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The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power Through Bedouin Women

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the romance of resistance: tracing transformations of power through Bedouin women

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introduction

One of the central problematics in the human sciences in recent years has been the relationship of resistance to power.¹ Unlike the grand studies of peasant insurgency and revolution of the 1960s and early 1970s (for example, Paige 1975; Scott 1976; Wolf 1969), what one finds now is a concern with unlikely forms of resistance, subversions rather than large-scale collective insurrections, small or local resistances not tied to the overthrow of systems or even to ideologies of emancipation. Scholars seem to be trying to rescue for the record and to restore to our respect such previously devalued or neglected forms of resistance.

The popularity of resistance provokes a number of interesting questions which cannot be considered at length in this paper. First, what is the relationship between scholarship or theorizing and the world-historical moment in which it takes place—why, at this particular time, are scholars from diverse disciplines and with extremely different approaches converging on the topic of resistance?² Second, what is the ideological significance in academic discourse of projects that claim to bring to light the hitherto ignored or suppressed ways in which subordinate groups actively respond to and resist their situations?³ In this article I want to consider a different question: what are the implications of studies of resistance for our theories of power?

For at the heart of this widespread concern with unconventional forms of noncollective, or at least nonorganized, resistance is, I would argue, a growing disaffection with previous ways we have understood power, and the most interesting thing to emerge from this work on resistance is a greater sense of the complexity of the nature and forms of domination. For example, work on resistance influenced by Bourdieu and Gramsci recognizes and theorizes the importance of ideological practice in power and resistance and works to undermine distinctions between symbolic and instrumental, behavioral and ideological, and cultural, social, and political processes.⁴

Despite the considerable theoretical sophistication of many studies of resistance and their contribution to the widening of our definition of the political, it seems to me that because they are ultimately more concerned with finding resistors and explaining resistance than with examining power, they do not explore as fully as they might the implications of the forms of resistance they locate. In some of my own earlier work, as in that of others, there is perhaps a

Resistance has become in recent years a popular focus for work in the human sciences. Despite the theoretical sophistication of many anthropological and historical studies of everyday resistance, there remains a tendency to romanticize it. I argue instead that resistance should be used as a diagnostic of power, and I show what the forms of Awlad ʿAli Bedouin women's resistance can reveal about the historically changing relations of power in which they are enmeshed as they become increasingly incorporated into the Egyptian state and economy. [resistance, power, Bedouins, women, the state, Egypt]

tendency to romanticize resistance, to read all forms of resistance as signs of the ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated.⁵ By reading resistance in this way, we collapse distinctions between forms of resistance and foreclose certain questions about the workings of power.

I want to argue here for a small shift in perspective in the way we look at resistance—a small shift that will have serious analytical consequences. I want to suggest that we should use resistance as a *diagnostic* of power. In this I am taking a cue from Foucault, whose theories, or, as he prefers to put it, analytics of power and resistance, although complex and not always consistent, are at least worth exploring. One of his central propositions, advanced in his most explicit discussion of power, in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, is the controversial assertion that “where there is power, there is resistance” (1978:95–96). Whatever else this assertion implies, certainly Foucault is using this hyperbole to force us to question our understanding of power as always and essentially repressive. As part of his project of deromanticizing the liberatory discourse of our 20th-century so-called sexual revolution, he is interested in showing how power is something that works not just negatively, by denying, restricting, prohibiting, or repressing, but also positively, by producing forms of pleasure, systems of knowledge, goods, and discourses.⁶ He adds what some have viewed as a pessimistic point about resistance by completing the sentence just quoted as follows: “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (1978:95–96).

This latter insight about resistance is especially provocative, but to appreciate its significance one must invert the first part of the proposition. This gives us the intuitively sensible “where there is resistance, there is power,” which is both less problematic and potentially more fruitful for ethnographic analysis because it enables us to move away from abstract theories of power toward methodological strategies for the study of power in particular situations. As Foucault (1982:209, 211) puts it when he himself advocates this inversion, we can then use resistance “as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, find out their points of application and the methods used.” We could continue to look for and consider nontrivial all sorts of resistance, but instead of taking these as signs of human freedom we will use them strategically to tell us more about forms of power and how people are caught up in them.

In the ethnography of the Awlad ‘Ali Bedouins that follows, I want to show how in the rich and sometimes contradictory details of resistance the complex workings of social power can be traced. I also want to show that these same contradictory details enable us to trace how power relations are historically transformed—especially with the introduction of forms and techniques of power characteristic of modern states and capitalist economies. Most important, studying the various forms of resistance will allow us to get at the ways in which intersecting and often conflicting structures of power work together these days in communities that are gradually becoming more tied to multiple and often nonlocal systems. These are central issues for theories of power which anthropologists are in a unique position to consider.

forms of resistance/forms of power

I will be taking as my case the changing situation of women in a Bedouin community in Egypt’s Western Desert, not because I want to make an argument about women in particular, but because first, few studies of resistance have focused on women; second, gender power seems to be one of the more difficult forms of power to analyze; and third, the circumstances of doing fieldwork in a sex-segregated society are such that I have more of the kind of rich and minute detail needed for this sort of analysis from women than I do from men. The group of Bedouins I will be discussing are known as Awlad ‘Ali and are former sheepherders settled

along the Egyptian coast from west of Alexandria to the Libyan border. Although sedentary, they describe themselves as Arabs and claim an affiliation with the Bedouin tribes of eastern Libya. They insistently distinguish themselves from the rural and urban Egyptians of the Nile Valley.⁷

By way of introduction to them, I should confess my own involvement in a complex romance of resistance. Since pastoral nomads have reputations in popular and anthropological literature as proud and free, those who go to study them are often attracted by these qualities. Nevertheless, I was not prepared for the specific forms Bedouin resistance was taking when I arrived in the late 1970s to begin fieldwork. For example, when I returned from my first trip back to Cairo after having officially moved into a household, one of the first bits of news the women and girls gave me was that in my absence they had been visited by the local head of the Egyptian security police. The women were furious and protective, describing how they had refused to let him search my suitcases; they told me that they had lied to the government son-of-a-dog, as they called him, by saying I had locked the suitcases and taken the keys. A couple of months after I had begun living with them, my host disappeared for a while. It turned out that he had been taken in for questioning about political ties to Libya and hashish smuggling; people reacted only by denouncing the Egyptian government for harassment. Over the years that I lived with them, I got used to finding pistols under my mattress and rifles in my wardrobe, to attending feasts to welcome home people who had been imprisoned for smuggling and crossing borders, to knowing young men who disappeared into the desert with the herds to avoid conscription into the Egyptian army, to hearing people talk about how to hoodwink officials or avoid paying taxes, and to knowing individuals such as the man whose temporary insanity took the form of a terror that the government was looking for him and would take him away because he had failed to register the death of a child whose name was still on his family identity card. This was not the diffuse kind of resistance by independent nomads that I had fantasized about but, instead, particular resistances to the specific ways—inspection, conscription, detention, control of movements, registration, and taxation—in which the Egyptian state was seeking to “integrate” the Bedouins of the Western Desert into its domain at that time.

But what of women? Although I did not begin with any sort of interest in Bedouin women’s resistance, I discovered various forms. I want to turn to these forms of resistance to show how through them we can begin to grasp more clearly the traditional structures of power in this community. I will describe four types of resistance associated with women. Then I will go on to discuss some important transformations of both resistance and power in the larger world into which Bedouins are being incorporated.

The first arena for resistance, one I have described elsewhere (Abu-Lughod 1985), is the sexually segregated women’s world where women daily enact all sorts of minor defiances of the restrictions enforced by elder men in the community. Women use secrets and silences to their advantage. They often collude to hide knowledge from men; they cover for each other in minor matters, like secret trips to healers or visits to friends and relatives; they smoke in secret and quickly put out their cigarettes when children come running to warn them that men are approaching. These forms of resistance indicate that one way power is exercised in relation to women is through a range of prohibitions and restrictions which they both embrace, in their support for the system of sexual segregation, and resist, as suggested by the fact that they fiercely protect the inviolability of their separate sphere, that sphere where the defiances take place.

A second and widespread form of resistance is Bedouin girls’ and women’s resistance to marriages. Indeed, one of the major powers families, and especially elder male relatives like fathers and paternal uncles, wield is control over the arrangement of marriages. Despite their apparent power, actual marriage arrangements are always complicated and involve many people, especially mothers and female relatives. Mothers sometimes successfully block marriages their daughters do not want, even though fathers or other male guardians are supposed to have control. For example, on my last visit to the Bedouin community I found out that my host’s

eldest unmarried daughter had just narrowly avoided being married off. Her father had run into some friends in the market and they had asked if their sons could marry his daughter and niece. Marriages are normally arranged between allies, friends, and kin, and to refuse someone without a good excuse is difficult. He had agreed to it and then returned home to inform his wife.

She reported to me that she had been furious and had told him she refused to let her daughter marry into that family. They lived in tents in the desert and her daughter, who had grown up in a house and did not have many of the old Bedouin skills like taking care of tents or milking sheep, would find it a hard life for which she was not prepared. Moreover, the family that had asked for her was in trouble. The reason they lived in tents was that two of their members had gotten into a fight with someone and accidentally killed him. According to Bedouin customary law, they had had to seek refuge with another family, leaving behind their homes and land. They lived in fear, knowing that the kinsmen of the man they had killed would want revenge. My host's wife did not want her daughter to be a widow. So she refused. Her husband got angry, she told me, and he said, "What am I supposed to tell them? I already agreed." He then marched off to talk to his niece's mother, to enlist her support. But she too refused to let her only daughter marry into that family. The women suggested that he inform the men to whom he had promised the girls that the girls' male cousins had decided to claim them. This is a cousin's right, so he was able to save face and, indeed, the marriages never went through.

When men are stubborn, however, or are so caught up in strategies and relations of obligation with other men that they will not or cannot reverse a decision, the women may not succeed. Yet even then, they do not necessarily remain silent. One woman whose daughter was forced to marry a cousin sang a song as the groom's relatives came to pick up her daughter for the wedding:

You're not of the same stature as these
your true match is the man with the golden insignia . . .
intī mā gadā hādhōl
gadāk bū dabābīr yilihban . . .

The song taunted them with the suggestion that her daughter was more worthy of an officer than of the poor man who was getting her.

Neither are unmarried girls always silent about their feelings about marriages. Girls sing songs as they get water from the wells and publicly at weddings. Among the songs I heard about the men they did not want to marry were the following:

I won't take an old man, not I
I'll give him a shove and he'll fall in a ditch
mā nakhudshī shāyib nā
nzuggū yāga^c fil-ganāh

I don't want the old fez on the hill
what I want is a new Peugeot
lubt il-^cilwa nā ma nrīdū
wuddī fī bājō jdīda

God damn the uncle's son
Lord don't lead me near no blood relative
yikhrib bēt wlad il-^camm
rabbī mā ygarrib lā dam

Significantly, the young women singing these songs were objecting in particular to older men and their paternal cousins, two categories of men who tend to have binding ties on their fathers that would make their marriage requests hard to refuse.

The most interesting cases are those where women themselves actually resist marriages that have been arranged for them. Their retrospective narratives of resistance were among the most popular storytelling events I heard. The following one was told to me and a group of her daughters-in-law and grandchildren by the old matriarch of the community in which I lived. The events must have taken place at least 60 years ago. She began by explaining that the first person

to whom she was to have been married was a first cousin. His relatives had come to her household and conducted the negotiations and had even gone so far as to slaughter some sheep, the practice that seals the marriage agreement. She went on:

He was a first cousin, and I didn't want him. He was an old man and we were living near each other, eating out of one bowl [sharing meals or living in one household]. They came and slaughtered a sheep and I started screaming, I started crying. And my father had bought a new gun, a cartridge gun. He said, "If you don't shut up I'll send you flying with this gun."

Well, there was a ravine and I went over and sat there all day. I sat next to it, saying, "Possess me, spirits, possess me." I wanted the spirits to possess me; I wanted to go crazy. Half the night would pass and I'd be sitting there. I'd be sitting there, until Braika [a relative] came. And she'd cry with me and then drag me home by force and I'd go sleep in her tent. After 12 days, my cousin's female relatives were dyeing the black strip for the top of the tent. They were about to finish sewing the tent I'd live in. And they had brought my trousseau. I said, "I'll go get the dye for you." I went and found they had ground the black powder and it was soaking in the pot, the last of the dye, and I flipped it over—Pow!—on my face, on my hair, on my hands until I was completely black.

My father came back and said, "What's happened here? What's the matter with this girl? Hey you, what's the matter?" The women explained. He went and got a pot of water and a piece of soap and said, "If you don't wash your hands and your face I'll. . . ." So I wash my hands, but only the palms, and I wipe my face, but I only get a little off from here and there. And I'm crying the whole time. All I did was cry. Then they went and put some supper in front of me. He said, "Come here and eat dinner." I'd eat and my tears were salting each mouthful. I had spent 12 days, and nothing had entered my mouth.

The next afternoon my brother came by and said to me, "I'm hungry, can you make me a snack?" I went to make it for him, some fresh flatbread, and I was hungry. I had taken a loaf and I put a bit of honey and a bit of winter oil in a bowl. I wanted to eat, I who hadn't eaten a thing in 12 days. But then he said, "What do you think of this? On Friday they're doing the wedding and today is Thursday and there aren't even two days between now and then." I found that the loaf I was going to eat I'd dropped. He asked, "Well, do you want to go to so-and-so's or do you want to go to your mother's brother's?" I said, "I'll. . . ." There was an eclipse; the sun went out and nothing was showing. I said, "I'll go to my maternal uncle's." I put my shawl on my head and started running. I ran on foot until I got to my uncle's. I was in bad shape, a mess.

She then went on to describe how her uncle had sent her back, with instructions to his son to send greetings to her father and to ask him to delay a bit, perhaps she would come around. She continued,

So I went home. After that I didn't hear another word. The trousseau just sat there in the chest, and the tent, they sewed it and got it all ready and then put it away in their tent. And autumn came and we migrated west, and we came back again. When we came back, they said, "We want to have the wedding." I began screaming. They stopped. No one spoke about it again.

This old woman's narrative, which had two more episodes of resisted marriages before she agreed to one, follows the pattern of many I heard—of women who had resisted the decisions of their fathers, uncles, or older brothers and eventually won. Her story, like theirs, let others know that resistance to marriage was possible.

A third form of Bedouin women's resistance is what could be called sexually irreverent discourse. What I am referring to are instances when women make fun of men and manhood, even though official ideology glorifies and women respect, veil for, and sometimes fear them. In this irreverence one can trace the ways the code of sexual morality and the ideology of sexual difference are forms of men's power. Women seem only too glad when men fail to live up to the ideals of autonomy and manhood, the ideals on which their alleged moral superiority and social precedence are based, especially if they fail as a result of sexual desire. Women joke about certain men behind their backs and they also make fun of men in general ways. For example, in a tale I recorded in 1987, a man with two wives is cuckolded by the younger one but foolishly rewards her and punishes his obedient and faithful senior wife. The folktale has many messages, but one of them is certainly that men are fools whose desires override their supposed piety and undermine their overt demands that women be proper and chaste. The kind of power this tale attempts to subvert and thus diagnoses is the power of control over women's sexuality that the Bedouin moral system entails.

Bedouin women's resistance also takes the form of an irreverence towards the mark of masculinity and the privileges this automatically grants. For example, Bedouin men and women

avow a preference for sons, saying people are happier at the birth of a boy. And yet in one discussion, when I asked what they did when a baby turned out to be a boy, one old woman said, "If it's a boy, they slaughter a sheep for him. The boy's name is exalted. He has a little pisser that dangles." And all the women present laughed. Another woman, commenting on the ending of a folktale she had told about the meanness of sons and the compassion of daughters, an ending in which the mean son was asked to slaughter a ram and produce its womb, explained,

You see, the male has no womb. He has nothing but a little penis, just like this finger of mine [laughingly wiggling her finger in a contemptuous gesture]. The male has no compassion. The female is tender and compassionate [playing on the double meaning of the Arabic root *rahama*, from which the word womb (*riḥm*) and the word compassion (*rahma*) are formed].

Here the usual terms are reversed and the male genitals are made the sign of a lack—the lack of a womb. An even clearer example of women's irreverence is a folktale I heard women and girls tell to children, which went as follows. There were an old woman and an old man who traveled into the desert and set up camp in a lonely area where there were wolves. They had brought with them seven goats, a cow, a donkey, and a puppy. The first night a wolf came to the tent. He called out to all of them "Ho!" and then demanded, "Give me someone to eat for dinner tonight!" So the old man and woman gave him a goat.

He came the next night and called out the same thing, asking, "Who will you give me to eat for dinner tonight?" They gave him another goat. This went on night after night until the old couple had given the wolf all seven goats, the donkey, the cow and the puppy. Then they realized that they had no more animals to give him and that he would eat them. The old man said to his wife, "Hide me in a basket we'll hang from the tentpole. And you, hide in the big urn." So she hung up the basket with the old man in it and she hid inside the pottery urn.

When the wolf came that night, no one answered his call. He came into the tent and sniffed around. Then he looked up. Now, the basket had a tear in it and the old man's genitals were showing—they were dangling out of the hole in the basket. The wolf kept jumping up, trying to bite them. The old woman watching this started laughing so hard she farted. This split open the urn she was hiding in, and the wolf ate her. Then he nipped at the old man's genitals until he pulled down the basket and ate the old man too. And then he went to sleep in their little tent.

The last time I heard this story, the group of women and girls with whom I was sitting laughed hard. The storyteller teased me for having asked to hear this story, and her final comment was, "The old woman was laughing at the wolf biting her husband's genitals." There is rich material for a Freudian analysis here, and there is no doubt that male fears of castration and of being cuckolded could be read in this folktale and the one mentioned briefly above. The messages in both are complex. Yet it is important to remember that it is women who are telling the stories, women who are listening to them, and women who are responding with glee to the things men dread.

Folktales, songs, and jokes among women are not the only subversive discourses in Bedouin society. Those I have just described, though, indicate the significance of the ideology of sexual difference itself as a form of power. In my book (Abu-Lughod 1986) I analyzed what I consider to be the most important of the subversive discourses in Bedouin society—a kind of oral lyric poetry. This is the fourth type of resistance. These poem/songs, known as *ghinnāwas* (little songs), are recited mostly by women and young men, usually in the midst of ordinary conversations between intimates. What is most striking about them is that people express through them sentiments that differ radically from those they express in their ordinary-language conversations, sentiments of vulnerability and love. Many of these songs concern relationships with members of the opposite sex toward whom they respond, outside of poetry, with anger or denial of concern.

I argued that most people's ordinary public responses are framed in terms of the code of honor and modesty. Through these responses they live and show themselves to be living up to the moral code. Poetry carries the sentiments that violate this code, the vulnerability to others that is ordinarily a sign of dishonorable lack of autonomy and the romantic love that is considered immoral and immodest. Since the moral code is one of the most important means of perpetuating the unequal structures of power, then violations of the code must be understood as ways of resisting the system and challenging the authority of those who represent and benefit from it. When examined for what it can tell us about power, this subversive discourse of poetry suggests that social domination also works at the level of constructing, delimiting, and giving meaning to personal emotions.

The Bedouin attitude toward this type of poetry and toward those who recite it returns us to some of the central issues of power and resistance. Like wearing veils, reciting poetry is situational; poems are recited mostly in situations of social closeness and equality. The only exceptions to this in the past were wedding festivities, which, not surprisingly, dignified older men avoided. This avoidance, along with people's opinions that this type of poetry was risqué and un-Islamic, suggested their uneasy recognition of the subversiveness of the genre. On the other hand, among the Bedouins with whom I lived, poetry was cherished.

This ambivalence about poetry suggested to me that certain forms of resistance by the less powerful in Bedouin society could be admired, even by those whose interests the system supported. I argued that this attitude was connected to the Bedouin valuation of resistance itself, a valuation associated with the larger political sphere and men's activities, whether traditional and tribal or current and government-directed. It is a value in contradiction with the structures of inequality within the family, where gender comes into play. Women take advantage of these contradictions in their society to assert themselves and to resist. But they do so, most clearly in the case of poetry, through locally given traditional forms, a fact which suggests that in some sense at least, these forms have been produced by power relations and cannot be seen as independent of them. I take this as a good example of what Foucault (1978:95–96) was trying to get at in suggesting that we not see resistance as a reactive force somehow independent of or outside of the system of power.

The everyday forms of Bedouin women's resistance described above pose a number of analytic dilemmas. First, how might we develop theories that give these women credit for resisting in a variety of creative ways the power of those who control so much of their lives, without either misattributing to them forms of consciousness or politics that are not part of their experience—something like a feminist consciousness or feminist politics—or devaluing their practices as prepolitical, primitive, or even misguided? Second, how might we account for the fact that Bedouin women both resist and support the existing system of power (they support it through practices like veiling, for example), without resorting to analytical concepts like false consciousness, which dismisses their own understanding of their situation, or impression management, which makes of them cynical manipulators? Third, how might we acknowledge that their forms of resistance, such as folktales and poetry, may be culturally provided without immediately assuming that even though we cannot therefore call them cathartic personal expressions, they must somehow be safety valves?⁸ I struggled with some of these dilemmas in my earlier work and I find them in the work of others.

With the shift in perspective I am advocating, asking not about the status of resistance itself but about what the forms of resistance indicate about the forms of power that they are up against, we are onto new ground. In addition to questions such as whether official ideology is really ever hegemonic or whether cultural or verbal resistance counts as much as other kinds, we can begin to ask what can be learned about power if we take for granted that resistances, of whatever form, signal sites of struggle. The forms I have described for Bedouin women suggest that some of the kinds of power relations in which they are caught up work through restrictions on movement and everyday activities, through elder kinsmen's control over marriage,

through patrilineal parallel cousin marriage, through a moral system that defines superiority in terms of particular characteristics (like autonomy) that men are structurally more capable of achieving, through a set of practices that imply that maleness is sufficient justification for privilege, and through the linking of sets of sentiments to respectability and moral worth. These are not the only things at work—there are also such things as elder kinsmen's or husbands' control over productive resources, things which may or may not be resisted directly. But to discount the former as merely ideological is to fall into the familiar dichotomies that have kept people from looking at the most significant aspect of this situation: that power relations take many forms, have many aspects, and interweave. And by presupposing some sort of hierarchy of significant and insignificant forms of power, we may be blocking ourselves from exploring the ways in which these forms may actually be working simultaneously, in concert or at cross-purposes.

transformations of power and resistance

The other advantage of using resistance as a diagnostic of power is, as I argued at the outset, that it can help detect historical shifts in configurations or methods of power. In this final section, I want to turn to the ways in which Bedouin women are living a profound transformation of their social and economic lives. From a careful look at what may initially appear to be trivial matters, something important can be learned about the dynamics of power in situations where local communities are being incorporated into modern states and integrated into a wider economy.

I will make three observations about resistance, based on recent fieldwork. The first concerns the fate of traditional subversive forms. Some of these, such as folktales, seem to be dying out as Egyptian television and radio usurp young people's interest.⁹ Others, like the kind of poetry described above, are being incorporated into other projects and appropriated by different groups. I had thought, when I left Egypt in 1980, that this form of poetry was also disappearing. In recent years, however, the new popularity of semicommercial, locally produced cassettes has given traditional Bedouin poetry new life. At the same time, though, its social uses are changing. As I have shown elsewhere (Abu-Lughod In press), these poem/songs, always before recited equally by women *and* young men, are becoming in their new form an almost exclusively male forum for resistance. Older women continue to sing the songs or to reminisce about how they used to sing them, but the major public occasions for singing have disappeared and young women do not develop the skills or habit of reciting them. Women and girls avidly listen to these low-budget commercial cassettes but they do not record them because no modest woman would want her songs played in front of strangers or would be willing to sit in a recording studio with strange men.

As women seem to be losing access to this mode of resistance, it is becoming increasingly associated with young men, who use it to protest or resist the growing power of older kinsmen. The Bedouins' involvement in the market economy has enhanced and rendered more inflexible the power of these older kinsmen in two ways: first, monetarization and the privatization of property, especially land, give patriarchs more absolute economic power; second, as hierarchy in general is becoming more fixed and wealth differences between families are growing more extreme, the tribal ideology of equality which limited the legitimacy of domination by elders is eroding. The shifting deployments of this poetic form of resistance are related to and reveal these complex changes.

The second observation about resistance is that new signs of women's resistance to restrictions on their freedom of movement are beginning to appear. On the one hand, I witnessed a number of arguments between older women and their younger nephews and sons about how harshly these young men were restricting the movements of their sisters and female cousins.

Among themselves and in the presence of the young men, the older women expressed outrage and recalled the past, when they had freely gone off to gather wood and draw water from wells, occasionally on the way exchanging songs and tokens of love with young men. For the first time in 1987 I also heard adolescent girls and young women complain that they felt imprisoned or that they were bored. On the other hand, I noticed increasingly frequent incidents of young wives or unmarried girls having to defend themselves, usually again with the support of their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers, against slanderous accusations, generally initiated by their male kinsmen, that they had been seen some place where they had no permission to go or talking to boys outside the family. This resistance to the restrictions on movement and the smears of reputation intended to enforce them do not index any new spirit or consciousness of the possibilities of freedom on the part of women. Rather, I would argue, they index women's sense of the new forms of the powers of restrictions which have come with sedentarization and the consequently more extreme division between men and women. In the span of the present generation the Bedouins have settled and built houses in permanent communities. Surrounded by neighbors who are not kin, in a social world where there has been no dilution of the modesty code, women have ended up having to spend far more time out of sight or veiled than they did in the desert camps; they are now subject to surveillance whenever they step out.

Third, a new and very serious form of resistance is developing in the women's world, one that—unlike the two just discussed, which widen the gap between women and men—pits young women against older women and indirectly against their fathers and uncles, while putting them in alliance with young men of their own generation. These generational conflicts involve a deceptively frivolous issue: lingerie. Nine years ago I witnessed the following incident. Two of the adolescent girls in our community had bought negligees from a peddler. (Bedouins usually just sleep in their ordinary clothes.) The girls' grandmothers were furious, and they threatened to set the negligees on fire if the girls did not sell them back. When the old women had some visitors, the old women demanded that one of the girls bring out her nightgown to show them. The women all touched it and pulled at it, and one old grandmother in the midst of hilarity put the sheer lime-green gown over her layers of clothing, danced around the room and made for the doorway, as if to go out and show the men. She was pulled back.

By 1987, it had become almost routine for brides to display nylon slips and negligees with their trousseaus. Most adolescent girls bought such items for their marriages, and their older female relatives would no longer try so hard to thwart them. Now the frontier has shifted to bras, cosmetics, and bobby pins. In the household in which I lived, for example, many of the tensions between one of the daughters and her mother were over the homemade bra the girl insisted on wearing. Her mother was scandalized by the way it drew attention to her chest, and she frequently criticized her. The daughter persisted, as Bedouin children nearly always do in the face of parental pressure, retaliating by criticizing her mother for having so many children and running such a chaotic household. In her resistance to her mother's imposition of older Bedouin standards of modesty can be seen the beginnings of a crucial—and ironic—transformation of Bedouin life.

What the older women object to in the purchase of lingerie is not just the waste of precious money on useless items, but the immodesty of these emergent technologies of sexualized femininity to be deployed in the pleasing of husbands. Not that *they* had not worked to remain in their husbands' good graces; they had fulfilled their duties in maintaining their households and their moral reputations. But they had relied on their kinsmen for assurance of good treatment and redress of mistreatment by husbands. They had gained their right to support through their status as kinswomen or mothers and through the work they contributed to the extended household. What wealth women would get they got at marriage and after that, everyone had much the same things, grown, raised, or made in the household. Members of this older generation, at least as I saw them, were often dignified in comportment, but at the same time they were

usually loud, sure of themselves, and hardly what we would consider feminine. Some Bedouin men also commented on this.

Young women, in resisting for themselves the older women's coarseness by buying moisturizing creams and frilly nylon negligees are, it could be argued, chafing against expectations that do not take account of the new set of socioeconomic circumstances into which they are moving. Some of the girls with whom I spoke still, like their grandmothers, want to resist marriages. They do not object to the fact that marriages are arranged for them, but they do resist particular matches, mostly those which do not promise to fulfill certain fantasies. What they say they want, and often sing about in short public wedding songs, are husbands who are rich (or at least wage-earning) and educated (or at least familiar with a more Egyptian way of life), husbands who will buy them the things they want—the dressing tables, the beds, the clothes, the shoes, the watches, the baby bottles, and even the washing machines that mean the end of backbreaking outdoor work. Sedentarized and more secluded, these girls aspire to be housewives in a way their mothers never were. Their well-being and standard of living now depend enormously on the favor of husbands in a world where everything costs money, where there are many more things to buy with it, and where women have almost no independent access to it. That women's resistance to unfairness in the distribution of purchased goods, from blankets to bars of soap and boxes of matches, causes the most frequent conflicts in most households confirms this; men's powers now importantly include the power to buy things and to punish and reward women through giving them.

As the veils they wear get sheerer and these young women become more involved in the kind of sexualized femininity associated with the world of consumerism—even if it is only the comparatively small-time world of five-dollar nightgowns and 15-cent nail polish—they are becoming increasingly enmeshed in new sets of power relations of which they are scarcely aware. These developments are tied to their new financial dependence on men but at the same time are directed pointedly at, and are a form of resistance to, their elders of both sexes. If resistance signals power, then this form of resistance may indicate the desperation with which their elders are trying to shore up the old forms of family-based authority which the moral code of sexual modesty and propriety supported.

Like the older forms of women's resistance described earlier, these young women's forms are also culturally given, not indigenously as before, but rather by emulation of and borrowing (not to mention buying) from Egyptian society. These resistances are again, therefore, neither outside of nor independent from the systems of power. Nevertheless, what is peculiar to these new forms of resistance is how they travel between two systems and what this can tell us about relations of power under such conditions. For instance, along with the lingerie and cosmetics goes a pleasure in listening to Egyptian rather than Bedouin songs, following Egyptian soap operas on the radio, and watching Egyptian television. Their mothers impatiently scold the young women for wasting their time with that Egyptian trash, and some old Bedouin men refuse to allow televisions in their homes at all. These Egyptian songs and stories, like the lingerie, are oppositional within the young Bedouins' strategies of resistance to their elders, but unlike the old forms of Bedouin poetry or even folktale, they are not oppositional discourses within their original social context, which is the context of middle-class Egyptian urban life, a way of life whose debts to the West are manifold and whose penetration by the state is pervasive.

Ironically, in taking up these Egyptian forms and deploying them against their elders, these young Bedouins are also beginning to get caught up in the new forms of subjection such discourses imply. These new forms are part of a world in which kinship ties are attenuated while companionate marriage, marital love based on choice, and romantic love are idealized, making central women's attractiveness and individuality as enhanced and perhaps necessarily marked by differences in adornment (hence the importance of cosmetics, lingerie, and differentiation in styles and fabrics of clothing). The contrast between this world and the Bedouin world is captured wonderfully in an incident I remember from some years ago. An elderly aunt

visiting the household in which I lived jokingly teased her nephew, my host, who was an extremely important man in the community. She said he lived a dog's life. There he was with three wives, all good Bedouins. His house was a mess, his clothes were wrinkled, and not one of these women would budge when he called. Her son, on the other hand, had just married an Egyptian girl and he was living well these days. His bride, she reported, put on nice clothes whenever he came home, brought him special foods, and even ironed his handkerchiefs. Everyone present laughed at the time. Yet now young Bedouin women would be less scandalized by such behavior and may even be moving toward it.

Even more telling is what is happening to weddings. As I have argued elsewhere (Abu-Lughod 1988), these are important sites for the production and reproduction of Bedouin sexuality and social relations. Weddings too are becoming a point of conflict for young and older women. While older Bedouin women are scandalized by the practices of Egyptian weddings, today's adolescents are intrigued by them and try to emulate what aspects of them they can. Older women find shocking the fact that an Egyptian bride comes dressed in makeup and fancy clothes and sits in public with her groom in front of the mixed-sex gathering of guests. They are even more disturbed by the idea that she goes willingly to be with him privately at night to have sex.

They find Egyptian weddings distasteful because, much like our own, these weddings construct the couple as a separate unit of private desire, distinct from their families and gender groups. For Awlad 'Ali, proper weddings must center on a public daytime defloration that is part of a dramatic contest between kin groups and between men and women. This central wedding rite, enacted in a homologous fashion on the bodies of the bride and groom and on the collective bodies of the gathered kin and friends, produces a sexuality that is public and focused on crossing thresholds, opening passages, and moving in and out as a prelude to the insemination which should eventuate in the birth of children for the groom's kin group. Through songs about the families of the bride and groom and about the investment of others in the bride's virginity, and even through the ritual movements themselves, the identification of individuals with their kin groups is reinforced. For example, a bride is brought from her father's household completely cloaked in a white woven cloth that belongs to the girl's father or some other kinsman. Protected and hidden by her kinsman's cloak, she is brought out of her father's domain and carried to that of her husband's kin group. In the past, she remained under her father's cloak until the defloration. Nowadays the woven blanket is usually removed once she gets to her marital room so that the other women can view the coiffed young bride made up with cheap smudged lipstick and cakey white face powder and wearing a white satin wedding dress and makeshift hair ornament. This change in the ritual clearly reflects the new importance of individual attractiveness.¹⁰

Bedouin weddings also once played out a contest between men and women as groups. There is still a formulaic struggle between the groom and his age-mates, on the one hand, and the bride and the women who surround her when the groom comes to the marital chamber to take her virginity, on the other. But older women deplore a change in weddings that has altered the balance of this ritual contest. It used to be that the night before the wedding a young kinswoman of the groom would go out to dance amidst a group of young men. Veiled and girded in the same kind of white woven men's cloak that the bride would arrive in the next day, she would be serenaded by the men and would dance with a stick which the men tried to grab from her. Representing the bride and all women, the dancer enacted a challenge to men by inciting desire but eluding capture. Now all that is left is the men's invasion of the women's world on the wedding day, when the groom as hunter takes his feminine bride as prey. Young people would prefer to dispense even with this remnant of the public rites of defloration that link the groom and bride to their respective gender groups.

In resisting the axes of kin and gender, the young women who want the lingerie, Egyptian songs, satin wedding dresses, and fantasies of private romance their elders resist are perhaps

unwittingly enmeshing themselves in an extraordinarily complex set of new power relations. These bind them irrevocably to the Egyptian economy, itself tied to the global economy, and to the Egyptian state, many of whose powers depend on separating kin groups and regulating individuals. For the Awlad 'Ali Bedouins the old forms of kin-based power, which the resistances described above have allowed us to see clearly, are becoming encompassed and cross-cut by new forms, methods, and sources of subjection. These new forms do not necessarily displace the old. Sometimes, as in the case of the demands of sexual modesty and settling down, they run along the same tracks. Sometimes, as in the case of older men's greater control of resources and precedence in the political realm, they just catch up the old forms into larger, nonlocal networks of economic and institutional power, something which gives them a new kind of rigidity. Some, however, like the penetration of consumerism and the disciplines of schooling and other institutions of the state, with their attendant privatization of the individual and the family, are altogether new and just add to the complex ways that Bedouin women are involved in structures of domination.

Although their elders are suspicious of many of these new forms, the young women (and young men, I should add) do not seem to suspect the ways in which their forms of rebellion against their elders are backing them into wider and different sets of authority structures, or the ways in which their desires for commodities and for separation from kin and gender groups might be producing a kind of conformity to a different range of demands. This raises a final question: do certain modern techniques or forms of power work in such indirect ways, or seem to offer such positive attractions, that people do not as readily resist them? There is some evidence for this, and it is a question worth exploring comparatively.¹¹ In the case of the Awlad 'Ali Bedouins, though, there seem to be new forms of resistance to just these kinds of processes. If that is so, then such resistances can be used as diagnostics as well.

One sign that these new forms of subjection are felt as such is that among those Awlad 'Ali who have become most involved with and have had most contact with secular Egyptian state institutions (especially schools) and cultural life (especially through television, radio, fashions and consumerism)—those Awlad 'Ali living in major towns and the city of Marsa Matruh, for example—there has been a growing interest in the Islamic movement. These Awlad 'Ali signal their participation in the movement by adopting Islamic dress, engaging in Koran study, and changing their behavior, especially toward members of the opposite sex. If within the Arab world generally the Islamic movement represents a resistance to Western influence, consumerism, and political and economic control by a Westernized elite, within the Awlad 'Ali community it serves as a perfect response to, symptom of, and therefore key to understanding the kinds of contradictory sets of power relations in which the Awlad 'Ali are currently caught. For young Bedouin women and men, it is a kind of double resistance to two conflicting sets of demands—the demands of their elders and the system of face to face kin-based authority they represent, on the one hand, and on the other the demands of the national westernized and capitalist state in which, because of their cultural differences, lack of education, and lack of ties to the elite, they participate only marginally. For young women, adopting modest Islamic dress has the added advantage of allowing them to distinguish themselves from their uneducated sisters and their elders while leaving them irreproachable in matters of morality.¹²

Like the other forms of resistance discussed above, participating in Islamic movements is a culturally shaped and historically specific response. It could not have been taken up by individuals in this community to resist the situation they found themselves in at this juncture unless it had already developed in Egypt and elsewhere in the 1980s. It is easy to see as well how rigidly fundamentalist practices involve participants in yet a third set of disciplines and demands and tie them to new transnational structures—of religious nationalism in the Islamic world—that are not isomorphic with the transnational structures of the global economy.

This may seem like boxes within boxes within boxes. But that is the wrong image. A better one might be fields of overlapping and intersecting forms of subjection whose effects on par-

ticularly placed individuals at particular historical moments vary tremendously. As I have tried to show, tracing the many resistances of old and young Awlad ‘Ali, men and women, and those from the desert and the town, gives us the means to begin disentangling these forms, helps us to grasp the fact that they interact and helps us to understand the ways in which they do. It also gives us the means to understand an important dynamic of resistance and power in nonsimple societies. If the systems of power are multiple, then resisting at one level may catch people up at other levels.

This is the kind of contribution careful analyses of resistance can make. My argument in this paper has been that we should learn to read in various local and everyday resistances the existence of a range of specific strategies and structures of power. Attention to the forms of resistance in particular societies can help us become critical of partial or reductionist theories of power.¹³ The problem has been that those of us who have sensed that there is something admirable about resistance have tended to look to it for hopeful confirmation of the failure—or partial failure—of systems of oppression. Yet it seems to me that we respect everyday resistance not just by arguing for the dignity or heroism of the resisters but by letting their practices teach us about the complex interworkings of historically changing structures of power.

notes

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¹Terms like voices, subversion, dissidence, counter-discourse, and counter-hegemony as well as resistance key this interest and circulate through such widely diverse enterprises as French feminist theory (for instance, Kristeva 1981; Moi 1986:163–164) and social scientific studies of specific subordinate groups. Among the latter figure studies of resistance among working-class youths in England (Willis 1981), slaves in the American South and on the plantations in the Caribbean (Craton 1982; Gaspar 1985; Genovese 1974, 1979; Levine 1977), poor Southeast Asian peasants (Scott 1985; Scott and Kerkvliet 1986; Stoler 1985; Turton 1986), subaltern groups in colonial India (Guha 1983a, 1983b), marginalized black peasant workers in rural South Africa (Comaroff 1985), Bolivian tin miners and Colombian plantation workers (Nash 1979; Taussig 1980), and various groups of women both in this country (for example, E. Martin 1987; Morgen and Bookman 1988) and elsewhere (Ong 1987).

²This question has begun to receive some attention within and outside of anthropology. Marcus and Fischer (1986), Jameson (1984), and Haraway (1985) are especially concerned with the development of postmodernist theory in the postcolonial age of late capitalism. Foucault (1980:116) argues that the task of analyzing the mechanics of power “could only begin after 1968, that is to say on the basis of daily struggles at grass roots level, among those whose fight was located in the fine meshes of the web of power.” I would credit a number of social-political movements, including feminism, with shaking the hegemony of Marxism as radical discourse and opening up possibilities for rethinking power and resistance. Scott (1985:29) traces his own concern with everyday resistance more narrowly to his disillusionment with socialist revolutions.

³O’Hanlon (1988) asks this question with regard to the *Subaltern Studies* group, and Rosaldo (1986) has made an interesting argument linking Evans-Pritchard’s admiration of Nuer indomitability to his role as anthropologist in a colonial setting.

⁴Jean Comaroff (1985:263), for example, explicitly rejects the conventional divisions between the symbolic and the instrumental or religion and politics (distinctions, she argues, made by ethnocentric social science and Third World revolutionary intellectuals alike). James Scott (1985:292) refuses to accept the distinction between “real” and “unreal” resistance, defined in terms of the oppositions between individual and collective, self-indulgent and principled, or behavioral and ideological. Another kind of attempt to get at the complex forms of domination is the move in Marxian scholarship to explore more fully the Gramscian notion of hegemony, which, at least according to interpreters like Raymond Williams (1977:108–114), not only rescues ideology as a part of the apparatus of domination but actually breaks down the distinction between cultural, social, and political processes.

⁵For a lucid discussion of the problems with humanism in the historiographical project of those, like Guha (1983a, 1983b), involved in *Subaltern Studies*, see O’Hanlon’s (1988) sympathetic critique. Some of her points apply as well to other projects on resistance.

⁶A particularly clear statement of his view of power as productive is the following: "What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network that runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression" (Foucault 1980:119). His position on resistance is more ambiguous. Despite his insistence that resistance is always tied to power, he occasionally implies the persistence of some residual freedom (Foucault 1982:225).

⁷I went to live in one small Bedouin community first in 1978, and I have returned several times since, most recently for fieldwork in 1987, on which the analysis in the final section is based.

⁸Among the many problems with this last idea is that it assumes society is a machine and understands human actions as functions in this machine rather than recognizing that society is nothing but the collective practices of the people who compose it, a view developed most systematically by Bourdieu (1977).

⁹Messick (1987) analyzes the dissolution of a North African women's alternative, if not subversive, discourse brought about by the capitalist transformation of weaving.

¹⁰One wonders also what effect the images of coiffed and groomed Egyptian urban women that young Bedouin men see on television, or of the Egyptian girls they flirt with in school, have on their desires.

¹¹Bourdieu (1977, 1979) and Foucault (especially 1977), among others of course, offer useful ways of thinking about the effects of new forms of power associated with modern states in a capitalist world because they attend to the microprocesses that affect individuals in seemingly trivial ways. Mitchell (1988) considers the effects of such political transformations in Egypt specifically.

¹²See El-Guindi (1981) and Hoffman-Ladd (1987) for more on women in these movements.

¹³Feminist theory has been especially receptive to the notion of multiple forms and sites of resistance because it has had to face the obvious inadequacy of any current theories about domination in accounting for gender power, the complex field of forces that produces women's situations and the manifold and subtle forms of their subjection. See B. Martin (1982) for an extremely helpful discussion of these issues.

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