

## Flirting with Respectability: Gender Relations in the Private Public Sphere

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*A café in Cairo, Egypt, that offers patrons the opportunity to dance for each other creates a kind of liminal public-private sphere, in which societal norms of cross-gender interactions are somewhat relaxed. This easing of social restrictions and the consequent increased ability of young people to flirt with each other comes at the cost of class-inflected social stigma, which marks the café as a morally suspect space in the eyes of the haute bourgeoisie of Cairo. However, this stigma may be of scant importance to the café's patrons who have slim chances of ascending to a higher socioeconomic class anyway.*

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### Introduction

This paper looks at an unusual and limited form of public sphere, the “private public” sphere of a café in Cairo, Egypt, in which one of the attractions for patrons is the opportunity to listen to and dance to popular music. This is not a coffeehouse in the traditional sense of the word, especially as the term is used in Egypt,<sup>1</sup> but an establishment that bills itself as a “disco café.” As I shall discuss, the idea of dancing to music in mixed-gender company is sufficiently unsettling to many people that even the café’s management indicates some ambivalence about the practice, and there are some rules of engagement that both patrons and staff must follow in order to maintain a compromise on respectable comportment. The café’s physical layout and removal from street-level passersby affords its patrons a measure of exclusivity and privacy from casual observation while marking a precise kind of public arena in which certain rules of social etiquette must still be observed. And, despite this delineated arena, the perceptions of non-patrons of the café as violating the public/private divide prevent the patrons from attaining the level of *haute bourgeois* respectability.

The café, El Warda,<sup>2</sup> is located in Downtown Cairo, on the subterranean floor of a large block of shops. Patrons walk from the harshly fluorescent-lit corridor of the shopping area into a dim room lit primarily by black lighting, with zebra-striped fabric upholstery on the chairs and walls, interspersed with pictures of young women in evening wear or swimsuits. In the corner of the room opposite the door is a tiny triangular dance floor, with a DJ booth tucked into it. At the far end of the room is the bar, behind which is the kitchen.

During most of the year – the Islamic holy month of Ramadan is a notable exception – the café opens around noon, and from then until about 8pm, it serves a sedate clientele of middle-aged men who come there to smoke *shisha* and play cards or backgammon, and young married or engaged couples who come to spend some time in each other’s company without the helpfully prying eyes of their friends and family. During these hours, the house sound system is generally set on automatic, in coordination with a notebook computer, to play a mix of Arab (particularly a slickly produced genre called *shababi*<sup>3</sup>) and Western pop music: Tamer Hosny, Shereen Abd el-Wahhab,<sup>4</sup> Celine Dion, and the manager’s favorite, Whitney Houston, are the general order of the day. Reasoning that the bulk of the daytime patrons are starry-eyed couples who want to imbibe

some romantic atmosphere, the management prefers to keep the music on the schmaltzy side.

At 8pm, however, the clientele begins to shift from couples to youthful groups of friends, and these clusters of young people come not only to socialize – they could do that anywhere, and often cheaper than at El Warda – but to listen to music and dance for each other. The DJ switches the music from syrupy pop music to Egyptian *sha’bi*, an energetic genre of music popular with young people and especially among working-class and middle-class youth. The volume rises, more *shishas* are ordered, and there is more of a party atmosphere in effect for the rest of the evening, whether there is an actual party there or not. (Some customers like to hold birthday parties there.) On weekend evenings, there is a house singer who performs a mix of *sha’bi* and *shababi* tunes for the crowd, stimulating more people to dance. Patrons will often leave their *shishas* burning and their tea cooling while they ascend the tiny dance floor and perform – for themselves as well as for each other. The walls along the dance floor are lined with mirrors, and it is common for dancers to address their performance not to their friends but to their own reflections: they practice moves, analyze their footwork, and generally check themselves out to see how they look to others.

It is necessary to describe here the dancing that goes on at El Warda. There is virtually none of the close-contact dancing that Americans, for example, might imagine. Girls and boys hardly touch each other at all, although same-sex contact is more common, analogous to the level of contact in a conga line. The moves tend to center on the hips for both boys and girls — in fact, the moves are often identical for both sexes. To generalize broadly, the dominant style of dancing is a kind of bellydance: not the classical *raqs sharqi* that trained professionals disseminate, but the less formalized variant that, not at all coincidentally, may be seen in a number of Arabic pop music videos. There is a great deal of hip-forward motion and swinging backsides, and a flirtatious air of, to use the apt colloquial phrase, “showing off the goods.” In terms of style, it is not a demure kind of performance, and outside of private parties such as weddings, it is exceedingly rare to see in Cairo.

### Ethnography in negative

It is worth noting that my ethnographic information on the patrons, insofar as I can call it that, comes to me entirely by my own observation, and by a number of conversations with respondents who are not themselves patrons of the café. To wit, these are the manager of the disco café, and various friends and acquaintances of mine with whom I discussed my thoughts on the establishment I had been visiting. Because I was expressly forbidden from speaking with the patrons, I found myself obliged to engage in what I would term “ethnography in negative,” the equivalent of a photographic negative: instead of talking to the patrons of the café, I essentially spoke to everyone *but* them. For this reason, I am willing to admit this as a less than ideal style of ethnographic practice. More salubriously, however, this form of ethnographic inquiry has the benefit of bringing into sharp relief the cultural attitudes of people who do not patronize

the café, forcing them to make explicit the perceptions of the disco café that usually remain implicit.

As far as I have been able to discern, people do not go to El Warda to meet new people. If anything, they go there to hang out with people whom they know already. In fact, although the information I have given thus far may create the impression of a youth haven far from parental mores, parents sometimes come along with their teenaged children, and may even encourage them to show off a little on the dance floor. I wish I had sufficient information to say whether the parents usually have in mind family entertainment or potential matchmaking, but I have not. The reason I have no such information is that I was expressly forbidden by management from talking to patrons in any sort of research capacity. Why the ban? Because, as I learned from several conversations with the manager, they believe that their establishment is only slightly more respectable than a brothel.

The manager – call him Antar – said as much when I sat down with him for an interview. In discussing the clientele of the café, Antar frequently disparaged his customer base. As he put it, “I know what goes on here; the owner knows but he doesn’t want to know...I have to close my eyes: I have to make myself not see.” And what does he (not) see? He said that many girls here come to initiate affairs with men so they can get support for things they want, because the economy is bad. Indeed, he has a very macho take on Egypt’s problems: as he sees it, when the economy is good, and men can earn a reasonable living, they can lay down the law in their own homes as to what their women wear, what they do, and where they go. But when the economy is bad, and men either cannot afford to marry or cannot properly support their families, the girls dress in more revealing clothing and seek to exercise their seductive powers in order to acquire things they want. The latter situation, he says, has pertained in Egypt for the last ten years.

Antar is hesitant to qualify all the patrons as prostitutes and their customers. He preferred to say that many if not most customers are “impolite,” and when I asked what he meant, he reminded me of the girls dancing and the men watching. I asked him if, as seemed to me, many of them were in couples, either dancing together or the girls dancing for their boys. He said it was possible, but “you must understand: in Egypt, dancing is a *crime*.” He means this not in the literal sense of a criminal offense, but in the social sense of an unacceptable public activity.<sup>5</sup> I asked him if the girls I had seen in attendance with their mothers – and the mothers sometimes encourage their daughters to get up and dance for a bit – were searching for husbands among the audience, and he nodded and said, “Yes, some of them, and some of them are looking for a night. The men are looking for a night; they won’t marry someone who shows her body in front of strangers like that.” When I protested that mothers in full *‘abaya* and *higab* wouldn’t do that, and that I have also seen women in *niqab*<sup>6</sup> with their families here, he smirked and said, “Don’t believe everything you see. Those women wear *niqab*, and underneath they wear bikinis!” He admits that some patrons may be ordinary people enjoying themselves, but he is convinced that the majority are looking for either illicit affairs or out-and-out prostitution engagements.

Antar’s assumptions about the nature of his clientele are informed partly by his *sa‘idi*<sup>7</sup> upbringing, through which he has learned to hold virtually all of Cairene culture in contempt as debased, inauthentic and “polluted,” and partly by the very real traditional suspicion toward female performers of dance in public. Historically, the distinction between a female performer who dances in public and a courtesan – and in these less exalted times, a prostitute – has been a fuzzy line in Egypt (*cf.* van Nieuwkerk 1995). Antar makes an associative connection between the café he runs and the nightclubs only a few blocks away downtown where bellydancers perform for drunken men and, sometimes, prostitutes hustle for customers among the drinkers.

In fact, there is no alcohol served at El Warda, which allows for more of what US business-speak might term ‘family-friendly atmosphere’; of course, the lack of alcohol is also a preference for many if not most Egyptians, since most Muslims do not drink, and a great many Copts<sup>8</sup> do not either. I should add that this may not necessarily be the customers’ preference, but there is no way to know for certain. Antar tells me that the owner himself, a pious Muslim, refuses to trade in alcoholic beverages on principle, even though the café somehow possesses the requisite governmental license to deal in alcohol. I asked Antar if his boss were responding to his Muslim customers’ preferences, and Antar dismissed this idea out of hand. “We’d make twice as much if we served alcohol, but he thinks alcohol money is dirty. But,” he added snidely, “there is dancing here!”

A key difference that may or may not mean anything to Antar is that no one is paid to dance at El Warda; all dancers are themselves customers who dance for their own entertainment as much as for anyone else’s. If there are some male customers in attendance who are there just to watch the girls dance, then the vast majority of girls and women dancing seem uninterested in such voyeurs. In other words, there is a conspicuous element of what, following Arjun Appadurai (1996:7), I would qualify as *agentive* pleasure in the dancing here — a pleasure that is either absent or heavily sublimated (for the women, at least) in bellydance nightclubs. Antar would surely argue that this is not the case, since he sees the women here as trolling for customers, but in all the time I have spent at El Warda, I have never seen anyone whom I could identify for certain as a prostitute; nor have I seen any behavior that fits easily into such a categorization. To the best of my judgment, there is not a single prostitute in residence at El Warda — just lots of young people willing to push their boundaries of acceptable mixed-gender and class-marked behavior in public.

These two intertwined issues, public mixed-gender behavior and normative bourgeois comportment, are what help us to understand the unusual nature of the space marked off by the café. El Warda has become a destination for young middle-class Cairenes – the prices, I should note, ensure that the customer base has at least a modest amount of money to spend on leisure – who either seek to push the envelope on acceptable gender-inflected behavior or, as I suspect is more likely, simply don’t care about older standards of such conduct in public. Within the heavily veiled space of the café, which cannot be seen from the street and can just barely be glimpsed from inside the complex, there is an understanding

among the patrons and staff that the rules are a bit broader than in places that trade in bourgeois respectability.

### “Don’t believe everything you see”

It is well, I believe, to linger for a bit on that most overexposed of topics, veiling. While, in general, I agree with Homa Hoodfar that the subject garners more attention than it deserves, to the detriment of more serious matters (1997:15), in regard to El Warda, there are several points worth mentioning. First is the aforementioned matter of the veiled nature of the space, sharply marked off from surrounding establishments in the shopping center by doors upholstered with vinyl cushions that open on to a tiny passageway. There is, in fact, a tunnel through which one must walk in order to get into the café itself, which means that staring through the open door actually reveals nothing. Instead, there is only a hint of something mysterious and perhaps taboo unavailable to the eyes of casual passersby. At the same time, this particular form of *higab* is easily undone, since as often as not, the staff opens the other door, situated right next to the tunnel, which allows the passerby to peer straight in to the dance floor and, frequently, see young women dancing. (I have occasionally entered the café by passing young boys, perhaps not even in their teens yet, gawking open-mouthed into the café from outside this door.) It is a self-referential kind of spatial veiling, in that not only is the establishment’s interior hidden from plain view, but the management plays off Orientalist images of luxurious excess by padding the doors with cushions, suggesting an inside of langorous comforts that complement the music wafting towards the outside.

The other pertinent aspect of veiling is the literal practice among the Muslim female clientele of wearing an Islamic head covering, as well as the less religiously inflected standards of modest dress. The full Egyptian panoply of *higab* is on display every evening at El Warda. There are women who are veiled head to toe in black who discreetly lift their face veils in order to sip their coffee or smoke their *shisha*. There are many women who wear a headscarf of one style or another; and, as is increasingly common among style-conscious young Muslim girls in Egypt, there are many girls who wear two or three headscarves carefully layered over each other. There are many other girls who wear no veil at all. All of this is overlaid, literally and figuratively, on clothing, such that there are different kinds of clothes worn in combination with different veiling practices. On any given night, one may see loose floor-length black gowns, blue jeans and spandex Capri pants — with any one of the veiling styles (or the lack thereof).

Moreover, the spatial and the personal aspects of *higab* come together in another demonstration of what I have referred to as the private public sphere. While no one can be under the impression that she is at home, some of the women indicate a degree of comfort and familiarity with the space of the café by removing one form of veil or another as they enter: a headscarf thrown over the hair sometimes, or more commonly a traveling cloak that covers everything below the neck. A woman may wear additional, very modest dress under such a cloak, or she may wear the kind of tight clothes one associates with dance clubs.

In general, I have noticed the latter style favored by women who don traveling cloaks before they leave the café. Over time, I have also seen some regulars alternate between wearing *higab* and not — the space of the café permits this fluidity of public presentation. This fluidity even extends to a kind of performance that I had never seen before: one especially enthusiastic dancer occasionally whips off her own *higab* in the middle of a dance and throws it on her chair, or pulls it around her hips as a sash while she dances, and ties it around her head again when she sits down.

All of this may give the impression that patrons really do feel at home at the café, and that the rules of behavior are essentially those of the private sphere. This is clearly not the case. If the rules are somewhat relaxed from those obtaining on the street, they are nevertheless present. An important example is that people do not speak to others of the opposite sex whom they do not know, even if they have just applauded each others’ dancing. Girls sometimes talk to other girls, and boys sometimes talk to other boys, although in either case it is frequently a simple request for a cigarette lighter. There are mixed-gender parties, of course, in which large groups of *shabab* will enter together and chatter together for hours. In general, though, if there are several of these groups in the café, they will politely ignore each other. When Antar told me his suspicions that his clientele was composed primarily of disreputable characters, I spent some time gauging this possibility. Indeed, I noticed a number of men and women who would saunter over to each other’s tables to chat. It took some weeks of sitting in one corner or another taking notes to figure out that this was a closed circle of patrons who already knew each other; there was never any deviation from the roster of guests on friendly terms with each other. And the mixed-gender couples who go there for one-on-one face time infallibly comport themselves with standard middle-class decorum in terms of bodily contact; despite the funky lighting and suggestive pictures on the walls, this is not a place where people go to get “touchy-feely” with each other.

Antar, it appears, focuses on the seemingly scandalous degree of flirtation that goes on in El Warda without noting the limits that customers impose upon themselves. As indicated in his statements quoted above, he has made up his mind that all this dancing and flirting is halfway down the slippery slope to debauchery. But then, Antar knows a thing or two about debauchery himself: he brags to me about the thousands of women — by his own count — with whom he enjoyed pre-marital sexual relations. In contrast, when it came time for him to get married, he went to a provincial town in the Nile Delta to find a good, respectable virgin. He explained to me, “If she had so much as kissed a boy, I would not have married her.” He forthrightly confessed his earlier escapades to her at the outset of the relationship, and promised that this was all in the past. I saw no point in trying to suggest that perhaps whatever the *shabab* were doing in El Warda was not half as scandalous as anything that Antar has ever told me about his own youth; Antar has clearly indicated to me that what is acceptable and even admirable sexual behavior for men does not hold for women. It is worth observing, though, that it turns out that his wife disagrees with him. During the

course of my research, his wife, mindful of what her husband was up to in the old days, accused him of cheating on her with café patrons. To Antar's utter mystification, she, with the support of her family, threw him out of the house on grounds of suspected infidelity, suggesting that the limits of acceptable behavior for males and females are not necessarily quite as disparate as some men would like to think.

The management – that is, both Antar and his employer – attempted to alter this private public sphere for the month of Ramadan. If our customers use dance as a means of pursuing illicit relationships, they reasoned, then we will forbid dancing altogether for the duration of Ramadan. When I first entered El Warda after the holy month began, there were Ramadan tents tacked up over the zebra-striped upholstery on the walls and hung from the ceilings; waiters were dressed in shining white *gallabiyyas*<sup>9</sup> instead of the usual white button-down shirts and black trousers; and a table in the back was piled with backgammon sets. Tiny Ramadan lanterns were placed as centerpieces on each table — and several tables were set up on the dance floor. Antar, dressed in his best suit, greeted me and, his face beaming, said, “We canceled the dance floor because of Ramadan.” Many of the regulars were there, and all of them looked bored stiff. They had come to their hang-out in order to enjoy a middle ground between public and private, and instead were subjected to the prohibitions of both spheres with the corresponding liberties of neither.

This state of affairs lasted approximately an hour and a half, starting from the time I arrived that evening. In fact, there was rebellion from the beginning: a number of the younger patrons kept dancing by their tables since they lacked a dance floor, and the staff had to rush around apologetically requesting that their customers cease dancing. A couple of girls, a pair of regulars who are always together, kept rising to perform a few dance moves specifically to provoke the bouncer, who would then be obligated to go over and implore them to stop while they grinned mischievously. Once the singer began his set, though, the dam burst. The singer loves to have patrons dance to his songs – it makes them more likely to tip him with a shower of five-pound notes – and he began inviting some of the more restless customers up to the tiny portion of the dance floor that he commanded for his set. Two hours after I was told that dancing was forbidden, a mixed-gender crowd of revelers was dancing together as though they were at a wedding. The terms of the private public sphere had been reinscribed by the café patrons, despite the management's attempt at proscription. The two factions came to a tacit understanding for the duration of Ramadan: the customers would refrain from dancing to the recordings of *sha'bi* and *shababi* music in the early evening, and the staff would not protest when patrons danced to the singer or to the raucous club music that the DJ would play subsequently on the weekends. The patrons clearly had the upper hand in this conflict. Not only did they successfully flout the ban under various circumstances, but they had more opportunities to do so; throughout Ramadan, the singer frequently performed sets during the work week as well as the weekend.

### “Low environment”

It would be inaccurate to describe the patrons of El Warda as entirely respectable bourgeois citizens, insofar as the aura of potential disrespectability hovers over the café at all times. That is, the repeated statements of disbelief from my friends in and of themselves indicate the degree to which the societal respectability of El Warda's patrons is perennially in doubt. From the foregoing descriptions, it would seem that this dubious reputation is founded upon sexual morals and perceived violations thereof. However, I posit that class status is at least as important in this matter, inflecting not only judgmental attitudes of non-patrons, but also forging a classed distinction upon permissible gendered interactions and, thereby, upon those sexual morals themselves.

It is well worth observing that most of my friends who suggested that I had somehow missed the obvious – that is, the seemingly obligatory relationship between dancing at the café and prostitution – are students at the American University in Cairo, and may be counted among the economically and socially privileged elite of Cairene society. The university, which is not only very expensive but socially exclusive as well, has long been associated with the ruling elite of Egypt.<sup>10</sup> As everyone to whom I spoke acknowledged, this youthful elite does not, as a rule, patronize El Warda. The café's youthful clientele is instead comprised primarily of kids from Cairo's middle class — not the amorphous middle class known in America, to which most citizens claim to belong, but to a very literal middle class of Cairenes. The middle class includes the people who earn enough money to partake of occasional luxurious pleasures, which allows them to be distinguished from the very poor working class – the latter of whom, in 2008, often found themselves struggling financially and even physically to buy bread (Cf. el-Jesri 2008, El-Katatney 2008, Michael 2008) – but who cannot be confused for the truly wealthy *haute bourgeoisie* that has taken hold in Egypt since the disenfranchisement of the old aristocracy following the 1952 revolution.

One evening, after a dinner party, I invited a Tunisian student, Yusef, to join me at El Warda. Aside from socializing, I hoped to get some corroborating outside perspective on the ideas I was developing. He accepted, and laughed upon seeing the décor to which I had grown accustomed, saying that the nature of the space was itself somehow indicative of cultural geography: “Only in Egypt will you find this. It looks like Ali Baba's cave!” Yusef, as a Tunisian, shares the common Western perspective of Egyptian boys and men as extremely homosocial, going so far as to snicker at their movements and high degree of body contact, “Egyptian men dance just like girls!” Although Yusef agreed with me that Antar exaggerates the degree to which customers are involved in prostitution, he also saw more potential working girls than I did. I saw none whom I was willing to label as such, since I mostly focused on the actions of customers and the nature of their interactions with each other; I saw nothing like the type of business negotiations that I have witnessed in both bellydance clubs and five-star hotel bars. By Yusef's estimate, there were four or five in attendance that evening, but “the rest are not.” That is, the majority of the girls and women there were simply

customers. According to him, his suspicions were based on a combination of the tightness of some girls' clothing, and the heaviness of their make-up. I observed that a great many Egyptian girls, including those who wear extremely modest clothing, also wear very heavy facial make-up, which Yusef admitted is true. He said that "one develops a sense about these things," although he acknowledged that, were he to spend as much time at the café as I had, he might come to agree with me.

After Yusef had observed the scene, on a busy weekend night, I asked him what he made of it. He thought for a moment, then answered, "*Br'a*." This term, which literally means *environment*, is generally used in Egyptian Arabic to connote *low environment*, or, more idiomatically in English, *low-class*. Yusef had concluded that the overarching feature of the café was its low-class atmosphere.

My friend Khadiga was stunned that I would ever venture into the disco café, convinced of its unsavory nature. Khadiga, a young Egyptian academic who lives in an apartment overlooking the exterior of El Warda, has passed by it many times, and never even entertained the idea of looking inside. As she explained to me, the sight of a 'café', the interior of which could not be seen or accessed from the street, necessarily communicated to her the availability of alcoholic beverages and social disreputability predicated on, at best, sexual incontinence, and possibly sexual trafficking. Her mother, reading the same messages in El Warda's exterior, which is largely a collage of images from old Egyptian films and glamour shots of contemporary American actresses, actually feared to allow Khadiga to live in close proximity to such an establishment. As Khadiga reported to me, she had to convince her mother that she would not be snatched off the street into a life of sin merely by living on the same urban block as the café.

At the open-air café – that is, the more standard Egyptian variety of establishment dealing in tea, Turkish coffee and other hot brewed beverages – where Khadiga and her colleagues love to spend time most evenings, she and some of her friends critiqued my impressions of El Warda as excessively Western-influenced and overly optimistic about the virtue of its patrons. After hearing my descriptions of my observations, Khadiga eventually agreed to accompany me to the café – she dared not go alone – for a look. She was amazed, she told me over fruit juice and *shisha*, that there really was no alcohol; the café's interior, like its exterior, felt incongruous to her without alcoholic beverages for sale. She found it additionally cognitively dissonant that there were no tables of scantily dressed women searching for customers, but merely sparse groups of young men drinking tea and dancing with each other on the stage, and a few old men in the back playing backgammon. She was relieved, she told me, that it was a slow night in the café, since the lack of activity made it easier for her to adjust to the reality of her presence in the establishment. As I gathered, Khadiga had exerted a significant effort to overcome her urban instincts simply to accompany me into El Warda, and the sight of girls dancing on the stage might have made her turn tail and run for the exit.

In fact, a few months later, Khadiga returned to refusing to enter El Warda, despite her previous experience. At the open-air café, she and some of her friends again suggested the El Warda was essentially a pick-up joint for prostitutes. I responded that, since among them only Khadiga had ever dared to see the disco café with her own eyes, they should all accompany me on a field trip to see it for themselves. They refused, offering variants of the excuse that they already knew all about "such a place," although their own statements plainly indicated that they had no first-hand knowledge of it. When I pressed them on this issue, the girls in the group eventually discarded the pretense of comprehensive knowledge of the establishment, and offered an excuse that resonated deeper: they were afraid to risk compromising their reputations merely by setting foot there. Khadiga, it turns out, was more unnerved by the experience of sitting in the café with me than I had suspected, even though we did nothing there that she does not do habitually at her usual hang-out. Although she failed to tell me this earlier, she related, in defense of her renewed objection, a friend-of-a-friend story<sup>11</sup> of a nameless young man who, supposedly, picked up a prostitute at El Warda. Men in the group offered similar vaguely worded stories of such incidents at other *cabarets*<sup>12</sup> as corroboration, although I repeatedly reminded them that El Warda is not, in any substantive sense, a cabaret.

Khadiga and her friend Aisha, in particular, elaborated on the imbrication of class and gender in their everyday calculus of which places were acceptable destinations for them and which were unacceptable. Aisha acknowledged that it was possible that I was correct in dismissing the accusations of prostitution at El Warda, but reiterated that she would not see for herself, regardless of the truth of such accusations. For comparison, she noted that some of the cafés in which she likes to hang out in the neighborhood of Mohandiseen<sup>13</sup> are "well-known" as working territory for high-priced prostitutes who tend to target expatriates from the Arabian Gulf countries.<sup>14</sup> Despite this, she says, she has no problem spending time in such cafés, because, for whatever reason, her reputation suffers no injury by being seen there. By contrast, even if there has never been a prostitute working at El Warda – which Aisha herself considers an unlikely scenario – the establishment is read by her class-peers so negatively that she cannot help but risk besmirching her reputation as a girl of good morals merely by allowing it to be known that she has been there. Appropriate gendered comportment is a concern in both cases, but the difference that illuminates how one place is acceptable and another is not is classed distinction.

Khadiga and her café compatriots, it must be said, did not offer (only) empty criticism. They also asked several interesting questions: why did El Warda possess an alcohol license? And, if El Warda's on-site activities are entirely licit, even if *déclassé*, why does the management not simply re-decorate to give a 'proper' bourgeois impression? Why, in other words, does El Warda appear to go to so much trouble to seem disrespectable, if this is not the case?

To answer these questions, I return to the information provided to me by Antar, in an interview that bordered on the confessional. Antar describes the disco café's origins, under current ownership, as a place that dealt in non-alcoholic

drinks, *shisha*, and music. To my frustration, Antar glossed over the matter of why the management ever acquired a license to trade in alcoholic beverages in the first place, and I was unable to pry a direct answer to this question out of him. Although Antar certainly does not say so, from his descriptions of the original atmosphere of the café, it seems that the management always envisioned a space of questionable morality in which cross-gender interactions that would be censured in public could be pursued more actively. This original intent is emphasized by the fact that, a few years after opening, El Warda's management found it necessary to upscale the café somewhat, in response to emerging competition.

As I gather from Antar's descriptions, the management had banked on a clientele drawn from a variety of class backgrounds, and especially hoped to attract moneyed young men and women from nearby AUC. However, this clientele, if it ever patronized El Warda to a significant degree, has vanished from the premises. Couples of AUC students in the neighborhood, if they wished to spend time in a café with any sort of romantic notion in mind, preferred to patronize the string of "fancy cafés"<sup>15</sup> that opened across the street from the university's two main campuses. These cafés, some of them independent and some franchises of Egyptian or European corporate chains, offer tea, coffee – almost inevitably espresso and espresso-based drinks, rather than Turkish coffee – and fruit juice at comparable prices to El Warda, as well as various kinds of meals.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, these fancy cafés trade in bourgeois atmosphere as much as in tangible goods: they have no spaces for dancing, they are brightly lit and, usually, feature large street-level windows that allow passersby to gaze in at the patrons. The music at these cafés tends toward syrupy, romantic Western pop, rather than the raucous *sha'bi* music beloved of El Warda's dancing patrons. In short, not only do the fancy cafés deal in prestigious, bourgeois food and drink (espresso, panini, salads), but they also deal in bourgeois prestige itself: the opportunity to be seen and, one would apparently hope, to be admired and envied by others for being a patron there. El Warda cannot compete in either regard, and, consequently, has lost whatever AUC-derived business it once drew.

What was left to El Warda, was, in effect, the less affluent segment of its target market, the youth who came there from the downtown neighborhoods rather than from the moneyed elite of the nearby university. The café responded by introducing its daytime musical fare, which Antar characterizes as a direct response to the competition of the fancy cafés. (Whether this shift in music actually drew in more couples hoping to flirt with each other over tea, or whether the pre-existing patrons simply demanded appropriately romantic music, I cannot say.) The evening clientele, however, maintained its market demand for *sha'bi* music and dancing. With the fancy cafés a few blocks away for comparison, Antar perceives his workplace as even more evidently downmarket and sleazy than it once was. The management of El Warda has never thought to compete directly with the fancy cafés, because they believe that they are fundamentally different kinds of businesses. The management, in spite of the owner's hand-wringing about the evils of alcohol and Antar's sneering at dancing in public,

is hoping to attract patrons of presumed low moral character. Attempting to re-decorate the café, they reason, would only result in driving away the disreputable characters who pay the bills.

### Speculative conclusions

In my estimation, the management is right about losing its customer base, but not because they would eliminate the possibility of sin. (Witness the fact that the fancy cafés, which are all but incapable of providing shelter for any kind of morally questionable behavior, not only flourished immediately, but also appear to have siphoned off the customers most financially – and, for that matter, socially – capable of whiling away time in a café or paying for a woman's favors.) Antar and his employer seem to have missed the forest for the trees: their young middle-class customers, who have very long odds of attaining higher economic or social status, have abandoned the attempt as bootless. Instead, out of desire to relax and enjoy themselves without the anxiety of appearing "polite," and, quite likely, under the enormous and growing economic pressure that makes marriage an increasingly distant goal for young people (Hoodfar 68-72; Singerman 1995:15),<sup>17</sup> El Warda's middle-class patrons appear to have discarded the rigid standards of *haute bourgeois* modesty as unrealistic and pointlessly restrictive. When young men in the middle economic strata often have to look forward to decades of hard work before they can accrue the necessary capital to afford marriage, which is a prime component of solidifying one's place as a respectable member of society, they and their young lady friends may well feel that behaving themselves in keeping with bourgeois standards of gender segregation and cross-gender formality and sobriety can only rob them of what little pleasure they can take from their current circumstances.<sup>18</sup> With little to gain from adhering to the pretension that they command the same respect in Cairene society as do their age-peers at AUC, these *shabab* have decided to sacrifice a degree of social respectability in exchange for the opportunity to dance for each other and flirt with each other — but respectably so, by their own yardsticks.

### NOTES

1 The term *coffeehouse* (or, in Egyptian Arabic, *ahwa*) in Egypt has historically denoted a thoroughly masculine space, in which men sit together to drink coffee and tea while smoking *shisha* (water pipe).

2 A pseudonym. All people named herein have also had their names changed for the purposes of this article.

3 *Shababi*, from the word *shabab* (youths), literally is "youth music," and denotes a category of music especially popular among young people. (The word *shabab* is used in a broad sense to denote both adolescents and twenty-somethings; to some degree, it also connotes unmarried people in this age range.) *Shababi* music includes, generally speaking, slow-tempo ballads and up-tempo songs that almost inevitably deal with sentimental romance.

4 Tamer Hosny and Shereen Abd el-Wahhab are both much-beloved young *shababi* singers.

5 Dancing as a *private* activity, however, is perceived as an aspect of matrimonial life. The dominant style of dance at El Warda, particularly as the girls perform it, has been characterized to me by Egyptian friends as something women are often expected to do for their husbands.

6 Various degrees of Islamic coverings worn by women in Egypt. The *'abaya* is a long black cloak worn over regular street clothes; *higab*, the word denoting the abstract concept of a female covering herself for purposes of Islamic modesty, often refers to one or more headscarves arranged to cover a woman's hair; *niqab* refers to a veil over the face, and is always worn with some form of *'abaya* and *higab* in tandem.

7 The *sa'id* is the southern highlands of Upper Egypt, which, according to most Egyptians, espouses more conservative, traditional moral standards than Cairo. Antar considers himself a representative of this provincial standard, although he is a lifelong resident of Cairo whose family left the *sa'id* two generations ago.

8 Members of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, the indigenous Egyptian Christian church. While the church does not prohibit alcohol, as does Islam, a great many Copts not only do not drink, but believe that it is forbidden in their religion as well.

9 The *gallabiyya* is the traditional outer garment for Egyptian men, resembling an ankle-length shirt. Restaurants catering to a high-status clientele often garb their waitstaff in spotlessly clean *gallabiyyas* that contrast with the perennially stained *gallabiyyas* worn by waiters in working-class cafés. The garment also further inscribes class distinction between customers and staff, perhaps in an effort to make El Warda's patrons feel that they were being treated to a taste of aristocratic privilege. For more on the social valences of clothing in Egypt, see Fandy 1998.

10 And, with President Hosny Mubarak's son Gamal, another AUC graduate, apparently being groomed to inherit his father's office, this association with political power seems likely to increase.

11 The fact that Khadiga, as a graduate student in sociology, is professionally acquainted with the phenomenon of "friend of a friend" folklore does nothing to diminish her reliance on such stories to help define her own cultural geography.

12 The word *cabaret* in Egyptian Arabic has come to refer to nightclubs that serve alcohol and feature bellydancing shows, and are thoroughly associated with prostitution and vice.

13 A district on the west side of the Cairo metropolitan area, built in the 1950s and currently home to a large number of upscale restaurants, cafés, and stores.

14 Gulf Arabs, many of whom take up residence in Mohandiseen, are perceived by many Egyptians as wealthy profligates who come to Egypt to indulge in vices of all kinds, with an emphasis on sex trafficking enabled by Egypt's economic straits and the Gulf's relative prosperity. Some restaurateurs in Mohandiseen are sufficiently afraid of undesirable elements – that is, prostitutes and drug dealers – drawn by the lure of these stereotyped customers that they prohibit the wearing of Gulf-style *gallabiyyas* in their establishments, in an effort to discourage such enterprises.

15 While there is no precise term to describe such upscale cafés in use in Egyptian Arabic, my respondents often used this English expression as a gloss.

16 Meals are not, historically, offered or expected in Egyptian coffeehouses. While El Warda possesses a kitchen, I have never seen them serve anyone a morsel of food.

17 In fact, in the years since Hoodfar and Singerman published their ethnographies, the economic difficulty of middle-class marriage has grown a great deal worse, and has become a much-discussed social issue in Egyptian media and society (Slackman 2008).

18 For a related, albeit differently inflected phenomenon, see Jane Goodman (1996) on the emergence of mixed-sex dancing in Kabyle communities in Algeria.

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