence. Maryam sometimes reminded the group that as women in _Quran_, people in the neighbourhood held them to a higher standard than others. She told them to carry their lessons in their comportment. Affirming the Quran, then, is not only a witnessing of truth, but it is also the propagation of the Quran to others through their self-presentation.
The literacy classes came to follow the forms of repetition established in Quran, so that rather than moving towards completing the curriculum, due to lapses and disruptions, literacy took on the cyclical learning and re-learning of Quran. In Quran, this repetition was also a part of maintaining the responsibility of maintaining previously memorized verses. The need to remember (dhikr) is an obligation that calls attention to the significance that an internalized verse is supposed to have on the individual: one must continue to carry the memorized verses. Forgetting is careless, and indicative of a laxity with revelation. In this way, the re-learning of the simple chapters is not a failure to progress, but a shouldering of the responsibility. Maryam reminded the women of the necessity not to forget, citing hadith that liken forgotten verses to an abandoned house and cautioned them that the Prophet warned Muslims that verses can escape the memory like camel freeing itself of its rope. Their reward is not only in the amount of Quran they memorize, but in the effort they exert to learn and retain it. The women did not accumulate verses, but were engaged in the processes of memorization, discussion and community that remembered God in their late afternoon circles. At the same time, Quran was also an escape from the responsibilities of daily life, a release from the mundane.

Conclusions

Months later, looking over pages of fieldnotes from Quran, I discover the frenzy of late afternoon birds and the sun falling through a window across a circle of women. There is an absence of the physical text in my descriptions that I come to understand as immediacy, and a curiosity about conversations that weave the familiar with the sacred that I come to think of as affirmation. Those moments I tried to discretely write in my notebook, I think I felt their eyes, as though the notebook was the machine Samia teased
me about, the one capable of looking inside of us. I wrote as though if I plot these scenes in my notebook, there would be a fragment to return to. I stuffed my notes into my bag for fear they would be a barrier between me and the other women I was learning with.

Even though literacy did not lead neoliterates to abandon their previous Quran practices, the study of literacy and Quran brings into relief distinct reading regimes with different conceptions of the agency of the reader. While at first glance we may understand these different text practices as worldly (literacy) and other-worldly (Quran), I argue that what is notable is how distinctive practices converge in making reading an act of worship, even as the reading classes taught distinctive disciplines and subjectivities. Khaled teaches a conception of reading as worship where the intellectual effort of the reader to contemplate is essential to “living with the Quran,” but still does not exclude the “true reading” of traditional practices. I elaborated the notion of theological reading through the women of Batn al-Baqara and their engagement with traditional practices that are a part of al-Azhar’s project to modernize and localize Quran instruction. My point has been to demonstrate how ‘readers’ invest in practices of recitation that are not about an alternative mode of understanding, but rather a different orientation to the text, where the text is not only revered, but is also embodied. The women connect the truth of the text to their experiences, and in so doing affirm the Recitation, and one’s place in the world.

By bringing together literacy development and Quran practices, my aim has been to show that Islamically sponsored and motivated literacy to transform the subject’s encounter with the Quran, reveals the durability of oral Quranic practices of recitation, memorization, and affirmation. The disciplines of Quran are not the mere product of limited literacy abilities, but are representative of specific theologies of mediation. In the
following chapter, I shift away from the Quran and reading to focus on the writing practices of workers in a shipyard. While the civic good of literacy among women was deferred to her family, specifically her children, and cast into the future, for factory workers, literacy was supposed to materialize in the productivity of their output. In the context of literacy classes, the material evidence of literacy was produced in their forays into writing. I therefore shift my attention on communication from the practices of recitation, to the forms of expression articulated in the workers’ early compositions.
Chapter 6
The Production of Happiness: Self-Expression at Work

Tawfiq has a complaint. He does not want anyone teaching him happiness.

Today’s literacy lesson was interrupted for a special seminar that gathered all of the worker-students into one classroom. A Life Makers volunteer trying his hand at motivational speaking recently began to visit the shipyard to give lessons on civic responsibility and life coaching. He stood at the front and wrote the word saʿāda on the board. Happiness. For forty minutes he spoke about gratitude to God and appreciating our blessings. He encouraged hope and optimism in the face of fear for Egypt’s future. Some other teachers joined in with examples of how they chose to live happily instead of with worries and anxieties. When they finished their lesson, the workers returned to their regular classrooms.

In a hallway made of long sheets of wood that the workers built in the workshop-cum-school, Tawfiq spots his teacher, Umar, and confronts him:

What is this? I don’t come to literacy class for happiness talk. Happiness? This is not why we leave our work and come to literacy. I come to learn my abcs. In these seminars they try to tell us how to vote, but we discuss politics among ourselves, we don’t need the opinion of this youth. I work all day. When I go home, someone wants thirty pounds for this, another wants fifteen pounds for that. Happiness! He wants to talk about happiness!

Umar listens, nods sympathetically, and ushers him to the classroom where they will begin a regular lesson.

In this chapter, I employ Tawfiq’s complaint as a guiding thread to allow us to understand the contingent relationship between oral complaint and the workers’ writing.

In their early experiments with the written word, neoliterates mobilize circulating scripts
of the virtues of work. By representing the tropes of productive labour, they are taught to employ the very discourse used to discipline their productivity in order to make claims to their personal dignity (kirāma), one of the central claims of the revolution. Workers (ʿumāl) constitute a durable social category in Egypt, as well as in scholarly literature. The long history of Egyptian workers as both a basis of support to governing legitimacy, as well as a challenge to authoritarianism, makes the study of KIP’s implementation at Arab Contractors a rich site to explore literacy as a project of individuation among a people so frequently referred to, written about, and treated as a collective. I consider the effects of literacy activism within a factory in relation and interaction with a workplace culture in flux during a revolutionary moment.

At a historical juncture of blue collar organization, literacy had the potential to be a tool for workers’ mobilization. Recall that KIP volunteers saw themselves as carrying forward the revolution. They understood the first step of building a new Egypt as educating its people. Despite the potential for literacy to enable political organization and empowerment, it did not do so at Arab Contractors. Workers did not depend on writing to make political demands, nor did they employ their burgeoning writing skills as a tool for “self-expression,” as they were instructed to do by their teachers. Instead, they continued to privilege face-to-face communication as a means of complaining and negotiating with authorities.

The implementation of literacy classes in the factory illustrates the contradictions of literacy as revolutionary action. The campaign teaches workers to celebrate the revolution and their contribution to it, and yet, to transform the aggressive and ignorant...
worker into a pliable, reasonable, and productive one; volunteers did not teach literacy as a technique to enable workers’ agitation for better work conditions and fair wages to further workers’ revolutionary cause, but instead to lift the spirits of workers and in turn make them more diligent and dedicated to their craft. Nevertheless, at Arab Contractors shipyard, the ideals of “productive literacy” at work valorized worker patriot identities. To complicate matters, literacy was a product made legible through the written word—written paragraphs, successful exams, and government certification.

Building on Lila Abu Lughod’s Foucaultian contention that “resistance is a diagnostic of power” (1990), I situate the workers' communicative practices within the larger frame of revolutionary Egypt, specifically the workers' movement. I argue that by strategically shifting communicative practices, workers navigate not only the powers exercised by authority, but the powers of communicative technologies (Abu Lughod 1984, Caton 1990, Cody 2013). I therefore tend to the ways that workers skillfully managed to perform the worker identity, in order to access literacy classes for their own goals. This ongoing negotiation included participation, opposition, disappointment, and satisfaction with their lessons, instructors, and the institutional overview of their progress through the curriculum to final examination.

Throughout the chapter I trace how teachers, factory administrators, and workers sought to make literacy productive in the workers’ lives. As an affective pedagogical project, Knowledge Is Power (KIP) sought to cultivate productive workers and citizens, in ways that drew upon and magnified pervasive assumptions about non-readers and powerful class cleavages between the ignorant (gāhil) and the educated (mutʿālim). Happiness lessons enjoined workers to imagine better futures in ways that workers
contested as being out of touch with the realities of their present lives. Managers maintained that literacy would transform the *habitus* of the workers, improving their ways of thinking and their characters. Literacy was a program to appease workers, generate productivity, and transform the brute (*ʿaṣabī*) worker into a civilized person. I explore the contradictions between the workers’ articulated desire for literacy and their simultaneous rejection that their illiteracy made them inferior and incapable. While the men explain their efforts to learn for personal reasons that transcend formal incentives, at the same time, they seek recognition of their newfound skills from authorities.

I examine the workers’ simultaneous rejection of the moral and affective pedagogies of KIP with their genuine desire to read and write by tracing how workers shifted between oral and written communicative strategies in order acquire literacy skills, while at the same time contesting the affective goals of the literacy campaign. I ask: How do workers (en)counter literacy as cultural capital and an ethical project of self-formation? How does literacy (dis)enable workers’ communicative strategies, particularly amid a revival for articulating demands in the context of a flourishing workers’ movement? How is Life Makers’ affective campaign of happiness-optimism inflected in the implementation of literacy in the shipyard?

I also explore writing as an idealized form of self-expression within literacy development. One of the international and national measures of what makes an individual literate is the ability to write a paragraph about oneself and one’s daily life. The GAAE exam is the ultimate (and only legal) arbiter of literacy in the state and typically includes a final section that poses this question. Those that pass the exam are issued a certificate that is required, for those without a minimum level of education, to obtain government
licenses, like a driver’s license. Thus the ability to write about oneself is suggestive of a specific sort of self-representation for entry into citizenship.

To prepare for this question, teachers assigned various writing tasks to workers, such as writing a letter to their friend, writing about Ramadan, or writing on the value of work. As Dr. Hegazy pointed out in chapter two, literacy is attached to notions of a self that is to be understood and represented. The workers’ early practices of writing are revealing of notions of an authentic self, and the fact that self can be represented in writing through notions of self-expression. I depict how workers, who are regarded as a collective identity (and myself make reference to this collective identity throughout the chapter), are taught to represent themselves as authentic individuals while also drawing on their worker identities. Workers themselves inhabit the role of the ‘worker’ to make claims to a worker identity, but at the same time articulate their desire to better father their children, and to not be treated poorly by employers, society, and the state, two statements that go beyond the scope (and tropes of) the typical Egyptian worker.

I begin with a description of Arab Contractors and their role in Egyptian industrial history, which sets the stage for a brief summary of the workers’ movement in the context of post-Mubarak Egypt. I consider the workers’ methods of protest at a historical moment of mobilization, which helps to situate the reasons for and effects of implementing KIP at the Arab Contractors’ shipyard. I then examine the men’s explanations for why they wanted to learn to read and write, and describe the role of knowledge as cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). The chapter then turns to the voices of factory administration, who explain literacy as a project to morally reform unruly workers emboldened by the revolution. The following section draws on workers’ writing samples to examine how
their early compositions relate to ethical scripts of the worker-hero prominent in Egyptian nationalist discourse. In the final section, the workers' final examination illustrates how cheating was a way to subvert the formalizing process of literacy in the state-administered exam.

**Arab Contractors, Egyptian Workers, and the Revolution**

The participation of Arab Contractors in KIP is symbolically and strategically significant. Since literacy became a major national project in the 1950s, it has been associated with the country's industrialization. Literacy promised to increase productivity in factories and drive the engine of Egypt's economic and social development. Arab Contractors prides itself on a long history in prominent Egyptian development projects, from the High Dam to subsidiary companies working on a Suez Canal causeway, and the construction of the new Alexandria Library and other major projects seen as emblematic of Egypt’s economic and infrastructural development. Arab Contractors is Egypt’s and the Middle East region’s largest construction and contracting company. It is a symbol of Egyptian industry and national development.

The company was established in 1955 by Osman Ahmed Osman, and since its infancy has been closely associated with political power and Egypt’s modernization project. Its minor role in the construction of the High Dam under Nasser was highly advertised and created a reputation for the company that Anwar Sadat continued by hiring the company to renovate two presidential palaces. Through the renovations, Osman and Sadat formed a close relationship that eventually led to Sadat naming Osman the Minister
of Construction in 1973. Osman’s name was so closely related with building Egypt that there was a joke that cemented his place in Egyptian history: “Who founded the Ottoman (Osmani) Empire?” “Osman Ahmed Osman.”

As the company’s charismatic founder, Osman continues to be a major reference point for company philosophy. His memoirs, *Pages from My Experience*(Ṣafḥāt min *Tajribatī*, 1981), sold out a first printing of 65,000 copies. During my fieldwork, it was available in bookstores; a leader in Life Makers and KIP administration opened a meeting for Arab Contractors volunteers by citing Osman’s memoirs and holding him up as an exemplary figure of a self-made man. Osman continues to be celebrated as a hero and visionary for the company, and moreover, for Egypt.

The Arab Contractors’ Ma‘sara shipyard is situated along the Nile and is surrounded by cement factories and other production plants. The factory sign bears the ubiquitous Arab Contractors logo: a Sphinx with the outline of a skyline of Contractors’ buildings behind her. The guarded entrance to the factory opens on a compound of office buildings, workshops, and heavy machinery for the company’s branch of shipbuilding and repairs. Their work is in Nile cruises, primarily floating hotels and restaurants. Most of the men ride on company buses to the factory every morning. They come from different parts of the city, many traveling for more than an hour in each direction. Work begins between 7:30 and 8:00 am and finishes at 4:00 pm. They work six days a week, with Friday as their weekly break.

---

109 Ibid.

110 In May 2014, a court found Mubarak and his sons Gamal and Alaa guilty of the embezzlement of public funds for private Mubarak properties. Arab Contractors, with their long-standing relationship with the presidential palace, was implicated in the case, with two low-level employees charged (Bahgat 2014).
The literacy campaign’s focus on workers came at a time of increased worker organization and mobilization. Life Makers classes began in February 2012. KIP classes were held in a workshop between working areas and the Social Hall, where factory activities often took place, and ran on alternating days from 11:00 am to 1:00 pm. The men were compensated for their time in the classroom and promised bonuses for all who could successfully pass the final exam, with prizes for top students. Of the 1500 workers at Ma’sara, 109 were enrolled in KIP, as the result of an informal process of supervisors nominating workers who they knew could not read or write. The implementation of literacy among factory workers was not restricted to the Ma’sara shipyard, but included other Arab Contractors sites, as well as Pepsi Egypt, and a number of factories located in the Sixth of October industrial area. The factory setting with the regular, regimented classes and monitored attendance made Arab Contractors’ literacy classes the most effective setting during the first year and a half of the nationwide campaign.

A company notice is a striking example of the cleaving of the worker’s dignity with their dedication to the progress of the nation. On the way to the workshop, the men walk past a large placard:

Your Dignity Comes from the Dignity of Your Country
Donate a day's work to the Egyptian economy
It is better than raising our hands to our enemies
And God said about alms:
“And in heaven is your provision and what you are promised”
Make optional deductions today for two months
Whoever wishes to do so, register your name with the Director of Human Resources
Raise Your Head High, You’re Egyptian

The sign asks the workers to take individual responsibility for the country’s economy and turn their wage into alms. The donation is voluntary (if one “wishes,” *raghba*), but it is an
invitation to the impossible ability to give up a portion of one’s wage: the worker-student, Tawfiq, counts his expenses on both hands, adding up his family’s monthly expenses as part of my education on workers’ lives beyond the shipyard.

While KIP taught literacy as the first step to Egyptian development and democracy, the very techniques of revolution that brought about the fall of Hosni Mubarak’s regime were successful precisely in their bodily methods, rather than the use of formal channels of opposition dependent on literacy. Arguably, one of the most effective strategies of worker protest is withholding labour. In addition to workplace protests, labourers demonstrated in front of sites of symbolical power, like the People's Council and the government-sponsored Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF). Creative bodily tactics included mock funerals, as well as carrying and beating empty pots to demonstrate hunger as a result of low wages (Ali 24). One reason that complaint remained oral and protest was best expressed through bodily movements is a possible distrust of writing. Not only was writing a symbol of inefficient and oppressive bureaucracy, but it could also form evidence against workers. Even workers’ contracts that could protect their rights and give them official status within a company were used against many in company practices that pressured their employees to sign away legal protections.111

In Ma’sara, workers had long abandoned the idea of forming a union. As they told me, a union would not benefit them, because if one existed, it would only be for its appearance and would do nothing to advance their rights. Despite the workers’ complaints about low pay, they recognized that compared to other workers across the country, Arab Contractors workers were comparatively well-paid. Older labourers who

---

111 See Beinin on unfair contract practices (2012, 24).
worked at the shipyard for several years understood their contracts as stable. Their salaries helped them marry and establish families who had access to education. Even the younger generation of workers there who did not have secure contracts like their older colleagues still saw their positions as fortunate. Mustafa, a twenty-four-year-old solderer, worked at the shipyard in 2008, but had to leave when work dried up. He went on to install transmission towers for Mobinil for a year before he was able to return to Arab Contractors. He explained that even though there was sometimes a shortage of work for him, he preferred Arab Contractors to other places, since he was paid decently and given some benefits that were better than those offered by other companies where he performed similar work.

Indeed, Egyptian workers labour in varying conditions internationally criticized as unfair and illegal. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has kept Egypt on the blacklist of countries violating labour rights since 1957. This decision was made following a government announcement that a government-sponsored union, the Egyptian Workers Federation (later known as the Egyptian Trade Union Federation, or ETUF), would be the only representative of workers’ rights. The decision to form the ETUF was somewhat ironically announced on the occasion of Gamal Abdel Nasser’s oft-quoted position that represents the Egyptian state’s stance toward workers until today: “The workers do not demand; we give.” Workers’ advocates continue to demand that Egyptian labour laws adhere to ILO standards, including the right to organize without state approval, and that a new constitution grant syndicate freedom and particular political and social rights.

Collective strikes increased sharply in the early 2000s, particularly among textile
workers whose factories were scheduled to be privatized. New methods of protest also emerged. Rather than engage in factory occupations where production continues, protestors adopted a form of action initiated during the Nasser years by putting a halt to production. This method was controversial, as it was understood to be an affront to Egyptian industrial development. In the early 2000s workers engaged in wildcat strikes (Beinin 2012, 323) that eventually contributed to the uprising. Workers continued to play a major role in political movement under SCAF rule, Mohammed Morsi, and the interim government of Adly Mansour.

While it is common in Western and Egyptian media to call the revolution a youth revolution, observers of Egypt’s workers movement call attention to the ways that their organization and mobilization in recent years, particularly since the Mahalla al-Kubra strikes in 2006, inspired Egyptians to believe that protests could yield results. The country’s first independent union, the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU), was formed during the uprising in a move to overthrow the government’s stronghold over worker mobilization, and has rapidly grown to 1.6 million workers with some 100 other new unions (Shams al-Din 2012). Throughout 2011 and 2012, worker strikes and high level organization grew at a rapid rate never seen before in Egypt. In 2012, there were nearly two thousand labour strikes in both government and private sectors, including those by teachers, doctors, public transportation workers, post offices workers, and public taxation authority workers.

Despite this major step, under the military a new law was passed to criminalize labour strikes that disrupt production. Workers continue to live in precarity; in the first

---

112 For more on developments in workers' political organization and participation in post-Mubarak Egypt, see Beinin (2012, January 2013, August 2013) and Sallam (2011).
year following the January 25th uprising, 20,000 workers lost their jobs for participating in strikes and thirty committed suicide because they could not afford to provide for their families (Beinin 2012, 300). During the 2012 presidential elections, four candidates were perceived as pro-labour, including Hamdeen Sabahi, who gained 21.5% of the vote, the third highest, in the first round of voting. This was the backdrop for the implementation of literacy in the Arab Contractors shipyard.

**Beginnings: On Being the Gāhil**

The first day I went to the factory, I sat with the worker-students in a makeshift classroom built between workshops. I took a seat in the back corner of the class, where I met Tawfiq. As Umar taught, Tawfiq showed me his notebook, lingering on pages with the teacher’s red pen that marked his successes. Tawfiq was first in the class and wanted to show me everything he learned. He described his work as an employee in administration. He was responsible for reporting to one man. That man has a secretary who writes all of his communications, while Tawfiq is responsible for carrying that communication to another person in the factory. “I move paper from one office to another. I’m not so busy,” he explains. I ask about the others and how they manage in their work without math skills and reading that I imagine would be helpful, and Tawfiq responds, “It isn’t difficult. If there is something you can’t figure out, you just ask someone who can help.” He and his classmates mastered the art of getting by without letters, just as they knew how to get by in those days between the last of their wages and their next pay date.

Yasmin, the Life Makers director at the shipyard, entered the class to formally introduce me to the students. She told the men that I am a researcher from abroad and
requested that they each take a turn to tell me why they are in literacy. I preferred to
speak with them individually, but the men followed Yasmin’s request and each took turns
responding to her question. They spoke frankly, even urgently, about dignity and fairness,
a yearning to father their children and perform their religious duties. Tawfiq began: “I
can't help my children with their homework.” Another man agreed and carried on—it was
Muhammad, a 57 year-old carpenter who had worked in the factory for thirty-five years.
He told me that he reads the chapters of the Qur’an on Fridays that are traditionally
supposed to be read—*Kahf, Ya Sīn, Dukhān*—but he always makes mistakes since he
never learned proper pronunciation and cannot read the text to able to correct himself. He
tried to learn from his wife, but never had the time to properly focus.

Abd al-Nabi introduced himself. “I’ve been working here for seventeen years,” he
opened. “I didn't know how to read or write at all, but I am learning now.” He paused. He
does not know what else to say. Yasmin prompted him, “Why did you come to learn?” He
looked around the room. The others waited. “Why? I don’t know what to say.” He
repeated this several times until Nabil took over.

Nabil has worked at the company for twenty-five years. Although he completed
middle school, he left having learned nothing at all. He explained that passing through
school is like everything else in Egypt—it can be bought with money. Rafat wears thick
glasses and is one of the older members of the class. He has worked here for seventeen
years. He carries small booklets of supplications and religious advice with him and holds
the pages close to his face during spare moments in the classroom. His wife is a teacher
who specializes in special needs. He says he has wanted to read for many years, but was
too busy with work to have the time to dedicate to it.
The youngest member of the class is Salih Fathi. He is twenty-eight years old and has worked with the company for eight years. He responded plainly, “I am here because I don't want anyone calling me gāhil [ignorant].” Others agreed.

I asked for their permission to join their class and to write about them. They welcomed me and insisted I use their real names in my writing. Rafat asked who my research is for, whom it benefits (tistifīḍ). I explained that I am not an education specialist, that I will not draft policy or advocate for a particular type of literacy curriculum, that my research is about how reading and writing are taught so people can lead better lives. The teacher, Umar, interceded and explained that such research is important for creating knowledge about literacy around the world, that there are other parts of the world that are also working very hard to eradicate illiteracy, and they can learn from the Egyptian example. Yasmin took the opportunity to teach: “It’s important to have faith in tomorrow.”

The hour came for the men to return to their work. As we filed out of the workshop, Salih Fathi approached me: “The real problem is Egyptian education, tell Amr Khaled, our children graduate from university and can’t read. That's the problem. And when we learn, then what?”

Yasmin overheard his comment and responded, “We can’t accomplish anything if we are not optimistic.” When we emerged from the class, we heard the news that someone had died in clashes in Abassayia. Later, I learned that eleven had died and three hundred and fifty had been injured in clashes outside of the Ministry of Defense between police and protesters demanding the overthrow of Marshal Hussein Tantawi, the head of the ruling military council. Authorities called for an overnight curfew in the
neighborhood surrounding the Ministry, and some presidential candidates put their
campaigns temporarily on hold out of respect for the dead. Driving away from the
factory, the teachers talked among themselves. I thought about Abd al-Nabi searching for
an answer to explain why he is in the literacy class: *I don't know. I don't know*. I thought
it was the most honest answer I could have given Rafat about whom my research would
benefit.

![Figure 8: Tawfiq (right) and Rafat (left) in class](image)

In its Egyptian usage, the *gāhil* is the ignorant or foolish person (Badawi and
Hinds 179). It is a powerful term and a marker of social status used to refer to the poor
and those with little or no formal education. It is also widely used to refer to the working
class. Some of my interlocutors, particularly men at the shipyard, describe becoming
lettered as a means of transcending this social category. As a major motivating force for
literacy, as well as a social category understood as a state of being, the *gāhil*'s quest for
dignity is their opposition to the pedagogies of happiness-optimism. The *gāhil* is not only
depraved; he is politically dangerous. It is a term that invokes centuries of derision in its
reference to pre-Islamic Arabia: the before-revelation, the before-true knowledge, the obstinate. On the first day of class, Salih Fathi told me he wanted to learn to read so that nobody could call him ignorant. In his work on the creation of a working class and the worker as a social actor with economic and social effects, Zachary Lockman demonstrates how the emergence of these categories was not only the result of capitalist modes of production, but was also a result of social change—political and ideological—that created new notions of nation and citizenship, in which the worker was a significant player (1994: 187). In Egypt, the working class emerged in the 1910s, when terms such as ‘worker’ and ‘workers’ (ʿāmil and ʿummāl), as well ‘the working class’ (as al-ṭabaqa al-ʿāmila), were first used in public discourse (158).

While traditional scholarly distinctions between the ʿalim and the jāhil refer to the ignorant as living in a childlike state of innocence, the term has acquired strong connotations that suggest moral failings. Brinkley Messick sketches scholarly categorizations that in their most general schema, distinguish between the scholar (the ʿalim) and the jāhil (the ignorant person). Messick illustrates the problem that this distinction posed to the egalitarian ethos of the ideal Muslim community. To add nuance to the ways in which Yemeni society was hierarchically structured, Messick describes class distinctions with regard to knowledge with the ability for mobility: “A modicum of social mobility was always part of the system, however status could be achieved through the acquisition of either knowledge or wealth” (1993: 161).

Drawing on Bourdieu, Messick goes on to explain that the categories were not about distinguishing between differences in intelligence, but rather, marked knowledge as

113 Note that gāhil is the Egyptian pronunciation of the Modern Standard Arabic pronunciation of jāhil, which Qutb, Starrett, and Messick employ.
cultural capital (167). The moral burden of the gāhil presents a tension for Islamic egalitarian conceptions of the human raised by the high value of knowledge. The Egyptian intellectual Sayyid Qutb popularized the term in the modern period in his work *Milestones* (1990), where he argues that Egypt is in a state of moral ignorance, jāhiliyya, a reference to pre-Islamic Arabic. According to Qutb, the gāhil is not simply intellectually immature and in need of education, but is “evil and corrupt” in “manners, ideas and concepts, rules and regulations, values and criteria” (132).

At the shipyard, workers saw literacy as a way of escaping this social category and gaining a sense of dignity. Rather than doing so through their labour and contributing to their company and country—as they were so often instructed—literacy lessons offered a way to acquire useful new abilities. The workers’ attempts to transcend the category of the gāhil are illustrative of intersubjective dimensions of the cultivation of supposedly interior qualities. Literacy gave them the opportunity to transform themselves in the eyes of their managers, coworkers, and families, which would improve their own self-perception and self-worth. Yet, this self-transformation needed to be acknowledged in the form of government certification and company recognition, as I will show through their efforts for the final exam.

In the following section, I return to our opening scene to examine Life Makers’ affective pedagogy. I describe how happiness-optimism is more than an extension of Amr Khaled’s affective project through KIP, but how within the shipyard it worked to reorient workers’ expressions to positivity. I then go on to describe how factory administrators envisioned literacy as a technique to appease workers and transform them into efficient

---

114 The concept resonates with other influential Muslim reformers, including the Pakistani thinker Mawlana Abu al-A’la Mawdudi.
workers with respectable, more compliant characters.

**Literacy as Social Discipline**

For Life Makers, happiness-optimism was a major characteristic of literacy activism at work in the factory. I use the term ‘happiness-optimism’ to describe the particular kind of happiness advocated by Amr Khaled, the Life Makers ethic, and the volunteers. I describe the happiness taught in KIP literacy, particularly among worker-students, as happiness-optimism, as it was always projected into the future. The happiness-optimism taught in Arab Contractors literacy lessons made happiness part of the desired object of literacy, where the men’s acquisition of literacy skills is accompanied with attendant feelings of positivity for the literate person. Volunteer teachers used several words for happiness, such as *saʿāda* and *farāḥ*, as well as stressed the virtues of being optimistic (*mutafāʾil*) in order to plan for the future. They taught literacy as a way to cultivate happiness-optimism, to produce this feeling through literacy, as well as a way to motivate learning. Iterations of happiness as an Islamic disposition echo developmentalist social programs in Egypt and the region that regard Arabs as an innately apathetic people.115

It is important to understand the context of this happiness-optimism, since the months following the eighteen-day revolution brought a deterioration of security, a worsening economy, and frequently articulated sentiments of frustration, despair, fear, and worry.116 Life Makers promotes happiness as an Islamic responsibility and goal of

---

115 Recall from the third chapter the discussion of happiness campaigns in the Arabic-speaking Middle East (Sukarieh 2012).

116 See Winegar (2012) for an analysis of the language of “heaviness” that emerged the year following Mubarak’s ouster.
literacy. This message intersected with the statements of factory managers that promoted productivity as a virtue that can be bolstered when a worker is in a happy state. A recent Forum in the *American Anthropologist*, “On Happiness,” contemplates how anthropology can contribute to the understanding of happiness to examine “how we humans operationalize this notion as a social or political construct and the relationship between societal priorities and the material, social, and cultural conditions that sustain or inhibit happiness” (Johnston 2012, 15). Carolyn Nordstrom argues that “happiness is the antidote to hopelessness, it helps forge the ideals and relationships that reanimate the world.” In *Knowledge Is Power*, happiness is not a mere antidote, but part of a political program that cultivates happiness in the present by imagining a better future.

In ways similar to the project of universal literacy, happiness maintains its hegemonic force precisely in its failure to be realized. In Sara Ahmed’s *Promises of Happiness* (2010) she demonstrates the ways in which happiness obscures domination. She draws our attention to the ways that emotions “do” things, by examining how objects of happiness orient individuals and social groups to the ability of specific “goods” to create happiness. For Ahmed, it is necessary to turn away from the alluring promises of happiness and its futurities in order to cope with present political struggles. This requires imagining possibility beyond the possibilities of objects of happiness.

Khaled’s Islamic *da’wa* preaches happiness as part of a particular Islamic vision of virtuous emotions that is integral to his cultivation of faith. For factory administration, productivity had the literal sense of factory output—workers were taught to produce happiness like a factory product. A public message by Arab Contractors chairperson Osama al-Husseini imbibes a similar tone to that of Khaled’s, drawing on the glorious
past of the company to promote pride among its workers. For al-Husseini, the revolution is a sign of the greatness of the nation and a renewal for the country and company to ‘rebuild’ and ‘reconstruct,’ in the tradition of Osman Ahmed Osman, from “the engineering preparation of June 1967 war that paved the way to the victory of October 1973.” He went on: “I'm an optimist. I've always believed the future is going to be better than the past and everyone has a role in that. The great thing about human beings is that we can change; we can do better.”

Al-Husseini described the contributions of the country to the effort of shaping Egypt’s future through concrete actions to rebuild, from the “beautification of the streets” to “development of slums” to the “unprecedented initiative towards learning and development of the literacy project educating 5500 company workers.” He appealed to workers and Egyptians at large as a family that must work together to “map our future” in Egypt and abroad. He concluded with a prophetic saying commending hard work: “I am ready to help anyone of you, hoping to work together as a family helping each other. As our Prophet Muhammad (God’s Peace and Blessing Be Upon Him) said: ‘God the Exalted One, loves that if any of you perform an action, he should do it with perfection,’ thus the Prophet urges us through his saying to work hard and with efficiency.”

Khaled and al-Husseini share a vision of Egypt’s development that hinges on productive work, in a fashion that recalls Max Weber’s Protestant ethic. Egypt will be rebuilt through hard work. They each draw on Egypt’s glorious past as evidence for the greatness to come, to kindle hope and optimism. It is the intense focus on work as a way to create happiness that Khaled and al-Husseini’s calls to productivity depart from a more ascetic call to labour that Weber describes. Not only is work directed towards a greater
cause (the company, the country, and God), but work is a part of the realization of the
self, what al-Husseini refers to as “the human being.” This language attempts to
humanize the mechanized descriptions of labour, such as references to workers as
necessary cogs in the wheel of Egypt’s production. Not only does it make the worker a
person, but it also directs the emotions of that person to be more productive, and a person
who can change. While the poster solicits workers to give their wages as alms is a call to
their self-sacrifice, literacy calls on a different sort of discipline.

Affective dimensions of the campaign impact how literacy was taught as a
program of moral transformation and how this was negotiated by neoliterates. Happiness-
optimism counters not only the political atmosphere of despair and an impending sense of
economic doom, but also daily workplace tension. As Tawfiq eloquently illustrates
through his complaint to his teacher, the workers rejected the affective dimension of the
campaign. This rejection was typical of class conversations and discussions between
teachers and students, but was not a part of the neoliterates’ writing. Days after Tawfiq
confronted his teacher, Umar wrote a sentence on the board as part of a writing exercise:
“You cannot find happiness; you have to create it yourself” (lā tabḥath li-ṣa‘āda wa-
aṣna ‘hā ‘an nafsak). Each of the men copied the sentence into their notebooks.

Administrating Demands

The Arab Contractors administration closely followed the progress of the classes.
An employee took regular attendance and the Human Resources manager visited the
workshop-classrooms to monitor and give encouraging words to the workers he called
shabāb (youths), awlād (children), and rigāl (men). When I visited him in his office, he
expressed a connection between us because of our paths of study. He had studied
psychology in university before beginning his career at the Arab Contractors. This placed each of us within the world of the muthaqafīn, a cultured class. He stressed the implications of literacy on the men’s lives, psychology, and behavior:

For our workers, literacy is not about training them for a livelihood because they already work in particular jobs that they are trained to do. What I mean is, the goal of literacy is not material. Our main goal is the man of limited culture, someone who might not know how to read or write the alphabet. What does this limited culture at the level of the worker look like? He eats, he drinks, he sleeps, he goes to and returns from work. Ok, so if I have a child and I am illiterate, what will be the level of education of my child if I have none? So maybe I am not even looking to the life of the person I am educating, but thinking of the next generation. The worker must know how important it is to send your son to school.

But there are reasons for the man himself to learn. Perhaps before he could read and write, he was aggressive, but as he learns, this aggression diminishes. His way of discussion changes, he speaks with a different dialect, a style of politeness. His way of speaking becomes different to the point that he feels that he has become a different person. And on this idea, you’ll find that this individual change has a strong impact on developing countries, the third world, like Egypt. Egypt is a part of the third world. Our problem is that we do not know how to take advantage of our resources. But our people are always intelligent. The workers, or any Egyptian person, is intelligent. It is more than their way of speaking, it is their attitudes. I’ll tell you that before literacy classes here, there was a certain amount of violence among the workers. But the biggest difference when someone starts to learn, when they start to have the ability to read a sentence, is that they start to believe in themself.

We want the workers to raise their level of culture, to learn how to save time and increase productivity. This is something they don’t feel, time. The work that an illiterate person can finish in two hours can be finished by a literate person in one.

While literacy is not necessary to perform their work, he maintains that it could enhance productivity, but more importantly, he explained the transformative effects of literacy on the workers’ personalities, its ability to give them self-esteem and abandon brute habits. He was interrupted several times and was forced to excuse himself to tend to a matter that required his immediate attention; he sent a colleague to speak with me in his stead. Abir
was in her mid-fifties and has worked at the factory for thirty-two years. She praised the literacy campaign and blessed Amr Khaled for initiating the literacy campaign. She spoke candidly about workplace tensions that became acute following the revolution and described the deteriorating respect afforded to authority and the challenge of placating workers’ demands:

Here we have many problems. After the revolution, the workers want everything—an increase in salary—they want more, including promotions. And as for the demands after the revolution, some people were oppressed, yes, but others were thugs, so not all of them were oppressed. In my personal opinion, the person who takes their right is the one who works, and the one who complains is the one who doesn’t work. And the revolution gave people without work rights and it raised their salaries here in the company because the company was forced to respond—very good salaries of 1000, 1500 even 2000 each month. A very good wage! And we raised these salaries to agree to their demands. We give them many things. They have their soccer league and restaurants to eat in.

Yes, things have changed after the revolution. Nobody respects any other person. And in the company, we are afraid not to do what they ask because they say “we’ll go and complain,” and then they go and complain! They send messages on their cell phones and use methods that are not good.

I am by nature calm. We are taking all of their complaints, all of their words and we are really working on them. Because now, after the revolution, you can’t just say ‘no’ to anyone, even if it isn’t their right, you are forced to respond and give them something. The revolution has really changed people from within.

Abir’s comments on the increase in workers’ demands and their new tactics is revealing of the ways in which authorities attempt to shape their relationship with workers by appeasing them through social programming, as well as dictating what methods of negotiation are appropriate and in “good taste.” She did not see literacy programming at the shipyard as enabling the men’s ability to articulate their demands. Instead, she implicitly echoed the words of the HR manager, believing that literacy will cultivate specific manners in the workers at a moment when their unruly demands stretch the
patience of factory management.

**Self-Expression and Complaint**

Literacy classes taught the worker-students the arts of self-expression, an ideal of literacy promoted by national literacy programming and implemented as an evaluative component. Literacy classes teach modern notions of self-expression central to understanding literacy as enabling communicative practices that foster democratic principles of free and public exchange. The requirement for workers to represent themselves in normative structures of self-representation obliged them to reflect on their lives in unfamiliar ways in order to compose and represent those lives as ideal workers.¹¹⁷

Volunteer teachers and factory management call on the workers to represent not necessarily their individual selves, but the ideal worker-subject in their writing. As adult education expert and curricula designer Dr. Hegazy articulated in chapter one, literacy is supposed to teach new forms of self-awareness and self-expression. Hegazy’s teaching philosophy reflects a Foucaultian care of the self. In his brief writings on the technologies of the self, Michel Foucault describes writing as such a technique:

Writing was also important in the culture of taking care of oneself. One of the main features of taking care involved taking notes on oneself to be reread, writing treatises and letters to friends to help them, and keeping notebooks in order to reactivate for oneself the truths one needed. Seneca's letters are an example of this self-exercise. [...] Taking care of oneself became linked to constant writing activity. The self is something to write about, a theme or object (subject) of writing activity. That is not a modern trait born of the Reformation or of romanticism; it is one of the most ancient Western traditions. It was well established and deeply rooted when

---

¹¹⁷ The volume by Calagione, Francis, and Nugent, *Workers’ Expressions* (1992), explores workers’ lives beyond their work conditions, to take into account interrelations between work and social life. See also the recent dissertation by Makram Ebeid (2013) that moves between a steel factory and the neighbourhood where the workers reside. My own ethnography focuses on constructions of the notion of self-expression within the context of the shipyard in order to better understand how as a social program literacy development disciplines modes of communication within the work place.
Augustine started his Confessions. (1988, 27)

Reading and writing are associated with the care of the self in particular ways that shape our conception of the self as an interior world, where the written word is its external representation. Literacy not only forms new capabilities, but forms sorts of personhood that regard the self as in possession of an interior to be excavated, understood and examined, as well as represented to others. Neoliterates will discover themselves in new ways through literacy, and in turn be able to articulate this inner world through their writing. While men spoke about wanting to be able to assist their children with their studies, and therefore perform fatherhood, they were taught that their literacy was essential to their roles as workers, and not within the domestic world. The strong gendering of KIP’s implementation did not hold for the men who saw their literacy as central to their fatherhood more so than to their work at the factory.118 While literacy was taught as a way to express masculinity through their labour, the men overwhelmingly saw literacy as enabling to their roles as fathers.

Contradictions between the workers’ written and spoken words further illustrate differences between program aims and worker desires. And yet, the attempt to locate voices of dissent at Arab Contractors risks obscuring what workers articulate, and conceals the ways in which social structures maintain power by giving voice in the first place. In classroom discussions (ḥiwrār), the men debated and aired their grievances about the declining economy in Egypt. Discussion was a formal component of the literacy classes, and gave the men the opportunity to debate with each other and their teachers. A lesson on health and workplace safety led to the men’s critique of the healthcare system.

---

118 Historically it is common that literacy campaigns emphasize writing among men. See Furet and Ozouf (1982) and Limage (1987).
for its mismanagement of an outbreak of Hepatitis C. Meanwhile, writing became a mode of re-representing social and political tropes of valorized labour, piety, and efficiency. Workers’ writing must thus be understood in relation to classroom discussions and shipyard conversations with teachers and management, in order to appreciate what gets written and what gets said.

Literacy activists prompted workers to take pride in their work in ways that reinforce the worker-patriot and cast them as the builders of Egypt. This image of the worker in revolutionary Egypt and the one perpetuated through factory literacy made him the ideal nationalist, while at the same time, a symbol of dissent and critical to the revolution. This tension arises in their writing. Umar’s class practiced responding to various writing prompts in preparation for the looming final exam. One day, after five months of intensive classes, I looked through the men’s notebooks with them during a writing exercise period. Salih Fathi spent twenty minutes recording a common prophetic saying: inna Allâh yuwaffiq man yuḥāfiẓ ʿalâ waqtihi wa-yaqūm bi-adāʾ ʿamalihi bi-itqān, God grants success to those who save their time and do their work well.

Tawfiq showed me his page:

*ana astaʾil waqṭī ʿil-ʿamal min qāl an nabnâ masr*
wa uḥībb aʾmal min qāl an nūḥāfīz ʿala al-waṭan wa ahlī
wa atqana fīʾamalī lī wajh Allah wa laysa khawfān min aḥad*

I use my time to work in order to build Egypt
And I like to work to protect my home and my family
And I work well for the sake of Allah not in fear of anyone

Another worker-student, Muhammad, brought me his notebook and asked for corrections:

*muḥammad dhahaba ilâ al-ʿamal*
*ana aʾmal bi-l-muqāwalūn al-ʿarab*
ʿuthman aḥmad ʿuthmān wa-shurakāhu
*bi-l-ʿilm tatagaddam al-ʿilm*
shahr ramadān alladhī ʿunzila fīhī al-qurʿān
ifʿal lišānak
idhā ʿamala aḥadukum ʿamalan an yutqinuh
fataḥ Allah ʿalayk
ʿabd al-rahmān ʿādil mudarris
al-qudamāʾ al-maṣriyīn
al-riyāda tuḥāfiẓ ʿala al-sīḥṭ
muwāṣafāt al-manẓil al-sīḥṭī al-tahwiya al-jadīda wa-l-nizāf

Muhammad goes to work
I work at Arab Contractors
Osman Ahmed Osman and his partners
Nations make progress by knowledge
Month of Ramadan in which the Qurʾān was revealed
Move your tongue
If any of you does a thing they have to do it well
May God open up for you
Abd al-Rahman Adil is a teacher
Ancient Egyptians
Sport protects your health
Good ventilation and neatness are among specifications of a healthy house

Salih Fathi illustrates the common citation of paraphrased prophetic sayings in worker writing. Tawfiq asserts the writer’s claim to protect his family and fear no one, thereby affirming his honour in the role of protector. Muhammad paraphrases a prophetic tradition oft repeated to workers to encourage quality results. He echoes the managerial and self-help slogans of effective time management essential to success. His disconnected sentences string together different ethical teachings from factory literacy lessons and other social development initiatives. Taken together, these scraps of writing—early experiments in literacy—represent how neoliterates' writing participated in the tropes of efficiency as/and virtue.

One of the students was practicing writing outside of the classroom. Sayyid wore glasses but still needed to sit close to the board, rarely participating, always with a gentle and quiet demeanor. He was the oldest in the class, and among the eldest of the workers
participating in the campaign. His classmates had a certain affection and respect for him.

One day, he showed me a paragraph he had written at home. He wrote it on a Friday, after prayer. He stressed how he left his family to sit in a room all by himself to compose the piece. When we first met, Sayyid told me proudly that all of his children are educated.

His daughter is a teacher and he has a son graduating law and another in his final year of high school. His wife is an Arabic teacher at a private school. He showed me his paragraph. Two of the younger workers, Mustafa and Muhammad Sayyid, who sat beside Sayyid and listened to our conversation, teased him that he is the only one in his family who cannot read. He nodded without laughing and repeated that he wrote his paragraph alone.

I asked if I could photograph the paper with his writing. He was pleased, but insisted that he copy it out in better handwriting. I told him that I liked the one he produced at home, but he insisted on one with better writing and Mustafa and Muhammad Sayyid encouraged him to make a copy more presentable for a photograph.

He sat quietly to reproduce his work on a clean sheet of paper. The others reminded him that it is important to sign his name, and not to forget to write his occupation beside it. The endeavor took two efforts, but by the end of class that day, Sayyid was ready to show me the fresh copy.

$kānat thawrat al-khāmis wa-l-ʼishrīn min yanāyir hadifa wa-mubāraka.
tilka hiya al-thawra allatī fajjarahā shabāb ṯumūḥ min agl al-khurūg min
al-zulumāt ilā al-nūr li-l-wṣūl ilā al-ḥurriya wa-l-dimuqrāṭiya wa-l-
ʼadala al-ijtimāʾiya wa-l-maṣriyīn alladhīna al-ʼazīma wa-l-ʼālam ajmaʾ
fā-ashādat bi-l-maṣriyīn alladhīna al-ʼazīma wa-l-ʼālam ajmaʾ wa-l-nūhūd
bi-baladihim. wa-kāna al-shabāb hum al-sharāa allatī awqadat tilka al-
thawra al-ʼazīma min agl taḥqīq maṭalibihim al-maṣrū’a al-jadīr bi-l-
iḥtirām min agl taḥqīq mustaqbil afḍal. wa-lam nansa bi-l-dhikr shuḥadāʾ
tilka al-thawra alladhīna qaddamū arwāḥahum fīdaʾ an li-l-waṭan min agl
an taḥyā maṣr ʼazīza karīma ḥurra muṣṭaqilla li-dhālika nabʾath li-kull al-
The 25th of January Revolution had specific goals and was a blessed revolution. This revolution was sparked by ambitious youth in order to go out of darkness to light to reach freedom, democracy and social justice. This revolution amazed the world who praised Egyptians who persist and insist on raising their country up. These young people were the spark that started that great revolution to achieve their legal and honored demands for a better future. We do not forget the martyrs of this revolution who gave their souls as a sacrifice for the country of Egypt to be precious, free and independent. We send blessings to all the pure souls who left life in order to give us freedom, dignity, honor, and democracy. May God protect Egypt.

In this final version that he makes public, Sayyid adds “carpenter” beside his name, representing himself as a worker. Having written his composition alone and at home, his passage marks a shift from the previous passages that attempt to demonstrate their fluency in writing by repeating the lessons of class. Sayyid's piece, instead, takes up the language of revolutionary poetry and writing, wall graffiti, and street banners. Not only does he praise the revolution, but he thanks the youth of Egypt for sacrificing their lives to make their demands so that Egyptians can attempt to live in “dignity, honour, and democracy.” For Sayyid, workers are not the revolutionaries, but are among those who inherit the responsibilities of the martyrs' sacrifice.
By performing the worker-patriot, the neoliterates reproduced the tropes of virtue, masculinity and productivity expected of them. In so doing, they not only represented themselves to teachers, factory administration, and would-be state examiners, but they perpetuated ideals of a working class that sought their dignity through the worker identity, the very identity that served to both undermine their dignity and through which they could make claims to dignity.

In Judith Butler’s *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), she demonstrates how the forms of language and narrative employed to represent the “I” reveal the opacity of the Self in relation to the Other. She observes how in giving an account of oneself, “The norms by which I seek to make myself recognizable are not fully mine” (35). The impossibility to give an account of oneself is the potential for an ethic that challenges notions of violence, condemnation, and responsibility. For Butler, it is critical to account for the ways in which norms determine who and what can be a subject. The championing of self-expression to promote the individual subject contrasts with tropes of a collective
worker identity that makes the worker integral to Egypt’s development and their
instigating role in the revolution.

By calling on workers to represent themselves as workers in their writing, the
implementation of literacy in the shipyard thus departs from the literacy trends that
promote self-expression as the transparent mediation of the ideas of discrete and unique
selves. Instead, self-expression, as it is taught at Arab Contractors, involves reiterating
prescribed scripts of fulfilling one’s national role as a pious and content worker.
However, workers’ experiments in writing do not indicate the moral lessons of the
volunteers’ happiness-optimism. Instead, drawing on Butler, I argue that the burgeoning
writing abilities of the workers is involved in the sorts of address and recognition that
creates subjects.

The workers’ experiments in writing tell stories of how giving an account of
oneself is not only an account given to others, but is also an account of Others as
substitute for some sort of self. When asked to represent themselves though the written
word, they represented the self they knew to be identifiable to their readers. For those
who wanted to listen, we heard stories of proud fathers, narrated with the help of photos
stored on mobile phones. It is not only that the men articulated complaint orally while
they reproduced scripts of worker’s values, such as the love of work, in writing. Such a
reading of workers’ writing is attentive to the ways they spoke in class and on breaks,
selves that are not constantly embattled in a workers’ struggle.

One of Sayyid’s classmates, Mustafa, was in his twenties and younger than most
of the others, but like them, he told me his story with the help of a cell phone, sharing
photos and video clips with me. He scrolled through images of a ship being immersed in
the water for the first time. It was a project he worked on last year. Mustafa was the most advanced in his class; he was also the only student other than Sayyid who spoke about writing that he did outside of class. He practiced at home in the evenings with his sister-in-law.

After two months of literacy classes I received a message from him on Facebook requesting to be my friend with the message “Hi Nermeen. Why weren’t you in class yesterday” (hay Nermeen, inty magīsh lā) (sic). In his Facebook photo, he wore a suit and tie. He listed his favourite television shows (Xena: Warrior Princess) and pop musicians (Mohamed Mounir, Ramy Sabry, Mohamed Hamaki), as well as his preferred soccer team (Ahly). He was friends with only six others, and under personal information, the single category he filled in was that of his employer: Arab Contractors. The curated lists of favourites and images of Islamic advice were a departure from the written paragraphs of his co-workers, and instead resonated with a global culture of self-identification through the features of the online social network. By navigating Facebook he also became part of a different social class in Egypt, communicating with a different, albeit limited, group of people.

Watching Mustafa’s occasional postings crystallized for me not only how notions of a “Facebook Revolution” are restricted to only a narrow segment of society, but also how such powerful ideas of a “social media revolution,” created aspirations for literacy as a mode of participation, not through formal state channels, but through the leisure and communicative modes of communication and sharing made possible by Facebook. It was through his Facebook profile that I observed Mustafa’s participation in the popular format of a different supposed self-representation to an audience of “friends.” Some months after
I left Egypt, one of Mustafa's classmates, another of the younger generation in his twenties, Muhammad al-Sayyid, also joined Facebook.

From afar I followed their news on Facebook along with dozens of Life Makers. The format offered a different interface through which to engage my interlocutors, and further sharpened the distinctions between volunteers and students. In their online identities, Life Makers volunteers regularly posted cheerful images of open fields, flowers, and smiley faces. They posted photos from literacy classes and congratulated each other on their hard work. The repertoires of happiness-optimism dotted my newsfeed, while Mustafa and Muhammad al-Sayyid’s profiles never included the affective pedagogies employed to teach them the skills required to join Facebook. Mustafa and Muhammad al-Sayyid’s Facebook profiles illustrated ways in which literacy was put to use.

Egyptian workers are the subject of intense scholarly and activist interests, including studies of worker self-representation, particularly the ways that workers articulate dissent and resistance. Joel Beinin’s “Writing Class: Workers and Modern Egyptian Colloquial Poetry (Zajal)” (1994) examines the worker-poet's use of the zajal, a form of popular poetry, which has its roots in the oral milieu of pre-Islamic Arabia, and was revived by nineteenth-century Egyptian nationalists to champion the worker. Beinin examines workers’ self-representation through zajal, written in colloquial Egyptian Arabic, a mode of expression which, despite the antiquity of its form, was consciously chosen by nationalist intellectuals as a political intervention.

By appropriating what they considered a folk art, they altered the form by putting it into writing and thus actually distanced it from the domain of the illiterate majority
The potency of zajal as a “poetic social movement” came with the participation of the worker-poet in zajal writing, printed in the periodicals of nationalists and literati. Beinin's analysis betrays his disappointment that worker-poets do not express a stronger collectivity to write independently of the patronage and paternalism of the leftist literati. He attempts to recuperate workers' self-representation in zajal, an art-form with a long history of giving voice to the oppressed, and bemoans the ways in which their real voice is subordinated by the literati who publish worker poems with introductions that deride their authentic voice for lapses in style. Beinin is himself in search of the “pristine voice” that he concludes never existed for the worker in zajal, but which he struggles to uncover.

Unlike Beinin, Jacques Rancière is less concerned with tracing a voice of resistance and more attentive to the specific desires of workers in The Nights of Labour: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France (1989), where Rancière examines the writing of workers in their own newspapers and journals, letters and poetry. He observes the contradictions within their writings that go against the idea that workers wrote to celebrate their labour. He deconstructs the proletariat by demonstrating how they turned to writing as an escape from labour. Rancière approaches workers’ writing as an “interruption” from working life where they appropriate the power of “the other.” However, Arab Contractors’ neoliterates do not exercise power through their writing, but rather, their writing represents the disciplining powers of literacy as taught in the factory and refracted through their passages. For Arab Contractors’ neoliterates, writing neither resists nor does it escape from labour, rather it is a different sort of labour. Writing is not an activity to be revered for its creativity and intellectual processing, but is instead a
performative labour, an account to others to bring oneself into an existence that is something more than a state of ignorance. The men represent worker selves, and in doing so prioritize their dignity.

**The Final Exam**

In the lead-up to the exam, the temperature rose and workers and teachers started to count the days before Ramadan. An intensity filled the classrooms. Teachers debated among themselves whether they should rush to test the students as factory administration wished, or hold off until the men would be better prepared. The workers requested to have classes daily in order to cram. On July 11, the day finally came to write the official state exam. They wrote in a workshop they set up for the occasion. A large photograph of Osman Ahmed Osman with a cigar in hand hung above the workshop. The July heat brought down pools of sweat onto the exam papers. The exam was a stressful affair.

Sitting elbow–to-elbow, they shared answers with the people around them. State examiners threatened to cancel the exam if there was more cheating. One man grinned at being admonished. Another denied cheating and pointed at his page and then above his head, a gesture meant to attest to his honesty, that he writes his exam before God. Umar saw some of his own students calculating math problems in the brief arithmetic section on their mobile phones. He saw Hisham copying off of the paper of the man beside him. Hisham is a company driver. He had worked in a cement factory for twenty years before he came to Arab Contractors five years ago. Once I asked him how he worked as a driver if he did not have a license and he explained that many years ago he paid twenty Egyptian pounds for his literacy certificate so that he could get his license for work. “But this time I wanted to learn for real,” he asserts.
Cheating was not a contradiction between their repeatedly stated desire to learn, but rather, it was an indication of the strength of their desire to escape being called gāhil. The conflicted and ambivalent desire for the certificate of literacy reveals the ways in which the men related to the law, officialdom, and the state. On the one hand the certificate did not have meaning, it was a piece of paper that could be bought and sold. On the other, it was an indicator—not only to the state, but for the men themselves—of a particular status and a sort of person. While we could understand the men’s cheating as an indication of privileging the status of literacy above the desire to learn, I think this would reduce the ways in which this status marks the person and in meaningful ways that involve the self more deeply. The distinctions between people, these status markers of ignorant, educated and cultured differentiate between classes, but are also mobilized by workers to claim and perform the worker-hero. Cheating is a part of this negotiation between statuses, between worker and state and worker and volunteer. Cheating was a technique to recover dignity. Hisham wanted to believe that he was literate. He had the paperwork that confirmed that he was indeed literate and therefore a worker legible to take the exam. He was taught that being literate was valuable to the state and virtuous before God. Cheating was a way of convincing himself that he had become a person worthy of that value.

Although many of the men repeated to me that they were learning for their own sake, to learn “for real” (bi-ḥaʾīʾī), a successful exam was needed to prove to others that they had learned. This is one reason that they did not see cheating as a moral problem. They saw themselves as enmeshed in an unfair system—both within the factory and in Egypt at large—so that cheating was a way to gain social capital unfairly kept from them.
Failing the exam would only reinforce his status as ignorant. The men had opened themselves to the possibilities and promises of literacy; to fail now would be worse than to never have tried. Cheating was the slip, the pretend, the effort at playing the game they were invited to play. These men wanted to write themselves into dignity, away from the gāhil. *Raise Your Head High, You’re Egyptian.*

EAAE officials collected the papers and drove away. Volunteers and workers took photographs to celebrate the occasion. There was a sense among them that today marked something significant. The men were relieved the exam was over and anxious for their results. After the cameras snapped and the sodas were finished, the men trickled back to work. Tawfiq invited some of the teachers on a tour of the shipyard, showing them the different boats and cruises, pointing out which ones were under construction and which ones were being repaired. Although it was not my first time to make this walk with him, it was the first for me to see so many of the men from class at work. Some were shy and others gestured proudly toward their equipment, seemingly pleased to see the volunteers in this different space involved in a different kind of labour.

**Conclusions**

While their literacy was taught as a way to relate to the nation, the worker-students saw it almost in spite of its public benefits. They performed their jobs without literacy and proved their political acumen to volunteer teachers in class discussions. Literacy was for them, a skill for fathering, for religious learning and for self-value. In short, they did not subscribe to KIP’s Muslim citizenship. Within the shipyard, literacy was an object of desire that formed distinct attachments for the different people circling around the workshop where literacy was being produced. Volunteer teachers and factory
management saw literacy as a way to form a new type of person, where teachers saw
their work in education as a project of moral and affective uplift, and management saw
literacy as a technique to cultivate well-mannered and efficient workers. The workers
understood literacy as a valuable set of skills as well as a means to transcend the
stigmatized category of the gāhil. Workers employ the very discourses used to discipline
their productivity in order to make claims to their personal dignity. Literacy is not a tool
for production, just as it cannot produce the particular affects that Life Makers’ teachers
seek to cultivate through their literacy lessons and additional workshops in culture and
politics. While those who learned to read and write during a literacy experiment at their
workplace may now have the potential to use these skills to further the workers’
movement, to assume that literacy enables such political participation is to follow the
fallacies of linear development from the oral to the literate. Their persistent use of face-
to-face communication to articulate demands suggests that for the neoliterate workers,
writing is neither a technique of self-expression nor for political opposition, but rather a
practice of a new skill to claim cultural capital and dignity.

The chapter traced how notions of the autonomous self are attached to writing
through the expectation of an authentic representation of the self in the workers’ first
experiments in composition. By performing what was expected of them in their
compositions, worker-students claimed the dignity of Egyptian workers. Teachers
instructed a sort of individuality through literacy that was constantly reined in by the
strong role of the worker as a social category that while central to the men’s self-
identification, also limited their sense of personhood. While literacy is individualizing
and promotes the idea of a sense of self to be reflected upon and represented, in the
factory this individuating force is held in tension with treating workers—and the workers’
sense of themselves—as a collective.

At the Arab Contractors’ Ma’sara shipyard, Tawfiq complained. He offered his
teacher a sweet black coffee before class and enjoyed those spare moments away from
the responsibilities of reporting to his manager. He took a drag off his cigarette to prepare
for class, and then spent the next two hours preparing to help his children with their
homework. For him, these lessons, his effort, none of it had anything to do with
happiness.
Six Minutes

Around the same time the Institut d’Égypte was set ablaze, another scandal surrounding books in the Middle East circulated the media. Newspaper headlines were reporting in alarmed tones that Arabs were reading, on average, a mere six minutes each year. I first came across the statistic in Al Arabiya’s “Arab Citizens Read Six Minutes a Year (Al-Muwāṭin al-ʿArabī Yaqra’ Sitta Daqā’iq fī al-Sana). Six months later their English subsidiary printed the same story under the title “Sum of all fears: Arabs read an average of 6 pages a year.” I began to hear the figure mentioned at cultural and literacy events in Cairo. I discovered that the claim had been in circulation before December 2011, although new outlets had recently picked it up and it was being used with greater frequency. Sources often contrasted the Arabs’ lamentable six minutes with “Westerners” who were said to read 12,000 minutes a year. According to the article, while the average Arab reads a quarter of a page, the average American reads eleven books and the average Brit seven books. While the details differed across different outlets, the message was clear: Arabs read a pitiful amount. The statistic gained so much attention that the Lebanese English news source Al Akhbar ran the piece, “The Arab Reader and the Myth of Six Minutes” investigating the source and tracing the claim to an uncited footnote in a report issued by the Arab Thought Foundation. There was no explanation in the original source. The statistic seemed to point to a problem plaguing the Arabic speaking world, that the habit of reading is holding the region back from development. The Myth of Six Minutes is now a frequent opening for education, culture and literacy advocates. (As I interrupt my present writing with a quick Google search, I discover that the latest official
The frequency with which the six minutes myth was cited suggests that there is something believable about this staggering assertion (nowhere does anyone seem to ask: What counts as reading? Does reading online count? What about reading or reciting the Bible or Quran? Does studying for school qualify? What about reading the subtitles of a film?). By putting a number to the amount of time that Arabs supposedly spend reading annually, the statistic was offered as an answer to an unarticulated and yet pervasive question: What is wrong? The myth of six minutes is an explanation that offers a plan of action: reading. Just as Ebrahim Moosa points out that a modern reader looks to scripture for “answers” (2006), reading is itself offered as the answer.

This dissertation illustrates that it is precisely this logic that animated Knowledge Is Power. And yet the learners themselves were less optimistic about the powers of literacy. Even when they were committed to learning, they did not conceive of literacy as wholly transformative. The myth of six minutes points not only to reading as a solution to social ills – often in highly classed and differentiated terms of the cultured and educated person instructing the ignorant – it also speaks beyond the borders of an Egyptian (non)-reading public, where literacy and reading are self-conscious markers of development and progress and a measure of a country’s status in the world.

In Egypt literacy is broadly understood as a self-evident good, one with sacred and social value. I have traced how the effort to bring that good to different segments of Egyptian society as a mode of revolutionary action was met with ambivalence, but also adopted as a useful tool with which to claim one’s dignity. The unanticipated outcomes
of literacy show that where KIP teachers expect to teach a particular form of self-understanding and self-expression, one that presupposes a transparent subject, the on-the-ground implementation of the campaign shows how neoliterate take up literacy to express what teachers expect of them, while employing their new skills to develop online identities in social media, or to savor quiet moments alone to practice their writing. Despite the very particular goals of Islamic literacy development, learners negotiated performing the scripts of literacy’s promises, without taking on those goals entirely as their own.

**Hope as (Another Person’s) Method**

One early evening in May 2013, as I reviewed my day’s fieldnotes, a power-cut disrupted my stream of thought. While friends had been complaining of the inconvenience for a couple of weeks, it was the first evening for my own apartment to succumb to darkness. I was grateful for the light of my laptop, as I was not yet ready to be still. With the sound of generators churning from the street below, I reflected on my day.

After nearly a year away, I had returned to the field for a final short leg of research. I spent the day retracing my steps. I visited the women of Batn al-Baqara. There, in Mina’s apartment, she placed a warm baby in my lap, smiling broadly at the greatest piece of news I missed while I was away. There was an air of excitement to our reunion. People from the neighbourhood came by to sit and catch up. They told me that the literacy classes had stopped and that the gamʿiyaa had cancelled all of their activities. There had been a conflict among the leaders, but the women could not agree on what exactly caused the problem. Even the kindergarten classes had stopped and the local
teachers were without work. “Everything is broken” (*Kullu bayza*), Badariyya said to me. Indeed, I had never seen her looking so worn. She said it was a difficult day with her children, and there was little to distract her from her stresses. She wished she could have written the state literacy exam. She felt she could have passed, but instead she now worried that she had forgotten much of what she had worked so hard to learn.

Earlier that day I had met with Amal at a Life Makers branch while she was between activities. It was the day she asked me: *Are you optimistic?* It was much more than a question about my opinions on Egyptian politics at the moment. She was asking me something about myself, about my faith. To not be optimistic meant that I was not a part of the same project of *doing* that Amal hoped that I was a part of. She wanted my dissertation to be one of Life Makers’ traces, that my writing would be a part of their making. That she didn’t wait for my answer may have been her usual pace of conversation or an act of generosity that freed me from having to say aloud what she may have suspected I was thinking. I could have asked her: “Am I optimistic for what?” but I did not need to, since her question enveloped something larger than Egyptian politics, or the results of the campaign. She was asking if I shared her ontology. For Amal, to not be optimistic was to be stuck in this world, with the bad news that newspapers bring. While Life Makers is an Islamic faith project very much grounded in this life (*dunyā*) through their commitment to material development and the nation, their persistent positivity at this political juncture made them appear as though they were somewhere else. They understood the limits of theirs (and all human) actions, and trusted in God. Hope and optimism were central to their faith.

Hirokazu Miyazaki considers hope not as an emotional state or positive feeling,
but instead as what he calls a method where hope is produced in forms of knowledge (2004). Miyazaki replicates the hope of his interlocutors in his ethnography as a method of hope. For him, “hope as a method does not rest on an impulse to pursue analytic synchronicity but on an effort to inherit and replicate that impulse as a spark of hope” (30). While Life Makers campaigned on feelings of positivity, my other interlocutors, as well as the conversations I heard on metro rides and radio programs, in coffee shops and gatherings of friends was a language for the present and future that was at times despairing, and at others markedly resistant to either hope or despair. For Life Makers, hope is a method, but it was not one I can claim as my own.

While the power outages ceased in the immediate aftermath of Morsi’s ouster in early July 2013, they resumed by spring the following year. Field General Abdel Fattah El Sisi won the presidency in a two-candidate race with nearly 96% of the vote. While El Sisi projects himself and his supporters describe him as a stabilizing leader who can guarantee the country’s security, for many activists of the January 25th revolution, and the Muslim Brotherhood (among others) his rise to power is evidence of a counter revolution. Nearly one thousand protestors, mostly Brotherhood supporters were killed in the summer of 2013. Tens of thousands have been imprisoned, and nearly another thousand have been sentenced to death under various charges related to treason. There is much reason to despair. Although Khaled dissolved his Future Party in the wake of Morsi’s arrest, a key figure in his national vision, Khaled Abdel-Aziz, was named Minister of Sports and Youth in El Sisi’s first cabinet. Abdel-Aziz is the former president of the sporting club in which Khaled began his career as a dāʿīya, and was also a member of Khaled’s short-lived political party. His appointment reveals how Khaled does not
oppose the present regime, but instead continues to work within the system to bring about the ideals of Muslim citizenship. As the Life Makers volunteer Ayman remarked in the introduction, we are all remainders (fulūl).

When I call Cairo to get the latest news, a friend tells me that she was in a taxi cab when Amr Khaled’s A Smile of Hope came on the radio. Her driver cursed and changed the channel. “Really, when I hear this stuff now, it just makes me sick,” she said to me. She at least felt comforted by the fact that the taxi driver felt the same way. A few weeks later I read an interview with the activist Alaa Abdel Fattah before he would return to prison, once again charged for his leading role in organizing and staging protests. The author of the piece describes Abdel Fattah’s sense of hopelessness, a sentiment that few activists are willing to show. She quotes him: “We don’t have hope, we don’t even have despair, this is just who we are and this is our life” (Affify 2014).

In Egypt, the revolution is not just about what one does for the cause, but how one feels towards it. Despite images of jubilation in the streets for El Sisi, there are those who do not want to hear the word hope, for whom the word is an affront, just as the lesson on happiness was for Tawfiq. At such a moment, what is the politics of hope? For some, it is a betrayal of the revolution, while for Life Makers, it is the revolution. What is revolutionary about KIP’s literacy? On the one hand the literacy campaign articulates a break from a corrupt past, and yet, they employ literacy to dream of a better future in a very similar language to that of the state’s literacy project. Not only do Khaled and KIP teachers situate literacy as a continuation of the revolution, but learners themselves expressed the political moment of February 2011, when the campaign launched, as one of possibility. Despite the ambivalence of the good that literacy could produce, Umar and
learners within the campaign had moments of being swept up into the project of \textit{making}, particularly as it related to self-making. There was indeed a sense that working on the self is the most enduring project, especially when it is so easy for things to become broken, as Badariyya put it. The campaign gave its participants—volunteers and learners—something to \textit{do}. And that \textit{doing} was important for the present. Islamic literacy development makes literacy about more than acquiring abilities, so that when literacy is not acquired there remain other modes of evaluation: \textit{Are you optimistic? Do you have faith in the idea? Do you have faith in tomorrow?}

KIP is about much more than the movement from nonliterate to literate, from subject to citizen. The campaign aims to shape desires and mold subjectivities. It is in this way that we are best situated to think about literacy’s effects. Literacy’s promises are expansive, and while Egypt’s statistical results in literacy development continue to fall short of their goals, planners and learners alike continue to put faith in it. Literacy is itself a campaign to make hope. Unlike James Ferguson who examines the effects of “failure” in development (1990), in order to be attentive to the affects and aims of KIP, it is best to think in terms of hope and despair—or an absence of both—as my interlocutors do. This helps us to appreciate how Life Makers’ success is not the opposite of failure, but rather how it is measured by Godly recompense and in the spread of good feelings. These goals, while entangled in and attached to the aims of cultivating literate subjects, dominate the implementation of the campaign.

\textbf{Summary}

In the first part of this dissertation, I examined the genealogy of Islamic literacy development by exploring the pivotal moment of revelation in the Muslim imaginary, and
how the Prophet’s command to read has been adapted to promote the obligation of autonomous reading in a developmentalist project. KIP marshals Islamic theologies of mediation and developmentalist literacy that intertwine in a particular iteration of Islamic literacy development. Amr Khaled’s reformist hermeneutic of success proposes autonomous reading as a way to reflect on and contemplate the Quran and live God’s message. At the same time, reading is a tool to reflect upon oneself and create the Person of the Renaissance. Life Makers volunteers teach literacy as an Islamic-civic responsibility—their own responsibility to take part as teachers, and the responsibility of learners to improve themselves and form the nation through their specific roles as mothers raising Egypt’s future, and as workers who produce Egypt’s (industrial) development. The first half of the dissertation thus provides the politics, textual ideologies and ethical grounding of the campaign. It also situates KIP as particular strand of a reconfigured Egyptian Islamic Revival that employs discourses of development in Muslim citizenship as an Islamic way of being and a form of political attachment among people and to the state.

In the second part, I turned to sites of the campaign’s implementation: in Batn al-Baqara, moving between literacy and Quran lessons, and in the workshop-made-classroom at an Arab Contractors shipyard. In each of these sites, I traced how teachers sought material and behavioural transformation as a result of the new skills of neoliterates. In Batn al-Baqara, literacy was a mode to transform their neighbourhood, while in the shipyard literacy was attached to ideas of worker productivity. What took place on the ground was something much different. The women of Batn al-Baqara followed the program, on and off, with ambivalence as to the good that literacy could do
for them. While workers were diligent in their pursuit of literacy, it was to different ends than those spoken of by their managers and teachers. They wanted to be fathers involved in their children’s education, or to read the Quran. They wanted to be treated as though they exist. They wanted their dignity acknowledged by others. In distinction from literacy lessons, *Quran* was a site in which the Quran’s material form was redundant, where the Quran was most immediately experienced on the body in a reading that does not seek proximity to the text, as Khaled promoted, but rather sought its internalization through the practices of memorization, recitation and affirmation. Through the acquisition of literacy skills the Islamic literacy development of KIP seeks to make the nonliterate subject legible to the state and even to themselves. This is the legibility of state high-modern developmental projects, as well as a part of a movement of religious renewal that teaches the importance of and ability to read scripture. The Muslim citizen blends these projects, demands little of the state, and works on their self-improvement to form a better Egypt.

**Post-Literacy, Post-Revolution**

What kinds of opportunities for transformation does Islamic literacy development bring about? Does KIP’s literacy development cause a sort of rupture between pre-revolutionary times, and life in revolution/counter-revolutionary/post-revolutionary times? *Knowledge is Power* reproduces the social differences that mark distinct levels of education in highly stratified classes, that make up a logic of difference among people that impedes the possibilities of the sorts of social relations that can be formed through such a movement. Literacy workers are optimistic that their campaign, like those of historical precedent in China, Nicaragua and India, will soon be realized in Egypt. They
trust in history and the expertise of development and education specialists that preach literacy’s promises. Knowledge Is Power has now entered its fourth year, but under drastically different conditions from when they first launched the campaign. Today they maintain a visible media presence, and continue to open new classrooms. They move forward.

Those with experience in literacy in Egypt explained to me that the biggest problem they face is retention: while people could pass the literacy exam and be deemed legally literate, most of these people forget over time, since they do not use their new skills. Nabil at the Egyptian Bible Society explained how neoliterates required further exercises in reading and writing in order for them to be able to use it in real life (where ‘real life’ meant reading the Bible). Literacy planners attempt to address this problem through post-literacy programming that introduces the neoliterates to longer texts and offers an extended period for them to familiarize themselves with their newly formed skills. As one literacy advocate put it, “if we cannot make reading a part of their lives, then it is natural that they will forget what they learned.” Post-literacy is the corrective to literacy in the way that literacy is the corrective to the national education system. Post-literacy is a program that anticipates the failure of the program that precedes it. Post-literacy is the class that comes next, it is the reminder. In this way, the ‘post’ in post-literacy can be used to describe what is happening in Egypt today as a post-revolution, a moment that comes after, less of a break from revolution than a way to describe what became unrealized. Unlike counter-revolution, which portrays the losses of January 25th, post-revolution is neither hopeful, nor despairing, it is just life.
Bibliography

Literacy Curricula


Cited Amr Khaled Sources

Television series


Books and Discussion Forums


Video Clips


“Al-Qirā’a Ḥayāt: Tasmīyyat al-Mashru’ [Reading is Life: Naming the Project].” Last modified September 2, 2012. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_2sW2w721OE.


Secondary Literature


Caton, Steven Charles. 1990. “Peaks of Yemen I Summon”: Poetry as Cultural Practice


Farr, Cecilia Konchar. 2005. Reading Oprah: How Oprah’s Book Club Changed the Way


328–68.


University Press.


———. 2010. “New Media and Political Dissent in Egypt.” Revista de Dialectología Y


Khamis, Sahar. 2004. “Multiple Literacies, Multiple Identities: Egyptian Rural Women’s Readings of Televised Literacy Campaigns.” In *Women and Media in the Middle*


Glossary and Abbreviations

Organizations and Institutions

ASFEC – Arab States Fundamental Education Centre
EBS – Egyptian Bible Society
CEOSS – Christian Evangelical Organization for Social Services
GAAE – General Authority for Adult Education
KIP – Knowledge Is Power
SCAF – Supreme Council of Armed Forces
UNESCO – United Nations Education and Scientific Cultural Organization

Glossary

*adab* – literature, etiquette

*ʿashwaʾiyya* – informal settlement, slum

*dāʿwa* – lit. “call” or “invitation” to Islam, a wide-spread modern movement of Islamic revival

*dāʾiya* – preacher

*dars* – lesson

*gamʿiyya* – association

*ḥadīth* – sayings and practices of Muhammad

*ʿibāda* – worship, esp. ritual worship

*ikhlaṣ* – sincerity

*īmān* – faith

*khaṭīb* – sermon-giver, lecturer

*khayr* – good works

*kitāb* – book (scripture, Bible, Quran)

*maḥw al-ummiyya* – literacy, lit. “eradication of illiteracy”

*muṣallā* – prayer space

*muṣḥaf* – the written form of the Quran

*nahda* – renaissance

*qirāʾa* – verbal noun of *q-*r-’, to read, recite, proclaim

*saʿāda* – happiness

*sidq* – truthfulness

*tafsīr* – quranic interpretive tradition

*tajwīd* – rules of pronunciation for Quran recitation

*tanmiyya* – development

*tanmiyya bashariyya* (or *tanmiyya dhattiyya*) – personal development

*tilāwa* – verbal noun of *t-*l-’w, to read, recite

*ummi* – non-literate, unlettered

ʿulama’ – class of learned specialists of Islamic law and theology

*wahī* – inspiration, revelation