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ABSTRACT This paper attempts to show that while the production of waste may be universal, the threat it poses is not. In order to explain and justify the question 'what type of problem is waste', the paper begins by attempting to, first, provincialise the 'environmental' framing of waste by examining the category's historically changing problematisations in Western Europe and North America, and, second, through a critique of Mary Douglas's work Purity and danger, to argue that waste should be theorised ethnographically rather than analytically. It then argues that, in Egypt, the materiality of litter and the sociality of waste work are sublimated into a religio-civilisational register based on the central trope of cleanliness rather than environment. It does so by considering various meanings and inflexions of the word 'cleanliness' in vernacular usage, the way the terms environment and pollution are used, naming conventions for waste collectors and anti-litter campaigns.

KEYWORDS waste, Egypt, Zabbaleen, Islam, cleanliness

WHAT TYPE OF PROBLEM IS WASTE IN EGYPT?

INTRODUCTION

This paper is part of the effort to study 'variable forms of subjectivity' (Hawkings and Muecke 2003: xiv) with respect to waste in specific settings—in this case, contemporary Egypt. A topic of growing interest in a variety of disciplines (e.g. Crang and Gregson 2015), waste is being worked on by anthropologists in many settings (Reno 2015) including Arab-majority societies (outstanding work of the previous generation includes Jolé 1989; Jolé 1991; more recent examples, McKee 2015; Winegar 2016), where several recent events underscore its particular significance: the 2016 ban on the production and distribution of plastic shopping bags in Morocco; the 'trash crisis' Beirut, with its iconic images of rivers of waste broadcast on international media; the importance of trash clean up as a process of 'aesthetic ordering' after the Egyptian revolution (Winegar 2011; Winegar 2016); or the public accumulations of waste that have proliferated in Tunisia, indexing postrevolutionary political upheaval (dissolution of local councils previously responsible for waste management; falling budgets; public sector employment reform). Events such as these gather publics, telescoping seemingly local problems into vast movements of political contestation by instantiating state neglect (Fredericks 2013), bear witness to infrastructural collapse and transformation toward what geographers have termed 'people as infrastructure' (Simone, 2004) and anthropologists 'vital infrastructures of trash' (Fredericks, 2014), and underpin economies (Alexander and Reno 2012) as waste becomes a focus for coping tactics and labour in the context of financial crisis, leading to a rise in scavenging and informal recycling activities as well as innovative cultures of repair and reuse, as people seek to rekindle the value in discarded things and prolong objects' usefulness beyond their usual lifespans.

While all societies produce waste, and its trans-historic and universal demand to be managed seems incontestable (Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2011: 55), it is also profoundly contextual. Even the most obvious of such contextual factors, such as the makeup of the waste stream

(organic/inorganic; high density-low volume/low density-high volume…), the repercussions of different urban fabrics on collection service, or the articulation of governmental infrastructures with the local informal sector, are nevertheless often sidelined in attempts to reform 'solid waste management.' For instance in the early 2000s when the Egyptian state contracted solid waste management firms, aesthetic and symbolic concerns related to the appearance of 'modernity' led to the adoption of collection technologies that were not always appropriate to the narrow streets of some neighbourhoods (Furniss 2010; Furniss 2012) and the failure to consider how the new system would interface with the extant informal sector led to significant competition and negotiation over who would collect the waste, conceptualized as a resource (Desvaux and Furniss 2015).

Such contextual specificities extend still further, for instance to residents' waste disposal behaviours and expectations with respect to service provision, which are underpinned by more substratal notions and concerns. Thus, a different example from the time when foreign firms were contracted to manage Cairo's waste better illustrates what this paper aims to explore. Considering itself a delegate of the Governorate, one of these firms (Spanish) decided to put the Cairo Governorate logo on its bins. This logo features the name *al-Qāhira* [Cairo] in stylized lettering beneath the a skyline consisting of domes and minarets (**Figure 1**). When the company deployed these, public authorities and residents of the city were outraged by the association between refuse and the logo's religious motifs. The bins had to be withdrawn until the company had painstakingly ground the image of every last one (**Figure 2**).

I have been conducting fieldwork in Cairo since 2007, largely in the neighbourhoods where the city's informal sector waste collectors and recyclers (*Zabbaleen*) live, especially Manshiet Nasser (I also lived in Ezbet Al-Nakhl for 5 months in 2009). Around 2013 I began spending more time in Ezbet Abu-Hashish, the main site around which Cairo's itinerant scrap collector (*bikia*) business is organized. Relative to my other work, the ambition of this article is to adopt a more zoomed-out perspective, which is reflected in an omnivorous mix of sources consisting of vignettes from

everyday life, signage in the public space, media discourse, and the empirical material contained in published studies on Egypt. Having been attentive to the way waste is framed and debated in various settings, through the media, and by a variety of people I have met in Egypt during approximately 23 months living in the country and on shorter return visits over the past ten years, I have become progressively convinced of two propositions: first, that waste is not principally conceived of as an 'environmental' problem in Egypt, and second, that 'environment' as a category is understood differently in Egypt than in Europe and North America.

If it is true that in a comparative perspective waste and environment are terms of 'disjunctive homonimity' rather than 'correspondence of meaning' (Col and Graeber 2011: vii-viii), clearly there is great potential for mistakes of register in political debates and practical action related to the contemporary ecological crisis and the Anthropocene (COP22 was held in Marrakech in 2016), vis-à-vis southern and eastern Mediterranean societies and more broadly. However the conclusions this paper aims to draw from the manner in which household waste might threaten ideals with respect to civilization, religion, and cleanliness, and local imaginaries construe environment as itself contaminating, concern the way waste should be studied. Its aims are, from the perspective of waste or 'discard' studies, to 'provincialise' the 'environmental' framing of waste, and from the perspective of the discipline of anthropology, to suggest that 'the problem of waste' should be theorized ethnographically rather than analytically (Col and Graeber 2011).

I will begin by outlining a *prima facie* case for the first point, on the basis of some historical data that invite us to see the problem of waste as embedded in shifting practices, rather than as an abstract category, in Europe and North America. I will then explain the disciplinary relevance of second aim by positioning it as a critique of Mary Douglas's work *Purity and Danger*, which often invoked in studies of waste within the discipline, and still moreso without, but is rarely discussed in depth. These two sections provide the epistemological basis and some elaborations on how I want to approach the question of 'what type of problem is waste in Egypt,' as well as what I mean by that question. Finally, in a manner that is more evocative than definitively demonstrative, I will

try to suggest that in Egypt was is a problem of cleanliness. By seeking to show how cleanliness is in turn connected to a complex series of notions relating to civilisation, in the dual sense of civilised manners and civilizational grandeur (Elias 1973 [1939]) and piety, the paper seeks to sketch the set of values that are threatened by ineffective waste management in Egypt. Its sections include a discussion of the register in which physical garbage and waste work are generally framed, including conceptions of environment and pollution, and contestation over naming conventions for waste collectors; and the linguistic and moral registers through which waste is problematised and its 'proper' management is promoted, particularly in public signage. These sublimate the materiality of litter and the sociality of waste work into a religio-civilisational register in which environment is of limited relevance.

PROVINCIALIZING THE ENVIRONMENTAL FRAMING OF WASTE

The notion that the production of wastes and their improper management threatens 'the environment' is a recent development in Western Europe and North America (Strasser 2000; Barles 2005; Weber and Oldenziel 2013). Prior to WWII, and in a manner that shifted from one period to another, waste threatened things like health and morality (think: the Victorian hygienists (Hamlin 1985)), the viability of the household or national economy in a context of scarcity (think: war-time rationing and recycling schemes (Cooper 2008; Riley 2008; Thorsheim 2013)), and religio-moral narratives enacted and exhibited through thrift (think: the 'Protestant ethic' applied to throwing things away (McNeill and Vrtis 2011; Oldenziel and Veenis 2013)).

This is not a linear history of rupture so much as one of sedimentation, as '"new" garbage practices have been overlaid on the old' (Hawkins 2001: 12). Framings remain behind or re-emerge as major and minor themes at different times. For instance the contemporary emphasis on household recycling is not only underpinned by an environmental discourse. It is also a moralised one of personal responsibility, partially concerned with purging consumer guilt. The critique of household recycling presently articulated by a growing number of activists and academics (Leonard

2010; MacBride 2012) is partly an excavation of such inherited logics. The discomfort one can feel in the presence of such arguments is itself a sign of the deep ethical roots and psychological purposes served by rituals that allow for minimising the residual category of materials and artefacts one must bear responsibility for having 'thrown away,' for example selling or donating old items in an attempt to give them 'second lives' (Ortar 2015) or sorting household waste for recycling (Hawkins 2001; Hawkins 2006). Framings of the waste problem continue to evolve. Increased interest in the Anthropocene and shifting political outlooks are generating new questions about both what constitutes waste, how it threatens us, and how best to deal with it (Furniss, Tastevin and Joulian 2016).

If it is anachronistic to believe waste poses the same sort of problem at all moments in time, I believe the new anthropology of waste and the emergent field of 'discard studies' should be guided methodologically and epistemologically by the same principle, *mutatis mutandis*. Rather than adopting a universalist approach—asserting, for example, that all waste is ultimately 'matter out of place' (Douglas 2002)—our premise should be that although all societies generate waste, what constitutes the category, where it comes from, who is responsible for its creation and management, what sort of a problem it poses, and how best to deal with it, are subject to huge variation across societies—and debate within them.

The literature on waste in anthropology is growing fast (see Reno 2015), but the question 'what type of problem is waste' suggests quite a specific project for which there are relatively few emulable examples. For instance two recent articles about waste in the Negev desert of Israel (McKee 2015) and Cairo (Winegar 2016) in my view treat waste and the discourses surrounding in a different way, as having 'practical value in a system of agency' (Warnier 2006: 187), to borrow a phrase from material culture. These articles thus show what characterizing others as litterers or theatrically picking up trash while wearing surgical gloves can *do*, politically: justify various forms of social control and dispossession in the first case, or assert class yearning or disdain and reassert 'aesthetic order' in a manner that doubles-back on the inversion of authority produced when the

city's public spaces temporarily became places of contestation, in the latter. What I am proposing here does not contradict those types of approaches, and I think our only disagreement would be over emic perspectives, which McKee explicitly eschews (McKee 2015: 734), for reasons good reason in the case she studies (to do otherwise would implicitly accept a politically problematic definition of belonging in terms of orderliness and cleanliness).[1]

One example I have found inspiring is the demonstration of how Japan's elaborate system of waste separation, while having had a limited effect in reducing the amount of rubbish the country produces, has taken on great importance in generating Bourdieusian-type struggles for 'distinction' by embedding recycling into fields of competition and status between families and housewives in particular (Hawkins 2006: Chap. 5). The use of transparent bags on which family names are often written and the organization of families into multi-household clusters (Kirby 2011: Chap. 8) with shared responsibility for waste—resembling micro-credit circles—make recycling a tournament for competitive display of orderliness and obedience to civic duty, with the potential for social shaming those virtues put at stake in Japan. Discourses around environment and pollution, meanwhile, are interlocked with a series of preoccupations over national identity as well as notions of social purity and hygiene, in which waste in the sense of what people throw away has relatively little importance (Kirby 2011).

BEYOND MOOP: TOWARD AND ETHNOGRAPHIC RATHER THAN ANALYTIC UNDERSTANDING OF 'THE PROBLEM OF WASTE'

Nowadays, one can get the impression that the only reason Mary Douglas's 1966 book continues to be printed under the title *Purity and Danger* instead of *Matter out of Place* is to get people

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[1] Winegar's 2011 version of her article on cleaning brigades in Tahrir square is in my view an example of the risk McKee identifies. Arguing that through these acts Egyptian youth showed they were 'energetic and efficient,' 'clean, well-behaved citizens, not dirty threats to the social order' and consequently, that 'they deserved and were capable of democracy [...] [and] had the wherewithal to build a society through grassroots, democratic means' Winegar, J. 2011. 'Taking Out the TrashYouth Clean Up Egypt After Mubarak', *Middle East Report*, 259(Summer 2011): 32-5. I believe it naturalized a certain form of upper class contempt.

to read a least a couple pages past the cover (which it is not clear many of them do anyway). The concept has become so widespread that people attending Burning Man are invited to manage 'MOOP' (matter out of place) as part of the festival's 'leave no trace' ethic. Quite unlike Douglas's writings on the environment (Douglas 1970), including the lecture in which she tries to draw out the implications of *Purity and Danger* for debates about the environment (Douglas 1980)—which seem all but forgotten in this domain—quoting the statement 'matter out of place,' usually approvingly and in order to apply it, but also sometimes in the goal of critiquing or complementing it, has become like a *bismillah* (opening ritual invocation) in literature on waste. In particular, somewhat the way Geertz was once the voice of anthropology to non-anthropologists, the 'matter out of place' principle is very commonly cited in other disciplines, such as geography, where it seems to stand for 'the' anthropological viewpoint on the topic (Bickerstaff and Walker 2003: 40; Campkin and Cox 2007: where it constitutes the organizing principle for an entire edited volume; e.g. Riley 2008: 80; Moore 2009: 428, 34-35; see Moore 2012: for a discussion of 'matter out of place' relative to other paradigms for understanding waste in geography).

My knowledge of Douglas' legacy outside the study of waste is very limited, but if the fact that one can publish an article largely devoted to cleansing rituals under the title 'Clean people, unclean people' without citing Douglas once (Regnier 2015) is anything to go by, she casts less of a shadow in other directions. Douglas does however continue to be considered seminal within anthropological studies of waste, although there is a tension in her work's reception over whether it stands for a universalist or a particularist definition of waste. For some authors, Douglas appears to stand for the category's relativity (Argyrou 1997: 162; McKee 2015: 733; Winegar 2016: 609, 20). However when Fredericks argues that 'the meaning and thus political import of waste is not a transhistorical, cultural, or geographical given, but, rather, matters differently in specific conjunctures and their attendant sociotechnical complexes,' she considers this a point of disagreement with Douglas (Fredericks 2014: 533). A number of anthropologists and sociologists are now attempting to articulate the ways in which waste is at least *more* than just 'matter out of

place.' Their arguments include the idea that it is also a 'concept out of order' (Gille 2007: 23) although that seems implicit, even integral in Douglas's original formulation, or that it is not just something out of place but also produces spatial relationships (Reno 2015: 564) and phenomenological experiences *of* place (Reno 2011).

I would like to add two points to these 'waste is *more* than MOOP' critiques, before giving two arguments of a 'waste is *not* MOOP' type, which is my own position. First, why might the MOOP concept be inadequate though not necessarily inaccurate? In its structuralist pursuit of 'laws' or 'constants,' it ascribes to waste a single immutable intelligibility, based on a topological conception in terms of place, placement, location. While waste is not frozen in this conception, shifts are construed as movements between fixed poles, which produce re-categroizations. As a formalist theory based on systems of opposition and relation between invariants, it is subject to all the critiques Francois Laplantine develops in his argument for a rhythmic and botanical ('modal') as opposed to solidified and mineralogical (structural) anthropology (Laplantine 2015). In particular, it excludes material transformation so central to the way waste *qua* garbage is treated (Gabrys, et al. 2013 provide an elaboration of materiality issues with respect to waste plastic, although one contributor still manages to contend that through material transformations plastics 'acquire dirt' and 'become "matter out of place"'), and the temporal dimension of waste (this critique is elaborated at length in Viney 2014). In addition, many contemporary applications of Douglas pay too little attention to the specificity of 'dirt,' treating it as interchangeable with cognates such as rubbish, waste, junk, trash, or garbage. In fact, as an analytic category or concept, 'dirt' never really got much uptake (contra: Campkin and Cox 2007), and perhaps with good reason. When it is not treated as a term of art—and sometimes even when it is—it rings untrue for most of what discard studies or the anthropology of waste is currently concerned with. One way of spinning this would simply be to say that if being conceptually or physically 'out of place' is constitutive of 'dirt' as Douglas understood it, then much of the material of discards simply falls partially or entirely outside of her framework (without contradicting it in the special cases to which

it applies). One consideration in limiting the concept's scope in this way could be the centrality of the *sui generis* cases of societies with caste and her own fieldwork, among the 'very pollution-conscious' Lele of Equatorial Africa, to Douglas's theorizing.

My view is that more fundamentally, MOOP pounds waste into a flat, two- or even one-dimensional concept in which contextual specificities serve little purpose except to re-elaborate or re-demonstrate the underlying explanatory principle. Although the ethnographic detail in *Purity and Danger* might be understood to contradict that reading, Douglas in fact dismissed context-specific interpretive anthropology, calling it 'sociology in a teacup' (2002: 138) and declaring openly her 'prejudice' against 'piecemeal explanations,' in which she included all explanatory efforts limited to 'one kind of context' (Douglas 2002: vii, see also 51). The variations for which her theory allows (and which she explored comparatively in the book) are only as to what constitutes (dis)order. At the end of the day, all cases amount to the same problem, and all 'dirt' is explicable in terms of the intolerability of 'disorder.' This kind of 'same shit, different pile,' approach is precisely the 'heteronymous harmony between different worlds' (Col and Graeber 2011: vii) that Graeber and Da Col consider antithetical to ethnographic theory. One of the lesser but much overlooked ironies of this debate is that in the preface to the 2002 edition of *Purity and Danger*, Douglas resiled from the 'matter out of place' argument, calling the discussion of the Abominations of Leviticus (Chapter 3)—the book's clearest and most memorable attempt to argue that disorder on the cognitive level translates into what we call 'impurity' on the cultural level—a 'major mistake' (2002: xiii). She explains that this argument was premised on Durkheim and Mauss's essay on the universal tendency to classify, which led her to believe that anything 'defying the categories of our universe arouses deep feelings of disquiet' (2002: 213). The argument was that tabooed objects, sources of pollution, forms of dirt, acquire this status as a result of cultural embroidering around 'disquieting' singularities that disrupt the patterns human beings believe govern the order of things. This was immediately critiqued by pointing out that the life processes—birth, death, sex, defecation—are recurrent sources of pollution in many cultures, yet are frequent and 'natural,' not anomalous

category errors (Ortner 1973: 49). This is an important criticism, but not the one that caused Douglas herself to later relinquish her position. Rather, it was the indefensibility, as a generalized premise, of the idea that the fragmentation of the world necessarily provokes cognitive discomfort, which is an overly generalizing and psychologizing proposition to extend to all human beings. She also came to regard it as overly reductivist when trying to explain religious phenomena and devoted her last major work before her death to interpreting Leviticus in other ways, for instance through a supposed spatial logic of circularity, and analogies to the physical layout of places of worship (see Fardon 1999: 185-205).[2]

'CLEANLINESS IS INDEED THE MOST IMPORTANT THING'

When in Cairo I tell vendors they can keep the plastic bag they invariably want to put your purchases in, even a single beverage bottle you intend to consume immediately, many fail to understand what the point of this could be. (Indeed, many refuse to heed the protest and insist you take the bag). If, as I sometimes do, I offer by way of explanation a comment about 'protecting the environment,' the notion is by no means incomprehensible to them. But it frames my actions differently than they do when unprompted, as one young man did, smiling in approval and telling me: 'you are right, cleanliness is indeed the most important thing.'

'Environmentalism' in a Euro-American sense does exist in Egypt, but is a largely marginal form of bourgeois elitism (cf. Mawdsley 2004) and not a widespread way of framing the waste problem at any level of Egyptian society. When 'environment' is invoked, especially by the upper classes (paradoxically), it is often to refer to something quite different than what the term calls to mind in Europe or North America. It would be erroneous to assume that what threatens 'the environment' is 'pollution'—or that pollution is a category concerned with things like air and water

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[2] I draw in part here on a 26 Feb 2006 interview with Mary Douglas conducted by Professor MacFarlane of Cambridge's department of Anthropology (available on his website) in which she clarifies some of these points retrospectively and provides numerous autobiographical details.

contaminants, or 'litter'. For instance, Argyrou (1997) shows how in Cyprus, where environmentalism is seen by many of the working class as 'the product of a foreign, morally inferior' and effeminate culture (160), 'litter' is not considered a source of pollution the way effluents, decomposing material or excrement is, and what 'destroys the environment' are things like forest fires. Thus, the anti-litter campaigns Argyrou observed in Cyprus typically adopted a register of 'civilised manners' and 'cleanliness,' even as they remained principally elite-driven and largely ineffective.

There is no doubt that pollution problems such as air quality are a major concern in Cairo, and the infamous 'black cloud,' produced by farmers' annual burning of rice straw, is often credited with having produced a ferment in consciousness around 'environmental' issues in the 1990s (Hopkins & Mehanna 2001). Nevertheless, the authors of the book *People and Pollution* found that pollution [*talawwith*] had more resonance with Cairenes than the concept of environment [*bīʾa*], which is generally associated with another constellation of meanings.

Bīʾa, environment, is often used to refer to the social milieu. For example in 2013 when the Minister of Justice Mahfouz Saber (who surprisingly later resigned over this comment) was asked on the television show *Al-Beyt Beytak* whether the 'son of a cleanliness worker' [*ibn ʿamil nazafa*] could be appointed as a judge, the Minister explained that this was not possible because 'A judge needs to be from a (social) medium [*wasat*] that is appropriate to this job. With my respect to the cleaner and anyone less than him, or higher, the environmental *milieu* [*al-wasat al-biʾi*] that a judge grows up in has to be appropriate.'

While this type of construction, in which environment is more nominal than adjectival, is not wholly unfamiliar in English, the word *bīʾa* is in fact most often used in Cairene vernacular to refer to low class people. What is interesting is that while in theory (for instance according to the example given in Hinds and Badawy's Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic), this construction should specify that the environment is 'low,' *bīʾa watiyya*, in usage the 'lowness' of the environment is not specified—or no longer, since Hinds and Badawy wrote thirty years ago. Exposure to the

'environment' is thus, today, inherently problematic or always 'low.' To say that someone or something is 'environment' is to characterize it as low class or vulgar. This usage has attracted debate in Egyptian society and in 2016 a friend from Shubra, who trained as a pharmacist and now works in development for a large bilateral donor, shared an article with me on social media that deplored this usage of term. It noted that *bīʾa* is used to describe anything that is perceived to be lacking in good taste, vulgar or characteristic of a parvenu, including food, clothing, music, living in certain places, going on certain kinds of vacations, or speaking poor English. The criticized this usage on the basis of a nationalist argument, characterizing it as a form of self-loathing since the term's use valorized 'foreign' and 'consumerist' habits, and stigmatized local or authentic things as 'environment.' When we discussed the article I pointed out that a friend in his forties from Manshiet Nasser with ties to the waste collecting profession (someone of very low social class, but who holds a law degree) had told me that prior to 2005 he was unaware *bīʾa* was pejorative. He had learned of this usage for the first time in an NGO training in which the facilitator informed the waste collectors that they should not tolerate anyone referring to them as *biʾa*. The development worker who shared the article, who is in his twenties and of middle but not upper social class, replied he had always known the term to have that usage: 'I grew up with it,' he said. He then explained that when he had worked on development projects in informal neighbourhoods, local politicians and organizations such as schools almost invariable referred to their activities as 'environmental projects,' even when they had nothing to do with the natural or physical setting and were focused on things like gender or local economic development.

Returning to the *People and Pollution* study, respondents' number one definition of pollution was garbage, which to my North American sensibility is a surprising result: although it is not illogical for me to associate pollution with garbage, the word more readily calls to mind diffuse, micro-particulate problems than litter or landfills. What is most interesting, however, is the way respondents gave a series of responses conveying a metaphorical conception of pollution with religio-moral overtones, identifying the poor, drugs, hooliganism, sex, and other failures to observe

religious prescriptions concerning morality as sources of 'pollution.' Accordingly, when cleanliness revealed itself to be the central trope for understanding pollution, this referred not only to physical and aesthetic 'cleanliness,' but encompassed a series of symbolisms that might more closely correspond to what could be referred to as 'purity' (Hopkins and Mehanna 1996: 18-21).

ZABBALEEN OR *MUNAZAFEEN*: NAMING CAIRO'S WASTE COLLECTORS

Let us consider the work of waste collection and in particular how the city's informal waste collectors—Zabbaleen—are described by themselves and others. The term, which comes from the root word *zibala* [garbage], is stigmatising. 'Zabbal' or 'son of a zabbal' can be used as insults. Most of the waste collectors I know would prefer to hide the fact that they are 'Zabbaleen' in mixed social settings, for instance from their classmates if they attend a school outside their neighbourhood. While dissimulation is probably the most common route, in some settings and under some circumstances, the term is contested by the 'garbage people' to whom it refers. The rhetorical efforts they deploy in the struggle over how their work should be labelled and understood are of three kinds. The first is a movement to re-appropriate the word and wear it with pride by publicly affirming that they are Zabbaleen and not ashamed to say so; this could be compared to the feminist slogan 'cunt power' or certain uses of the term 'nigger.' This is fairly marginal on the whole, and most common among powerful Zabbaleen who have roles in politics or NGOs and which to claim some representativeness with respect to the identity, to which they are in fact often marginal. What is of greater interest here are effort to re-name the profession in a manner that portray it positively. These break down into two strands. The first is in terms of cleaning the city, and the second is in terms of protecting the environment. The latter discourse is employed mainly by elites outwith the profession, such as the Christian bourgeoisie who founded and run the Association for the Protection of the Environment, or multilingual Zabbaleen who adopt this framing when seeking to give a positive portrayal of their work to 'Western' interlocutors from whom they are seeking funding or to whom they are giving documentary or TV interviews. This

concept of 'environmental protection' is absent from the struggles over the profession's label, status, and social significance amongst most Egyptians, notably in domestic media. The positive, antonymic construal of the profession in such settings is most often articulated around the act of 'cleaning.'

Thus, when members of the Zabbaleen 'community' like the political figure Shahatta al-Moqaddes, the NGO worker Ezzat Naem, or the well-educated personality Romany Badir appear on *Egyptian* television to be interviewed (it's almost always the same people who are interviewed), they invariably find some appropriate place in the interview to make the point that they are not *zabbaleen*, i.e. people who make garbage, but *munazafeen*, people who clean the city. These individuals had repeated opportunities to make this point on national television in after the Minister of Justice made the comment quoted above. The announcers on such shows as *Al-Beyt Beytak* and *Al-Qahira w-al-Nas* generally showed polite agreement and a kind of condescending delight when their interviewees made this point, as though they found it touching, somewhat 'cute.' It has no real effect on usage, but what is interesting is the manner in which the binary is constructed by the speakers: the action which they claim to perform and the positively connoted activity with which they wish to be associated is 'cleaning.'

The earliest civil society organisation in the Zabbaleen neighbourhood of Manshiet Nasser, which was created and supported through international development efforts aimed at creating grassroots organisations that would provide an alternative interlocutor to the Church, called itself *rigal gama' al-qimama*, or the association of 'men who collect garbage.' Apparently a translation from the English (which is consistent with the association's origins), that phrase never got any uptake from the Zabbaleen themselves. Nor do they commonly use the formal or Modern Standard Arabic designation of the profession, *'amil nazafa*, even though it is close to the term *munazafeen* (which they push in the media) since it also employs the word 'cleanliness.' *'Amil nazafa* is, however, relatively common in Egyptian newspaper articles and TV reportages, especially if they are making a polite effort to be politically correct or respectful of their subjects. For instance when the anchor

of show '90 minutes' addressed the issue of the Minister of Justice's comments, he prefaced his interview, with Shahatta al-Muqaddes, by saying that 'I have a problem with the term Zabbaleen, which is a slang term. *'Umal al-nazafa* [cleanliness workers] are "employees" [*muwazafeen*], employees just like engineers or doctors.' His insistence on describing the Zabbaleen as 'employees' seeks to invoke the positive connotations associated with the term since independence, after which being a *muwazaf* was promoted as the appropriate aspiration for university-educated Egyptians, buttressed by the guarantee of a position in the civil service for all university graduates. The announcer then showed photos of statues of waste collectors in Japan, as an example to viewers of a country that respects its 'cleanliness workers.' In the interview he panderingly called al-Moqaddes 'respectable' in every other question, then praised the way al-Muqaddes cited the Qur'an and the Sunna despite being Christian, implying that a man who cites the Holy texts could not be a 'Zabbal' or 'garbage man.' It is this association between cleanliness and faith that I would now like to turn to.

FASHIONING THE NON-LITTERING EGYPTIAN CITIZEN: FAITH AND CIVILISED MANNERS

The word for 'clean,' *naẓīf*, actually usually pronounced *naḍīf* in the Cairene vernacular, has a number of usages that are unfamiliar to English speakers and are lost in the term's translation to 'clean.' One of the simplest but also most striking of these is its use as a synonym for 'good,' in both the moral sense and the sense of quality. Although I was vaguely aware of this usage for some time it crystallized on an occasion when I had to buy a new tire for a rickety bicycle I used to ride from Manshiet Nasser to my office near Tahrir square and back again, along the southern all of the old city. The shopkeeper said 'OK, you have two choices. Do you want the Chinese one, or one that is *anḍaf shuwaya*.' 'Chinese' is a synonym for poor quality, and the butt of many jokes. His way of asking me if I wanted one of higher quality (and more expensive) was to say 'do you want something a little bit *cleaner*.' For a while afterward I made a point of saying 'clean' or 'cleaner' every time I wanted to say 'good' or 'better' in a sentence and the substitution was seamless.

It is possible to encounter this usage in any context, but it is especially common when

describing people and weighing the appropriateness of relations with them. It is thus often used in the same breath as 'respectable' in describing the reputation of a family or a young girl. It is also common in describing other countries and the world 'outside' [*barra*] Egypt. For instance in describing their frustrations with Egypt, youth who want to immigrate often fantasise about going somewhere 'cleaner' or describe other countries as clean, or possessing 'cleanliness' (in the nominal rather than adjectival form). 'Oh, you are from Canada? But in your country there is cleanliness [*nadafa*], isn't there?' someone once said to me in astonishment at why I was living in Manshiet Nasser.

Cleanliness indeed has a central place in Egypt in the conception of the hierarchy of peoples, which is one that emphasises secular cleanliness as a token of social progress, even while often commingling sacred (purity) and profane (cleanliness) forms: Purification of the soul [*taṭhīr al-nafs*] and sterilisation of medical instruments [*taṭhīr adawāt girahīyya*] are achieved by the same verb, grammatically collapsing the religious and Pasteurian schemes into one. In his fascinating study *Putting Islam to Work*, Gergory Starrett discusses how Egyptian school textbooks—government produced and drilled-in through rote memorisation—place 'the sunna of the Prophet in the domain of the urban planner and the public health official,' and establish 'linkages between cleanliness (*e.g.* of streets) and civilisation' (1998: 141). For example, students in the fifth grade learn, or are forced to memorise, passages like this:

> Cleanliness is next to Godliness [*al-nidhafa min al-iman*], and distinguishes a Muslim person, because our Islamic religion impels the Muslim to it […] Cleanliness is a token of advancement and civilization, strongly bound to the progress of peoples, for advanced peoples are cleaner in their attire than others, and in their food and drink, and their streets. […] Islam is a religion of cleanliness, and therefore it's a religion of advancement and civilization. (A verbatim quote translated by Starrett 1998: 140)

Starrett elsewhere considers a series of other textbook extracts that promote *wudu'* (ablutions) in hygienic terms, extolling the way they protect the body from disease; praise water and soap; and outline the importance of purification of the bodily orifices in terms of the elimination of smell and disease (1995a: 961).

In addition to pedagogical materials, it can be interesting to consider municipal signs, which

Kaviraj has argued become 'the emblem of the voice of the state' in the effort to enforce a civilising project requiring attention to minute details of behaviour that policing cannot achieve (1997: 85). These are most often ignored—in India Kaviraj gives the example of a photo in which a row of people are urinating beneath a sign bearing the very British turn of phrase 'commit no nuisance'— which in some ways is precisely what makes them interesting since they reveal 'in an everyday form the contest between a bourgeois order of the middle class and those who flout its rules' (Kaviraj 1997: 84)

Only rarely do efforts to fashion non-littering Egyptian citizens invoke the 'environment'. The only anti-littering signs I have found that rely on this concept are ones sponsored by the petrol station Emarat Misr along the highways leading to the new—and very upscale—neighbourhoods of New Cairo and in particular the 'Fifth Settlement,' where the new campus of the American University in Cairo is located. These depict someone littering out of a car window, with a red line through it, like a no-smoking sign. The caption reads "Don't throw things out. Protect the Environment' (**Figure 3**). The fact that the image features someone littering out of a car window is not insignificant since these are areas without any pedestrian activity and which are largely designed, in an 'American' or indeed 'Gulf' style, around shopping malls and gated compounds, which gives a sense of the neighbourhoods' sociological profiles.

To give an example from a very different geographic and social location, in August 2009 I visited Assyut, a provincial capital in Upper Egypt, for the *mūlid* [religious festival] of the Virgin Mary. The city's boulevards were hung with signs promoting cleanliness. Some were special banners put up that year because of swine flu, but what caught my interest were the permanent signs designed to remind passers-by of the norms of proper behaviour, conveying something of the public authorities' sensibility and approach to this question. One of the main boulevards in the city was hung with a series of signs that read:

al-niẓāfa sulūk ḥaḍārī | Cleanliness is a civilized manner (**Figure 4**)

Since this is an area of Egypt with a not entirely undeserved reputation for violence, where the

police often send home any foreigners disregarding the no-travel advisory, the inclusion of the somewhat wobbly English translation could hardly be interpreted as a addressing itself to a non-Arabophone audience. Printing a sign half in English in a place where no one is dependent on that language and very few even understand it does, however, imbue the phrase with a certain foreignness, a vague association with the West, and an implied belonging to the repertoire of sophisticates (on English as a form of 'cosmopolitan capital' see Kreil 2016). The language therefore is part and parcel of the way the message simultaneously reflects and seeks to reconfigure a particular sense of the association between being 'civilised,' on the one hand, and cleanliness, on the other.

Framing *al-niẓāfa* [cleanliness] in terms of *sulūk ḥaḍārī* [civilised manners] and, conversely, *al-ḥaḍara* [civilisation] in terms of *al-niẓāfa*, all as part of an anti-litter campaign, succinctly brings together 'civilisation' in both of Norbert Elias's senses (Elias 2000), both that of a *civilising process*—a restructuring of social attitudes and people's habits though shifting thresholds of shame and repugnance—and the 'capital C' sense, of civilisational grandeur.

Finally, as Starrett's analysis of textbooks above leads us to expect, one of the most common registers for addressing an anti-littering message to citizens in Egypt is to invoke the 'cleanliness proceeds from faith' trope, which Starett himself notes that he often observed in Egypt (Starrett 1995b: 9; see also Winegar 2016: 615). I encountered a very elaborate set of slogans along these lines at a fee-paying school in Ezbet al Nakhl, largely attended by the children of Zabbaleen. The school is run by nuns and although it addresses itself to neighbourhood elites with social aspirations (families can rarely send all of their children there, so invest significant thought into deciding which ones, and of which gender, they want to make this additional investment in), it remains quite marginal and low class in the overall Egyptian landscape. It is the kind of place that most Egyptians would regard as full of people who are *bīʾa*.

As one entered the school, one was greeted immediately by a sign in block Latin letters, written in English, on which appeared the injunction: "KEEP YOUR SCHOOL CLEAN."

Entering the courtyard, bins were hung a regular intervals along the wall. They were decorated with paintings of cartoon characters such as bears in clown costumes, a man with a moustache, neck tie and a cap brandishing a mop, or a well-dressed and clean-cut 'model' student (a boy). On them were written a variety of phrases, including 'cleanliness proceeds from faith,' 'cleanliness is a civilised manner,' 'cleanliness is a trait (or marker) of civilisation,' 'cleanliness is a civilised habit, be sure to protect it,' 'my school is beautiful, clean, and developed,' and 'leave the place cleaner than you found it.' On the first floor overlooking the courtyard were posters promoting bodily hygiene in the same terms, with photos of bathing, brushing teeth, and medical check ups organised around the central phrase: 'cleanliness is a civilised manner.'

Consistent with the religious sociology of the Zabbaleen profession, the neighbourhood where the school is located is predominantly Christian. This important point provides an opportunity to relativise the 'Islamicness' of the cleanliness discourse with respect to waste (see also Fredericks 2013; Fredericks 2014: 534), which despite its religious inflection I would resist essentialising as a feature of Islam, and prefer to regard as a cross-cutting theme in Egypt.

CONCLUSION

In the context of increasing consumption and 'disposability', the global 'environmental' crisis, and the Anthropocene, 'waste' is a pressing contemporary problem. The material dimensions of this problem cannot be deconstructed by even the most committed relativist, and even if that were possible, I cannot see why anyone would want to do so. Yet, waste is not all just 'matter out of place': there exist genuinely different ways of understanding it. They are not mutually incomprehensible or exclusive, and they are certainly not always ideally adapted. Indeed everything suggests the opposite, both in Egypt where the waste problem persists despite the abundance of seemingly context-specific discourses about the importance of resolving it, and globally, where all the heretofore invented ways of thinking about and dealing with waste have demonstrated their inadequacy. But protecting the 'environment' is probably an even less effective register through

which to turn that around in the minds of people for whom it is, at least partially, a social milieu from which isolation is preferable.

Figure 1. Logo of the Cairo Governorate

Figure 2. Bin on which the logo was printed, then later ground off (grey patch under the logo Enser). Photo: Author

Figure 3. An anti-littering sign inviting motorists not to litter on grounds that they should 'Protect the Environment,' something that is quite rare to see in Egypt. The location of the sign in the wealth car-only neighbourhoods of New Cairo and the fact that it is not government-sponsored are noteworthy. Photo: Author

Figure 4. Government-sponsored public signage in Assyut, Upper Egypt. Photo: Author

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