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Mourning the Archive: Middle Eastern Photographic Heritage between Neoliberalism and Digital Reproduction

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There exist hidden treasures in the Eastern Mediterranean, largely unrecognized and cared for by an enlightened few. These treasures are not the artefacts, monuments and architectural wonders that normally come to mind when pondering the incredibly rich and long cultural history of the region, but photographs dating from the early history of the medium to the present day (Kennedy et al. 2010).

Egypt has a rich photographic history. For westerners, photography in Egypt conjures up images taken by travelers, adventurists, or archeologists, intended for western publics and nowadays located in western collections. However, a parallel *local* photographic tradition began to develop in Egypt itself in the mid-nineteenth century. The popularity of commercial portraiture spread rapidly among Egyptian elites, as did that of candid photography half a century later. Beginning in the early twentieth century, state bureaucracies and private institutions alike increasingly deployed photographs in official, commercial, scientific, educational, and legal contexts. In the interwar period, the local photographic market included ambulant outdoor photographers, hundreds of affordable studios in urban centers throughout the country, and a high-end niche in Cairo and Alexandria that defined photography as art. As the century progressed, photographs were intensely mobilized for the construction of national narratives in Egyptian public culture.

It is this alternative local history of photography that my opening epigraph refers to. It was authored by a collective of regional and international curators at the launch of a major undertaking called the Middle East Photographic

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Preservation Initiative (MEPPI), and it resonates with many similar statements that frame a renewed interest in preserving cultural heritage in Egypt and the region. The past decade and half has seen the founding of new archival initiatives devoted to collecting and preserving historical photographs.[1] This current constitution of a regional photographic heritage is represented as an imperative to save endangered "treasures," the photographs lying "out there," unrecognized and undervalued, and cared for by an enigmatic "enlightened few." For centuries the plunder of historical artifacts from the Eastern Mediterranean was similarly framed as "discovering treasures," and was justified by moral claims to provide "better care," based on the colonial powers' ownership of knowledge. Yet the situation today is different. To begin with, the claim to be "saving endangered treasures" is now often uttered not by outside intruders but by local actors. Secondly and more importantly, the epigraph evokes a sense of a historical vacuum. It is true that Egypt has no public institutions devoted to the collection, preservation, and study of its vast photographic heritage, and those that do hold photographs as an incidental part of their collections are in a dismal state. But archiving and heritage-making efforts in the country, stemming from both colonial and nationalist genealogies, are well over a century old. This troubled legacy has helped fuel and justify the recent wave of archive making.

Widely diverging attitudes toward old photographs coexist in contemporary Egypt. Public institutions, the academic community, and the wider public tend to understand photographs not as social and cultural objects but rather as mere *images of something*, as two-dimensional carriers of visual information. Both provenance and copyright are widely ignored. Photographs circulating in popular and academic publications alike, and more recently on the web, appear as orphan images deprived of their provenance and context. Both individual and institutional actors that produce and circulate visual images widely ignore information about their mediums, techniques, authors, sources, or contexts. While this observation, which I will develop further here, will be familiar to many, it is only one part of the cultural economy within which photographs circulate. In some contexts, photographs are just "images," but in others their materiality takes center stage. Historical photographs are an important part of Cairo's vibrant private market for vintage objects, one fully integrated into the global market. Here they are considered unique and valued commodities, widely sought after by both local and international collectors. In such contexts, the materiality of photographs is central to assessing their value.

The most obvious result of objects having value in some contexts but not in others in the same time and place—say, today's global Cairo—is that

[1] See Merryman 2006 for a summary of the vast debate surrounding this topic.

artifacts flow toward where they have value. This is not necessarily perceived to be a problem by those who regard photographs as mere images, for whom a digital copy is equivalent to its original. But there are further complexities. Equal values are assigned to digital copies, which are increasingly considered on par with physical originals, and the market values of both photographs-as-objects and photographs-as-images have skyrocketed over the past decade. Another kind of value has been added to this: an evidentiary value assigned to images as harbingers of past truths, and therefore as assets that cannot be freely shared or shown.

On closer inspection, therefore, the metaphor of saving hidden treasures raises many questions. First, given the different interpretations of the notion of what a photograph is, *what* exactly is being saved? Second, who are photographs being saved from? It is a failed state curatorship? Or is it certain segments of society, defined by class or culture, that often do not appreciate photographs as having any value whatsoever, or who favor a one-dimensional visuality at the expense of photographic objects and their historical contexts? Or are they being saved from the predatory private market that loots Egypt's heritage—including its public collections—for private collections in Egypt and abroad? A third question we must ask is what the method and purpose of saving the photographs are—how should they be saved, and for whom? The two strategies currently being deployed to save photographic heritage are digitization and privatization. Both introduce wholly new concerns, since they might justly be perceived as working against the very mantra of saving.

All this points to a fascinating moment in the process of heritage-making in this postcolonial, post-national situation, one that might be described as anything but simply "finding forgotten treasures." Instead, we confront a messy situation involving particular legacies that different actors interpret differently in accordance with their varied contemporary concerns. This is a context within which the "local" and the "global" become analytically useless categories, even while they retain their rhetorical power.

In what follows, I will explore this particular instance of heritage-making by scrutinizing two closely related aspects of it. One is the diverse understandings of what a photograph *is*, and how both historical and market values are attached to photographs in diverse contexts. Such understandings transcend the basic dichotomy of photograph-as-object and photograph-as-image to incorporate a host of other lenses through which photographs become valorized: as art objects, as visual documents that contain historical truths, or as mere visual data. The second feature of heritage-making that I will examine is the major actors, both individual and institutional, that currently shape the constitution of photographic heritage in the region. As I will show, their actions can only be understood within a wider historical context.

Western institutions often fail to function according to their own professed standards, and many western archives and museums have dark pasts as colonial

institutions. But this essay's implied comparison between western (or global) and Egyptian practice is not intended as a moral project. The comparison I undertake is warranted by the following facts: first, the local actors I will discuss take western standards as their professed goal and model and see their "globality" and technological literacy as measures of consequence, and second, the new archiving initiatives receive substantial funds from western sources. "Western standards" and western money are the elephants in the room. Comparison can bring into relief gaps and slippages between a rhetorically espoused western (global) model and its actual implementation on the ground. Different attitudes toward photographs do not merely reflect different regimes of value, or diverse markets (the local, the global, one for digital copies, and another for vintage objects), and they do not operate in isolation from each other. These markets and regimes of value overlap through the activities of specific individuals and institutions, which happen to be largely supported by western funding.

This paper is a product of a heterogeneous field experience that unfolded over more than a decade, spanning different activities and identities. I started buying old photographs in Egypt's used-paper markets in the early 2000s during the early stages of my doctoral research. I gradually developed friendships and professional links to a number of collectors, dealers, and "hybrids" (academics who are also collectors, collectors who are also dealers; see Ryzova 2012). I have seen the market change from my perspectives both as a collector and as a researcher whose position evolved from female student to rather opinionated academic. I have been able to observe how publishers deal with photographs from my positions as a reader, researcher, and publishing author. Later, while working on a postdoctoral project focused on the social history of photography, I studied in Egypt's archives and private collections. I also greatly benefited from stories of colleagues who have done similar research. Seemingly anecdotal, these fit into patterns that confirmed my own experience many times over. More recently I have assumed the role of an "expert," acting as pro-bono consultant for the Photographic Memory of Egypt program at the Centre for the Documentation of Cultural and Natural Heritage (CULTNAT), nominally a branch of the Library of Alexandria located in Cairo. As part of the CULTNAT team's initiative to survey the state of Egypt's photographic collections, I gained access to and interviewed some of the key players in the events I will describe. These interviews confirmed patterns that I was familiar with from other contexts, and gave me valuable insights into the culture, values, and modes of operation of some of Egypt's foremost cultural managers.

As result of this personal history, some elements of this essay are necessarily subjective. My evolution from a student to a professional academic closed some doors and opened others: my expertise frightened some long-time contacts and empowered others, depending on whether they chose to see me as

a competitor or a potential resource. Other elements reflect simple ethnographic facts. For one example, some dealers who ten years ago generously let me scan photographs I could never afford to buy, before they were shipped to their new owners, no longer do so because now digital copies enjoy equal value to originals. For another, some collectors who a decade ago showed me their photographs will not even speak to me now because my seeing their collections might endanger the futures they envision for them, as being one day "found" and "rescued" by institutions like the Getty (for the right price, they stress). In this article, I try to make sense of this experience as a way of charting the particular cultural economy of photographic heritage-making in contemporary Egypt.

My approach here straddles conventional disciplinary genres. I do not read old photographs in search of hidden alternative histories of the photography of Egypt that they may hold. Rather, I reflect on what comes before seeing and before reading. Historians have a rich tradition of problematizing the "archive" (broadly understood as any corpus of sources) and unpacking its modes of production. Putting oneself in the text is considered odd and unprofessional for a historian, while doing the same is widely accepted among anthropologists. Although both historians and anthropologists have written numerous books about the politics of the colonial archive (e.g., Schwartz and Cook 2002; Stoler 2002; Burton 2005), there has been little study of the contemporary cultural economies that produce visual archives (for an exception, see Frosh 2003). Anthropologists deserve much credit for greatly extending the field of photographic history and visual culture studies in new directions. This has crucially included critiques of western-centered visual regimes (e.g., Jay 1993; Pinney 1997; Edwards and Bhaumik 2008), a foregrounding of the materiality and social embeddedness of images as opposed to semiotic analyses of disembodied visuality (Edwards 2001; Edwards and Hart 2004; Batchen 2004), and examinations of non-western visual traditions (Pinney and Peterson 2003; Strassler 2010), to cite only a few better known examples.

But turning our attentions to non-western histories of photography (or to non-western histories generally) is not a matter of merely "paying attention." It is not just about going "out there" and discovering forgotten treasures. Historians know well that our work often suffers an optical problem on two levels. One is what we decide to see, what we decide to look for, depending on disciplinary agendas and fashions at any given time. The other is the problem of what we *can* see, a caveat that encompasses two specific variables: whether something has been preserved, and whether it is accessible. If we are lucky, our sources are indeed "out there," but they do not passively await our generous attentions. They are shown or hidden, either shared with those who ask for them or withdrawn from our sight. And even as we look for them they are in motion —locked away or thrown into the bin, sold and bought, or maybe transported to

another country. Sometimes, ironically, the harder we look the more they travel. As we discover forgotten treasures we create new value and therefore markets. In my particular case, the Egyptian vernacular photographs that I seek must become commodities before they can become historical sources. Describing the process of how this happens means describing a particular instance of "image production," since it involves looking at the forces and dynamics that are at play behind any future archives, that make future histories possible.

YOU DON'T NEED THE PHOTOGRAPH IF YOU HAVE THE PICTURE

Egyptian public archives are notoriously difficult institutions. Decreasing budgets have led to the physical deterioration of historical collections across the country, and it is public knowledge that theft is endemic. Another problem is conceptual—literally considered the "abodes of history," Egyptian archives have been subject to much contestation and manipulation throughout the modern history of the country. What is today the National Archive (*Dar al-Watha'iq*) started a century ago as a collection of documents assembled by royal order with the specific task of supporting a dynastic vision of Egypt's progress toward modernity as a process led by the house of Muhammad 'Ali (see Di-Capua 2009a). After independence, it was colonial history that needed rewriting. Egyptian historiography grappled with multiple genealogies that gave rise to both the nature of historical materials available and the intellectual traditions that formed the historical profession (royal, colonial, anti-colonial, liberal, leftist). Since independence in 1952, a succession of authoritarian regimes has de facto locked history up as they busily wrote their own versions of it. State-owned archives in Egypt understand their mission as being to act, not as public depositories and preservers of historical documents, but rather as vigilant guardians, or in Di-Capua's apt formulation, "gatekeepers" of the Egyptian past. And the gatekeeper must answer to a master.

But times have changed, to some extent. An attitude of excessive gatekeeping remains in place, but this is currently the result less of an imperative to control history than of bureaucratic self-perpetuation and the general deterioration of public services in Egypt, consistent with the fact that Egypt remains a police state. The authoritarian state of the 1960s and 1970s has given way to a neoliberal state that replaces concepts of "the public" with narrow understandings of "the market." After thirty years of structural adjustment and ensuing austerity measures imposed by external aid providers and enthusiastically supported by business elites, the state has reduced the scope of its functions. The situation on the ground remains complex and, in many cases displays a reconfiguration of the state's relationship to business enterprise rather than its simple withdrawal (Mitchell 2002; Denis 2006). Winegar (2006) notes that arts budgets at the end of the Mubarak era were actually at a historic high. But for many non-state actors, the "failure of the state" in the fields of archives

specifically and culture more generally remains a key reference point for justifying narratives and strategies of "saving" cultural heritage.

Photographs hold a precarious position within the wider Egyptian archival landscape. The National Archive includes photographs in some collections of documents, but photographs as such are not cataloged. Substantial photographic collections exist in dozens of specialized institutions and public museums across the country, such as the Railroad Museum, the Police and Army Museums, the Museum of Education, and the Egyptian Geographical Society, to name just a few (see Davies & Farid 2012). These institutions consider photographic material of secondary importance, and it often sits uncataloged and unused, and in some cases unknown even to its keepers. Researchers are at times allowed to see photographs on a case-to-case basis, and they often report their excitement at discovering material that nobody knew existed. This joy of discovery is typically coupled with the realization —known to all of us who work in Egypt—that "I will never see this again." Much of the historical material found in Egyptian archives is discovered by chance. These institutions are like libraries with no indexing systems, and their objects like free electrons with constantly shifting locations, and this leaves them easy victims of loss, destruction, or theft.

But if photographs have little value for most public archives in Egypt, there are notable exceptions. The giant public-sector publishing house Dar al-Hilal, which hosts a substantial photojournalistic archive, approaches its collections with a very different philosophy. Two research experiences will serve to illustrate the primacy given to visual content there, as well as the emerging attitude that this content should be treated as an asset, as visual "evidence." This merges with a drive to monetize its perceived indexical potential. A few years ago, seeking Dar-al-Hilal's permission to publish in a book cartoons and photographs that had appeared in one of their magazines in the 1930s, I turned to a high-placed Dar al-Hilal executive. "Sure, provided you can find it," he replied, referring to the notoriously bad state of the institution's archive. That was not a problem, I explained: "I have the old issue of the magazine; I just need your *permission* to use it." "You *have* the picture?" he asked, incredulously. "Then *what* is it that you want?"

More recently, a colleague was studying in the Dar al-Hilal archive. She was not allowed to simply consult photographs and make notes. Instead, she was told that for each photograph she saw she had to pay the price equivalent to the purchase of a scanned copy (which she would be given after the payment), and an astronomical price in dollars was set. Since this demand was presented to her on the third day of her research, and she had never been informed of their rules in advance, she refused to pay for merely seeing photographs. She argued that she did not need scanned copies, at least at this point in her research, and that she merely wanted to see what they have. But this was not an option for the Dar al-Hilal archive, which then demanded she

destroy the notes she had already taken (Davies 2011; and personal communication 2011).

These two stories illustrate the understanding of photographs in contemporary Egypt as mere "images," valued for the visual information contained on their surface. Increasingly, with the availability of digital technology, no distinction is made between an actual photograph and a scanned copy of the "picture" contained on it. In my case, since I already had the "picture" I had whatever there was to be had. At the same time, excessive demands are placed on such dematerialized images. The experience of my colleague, prohibited from taking notes on a photograph unless she paid for a digital copy, exemplifies the primacy given to the visual information on the surface: by taking notes, she was taking the "truth" (i.e., the visual *information*) contained in the image. And, because Dar al-Hilal is run as a business, she could not take that for free. She could only get the "truth" by purchasing a scanned copy, which would have in effect made her also the owner of "the picture."

Such practices contrast strikingly with how photographs are currently understood by western museums, curators, archivists, and researchers. The "image" contained on a photograph is inseparable from the material object that carries it (Edwards and Hart 2004). Materiality lies at the heart of two principal kinds of value assigned to photographs: financial (or market) value, and historical (or research) value. Market value stems from the photograph's material properties—its uniqueness as an object, including its medium, technique, and age—together with its position within a socially created pictorial canon that includes authorship, its subject, and aesthetic criteria. Historians and other researchers take these criteria seriously, but tend to privilege the photographic object's provenance, or contextual information, including the photograph's production, circulation, and consumption, all of which constitute sites that bear historical evidence. Photographs are certainly not understood as unproblematic records of things that once lay in front of the camera; rather, it is their lives precisely as objects—as staged images that can only be understood through the social and material contexts in which they circulated—that carry historical information that truly matters.

The distinction between a photographic object and its copy, digital or otherwise, serves all parties that are potentially interested in the circulation of photographs, or indeed any other art or historical artifacts. Consequently, fears of sharing copies are ungrounded. A reproduced copy of an artifact can circulate openly for the cultural, aesthetic, or educational pleasure of the public and can be used for research purposes, while the owner of the original remains secure within his or her rights. The link between a copy and its original is always present through citation and credits because an "image" without provenance and without the knowledge of its material properties it is not considered credible. The research *and* market value of a copy, a mere "picture" without provenance, is severely limited.

The absolute privileging of visual content at the expense of materiality and context in contemporary Egypt may well be understood through notions of cultural difference, as either a different regime of value (Appadurai 1988; Myers 2001), or as another instance of non-western vernacularity, a different visual regime akin to but also different from Christopher Pinney's "surfacism"—a vernacular understanding of the photograph that privileges the viewer's relationship to the surface image, contrasting with western notions of photographic "depth" (2003). Except that, in the Egyptian contexts, the historical dimensions of such attitudes remain crucial, suggesting that notions of cultural difference provide an insufficient explanatory framework. The undervaluation of photographs as less-than-documents tends to appear in long-established public institutions while their over-valuation as "images" taken for evidence, truths, and assets tends to characterize private actors and appears to be, by all accounts, rather recent. Rather than an instance of non-western vernacularity, we should understand these attitudes as an evolving historical dilemma, as suggested by Jessica Wingar in a related context (2006: 57): a situation that ought to be understood through its particular local genealogy, in this case how history has been produced in Egypt over the past century in both professional and public contexts, together with local and global phenomena of a more recent vintage.

The undervaluation of visual material in public archives and among Egypt's professional historians is heir to modernist notions of history as positivist and as largely textual, privileging the written document (on Egyptian historians' espousal of positivism, see DiCapua 2009b). In professional contexts, images are understood to be useful for *illustration*, and when used they are taken at face value as "evidence." In public history, by contrast, photographs have throughout the twentieth century played a significant role in constructions of nationalist narratives (see Golia 2009; Baron 2007), though not necessarily more so than elsewhere in the world. Alongside other visual materials, photographs have been mobilized to construct national pride and cohesion in key moments of struggle against occupiers and external enemies. These legacies collude in placing excessive demands on the evidentiary (indexical, documentary) quality of the surface "image." Photographs are heirs to the perception of history as "someone's truth" that can be, and indeed always is manipulated. This applies regardless of whether one takes their visual content for "truth" or for a "lie"; the important point is that photographs-as-images contain "somebody's truth," and as such they must be either controlled, or in the new neoliberal environment, commodified.

Positivist legacies function powerfully in the context of digital technologies' capacity to liberate images from the confines of archives, from oblivion and physical deterioration, so they can once again serve as a "visual proof" of things that once lay in front of the camera. Photographic indexicality found a new public role in the later years of the Mubarak era. Spanning a range of

genres from postcard street scenes to domestic snapshots, vintage photographs support public nostalgia for the colonial era as a golden age of modernity, prosperity, and political liberalism (see Ryzova n.d.). This is implicitly contrasted with a "decline" that came after the 1952 Revolution, embodied in the twin forces of destruction: Nasserist etatism and Islamic radicalism. A neoliberal political project is thus rendered "visible," as well as plausible and pleasing, through a number of physical and aesthetic interventions. The most tangible of these have played out in urban space (see Singerman and Amar 2006), but their aesthetic dimensions include a redefinition of what counts as heritage (El Kady and ElKerdany 2006). Deployed in their thousands in Internet venues and on Facebook pages, in coffee table books and as stock images used to brand new business ventures, historical photographs of "vintage Egypt" are used not only to feed this nostalgia and provide what Denis (2006) calls the "aesthetic mantle" of a neoliberal project, but also to virtually "prove" how beautiful and civilized Egypt once was.

These old anxieties and new opportunities are most evident in the changing attitudes of private collectors—the "enlightened few" who were aware of Egypt's photographic heritage well before global curators gave it their attentions. Let me now turn to these collectors so we can better understand both outstanding legacies and new opportunities from their perspective.

THE TREASURE KEEPERS

There are two kinds of private collection owners (or custodians) in Egypt: those who inherited family collections, and those who accumulated collections mostly through purchase. In some cases, the former subsequently became collectors and accumulated more objects. They often explain their collecting proclivities in terms of an inherited appreciation for "old things," "beautiful things," art objects, or "history." The nature of each collection naturally reflects its genealogy. Family collections may stretch back many generations and cover the private and public lives of individual family members. Collections actively created by collectors, by contrast, reflect particular aesthetic or other preferences and are typically more diverse or even idiosyncratic. The number of family collections is potentially endless, as is the number of photographs laying around in homes and institutions across the country. I discuss here those who actively perceive their holdings as a "collection" and themselves as its custodians, a self-positioning that informs decisions they make about their photographs. All collectors count as privileged, but they are socially diverse nonetheless, and their collections reflect this diversity.

For both types of custodians—collectors and family collection owners—salvage narratives are important. They are conscious of the historical time in which they live, that there is something to be saved *now*, or something to be sold or marketed, or in some cases, that the best moment is yet to come. This "now" is contrasted with a fairly recent past, during the 1970s or

1980s, when "nobody cared." One collector, son of a professional photographer, narrates, "When my father died, we had three apartments full of photographs that we threw away, as we needed those apartments; later, when I went to the Arts College, I realized that I used to have a treasure and threw it away. So I started to actively look for these things." "Back then, things were thrown out in the trash," or "things were put on the street pavement for anyone to take," are common ways of describing the neglect of the past, against which the individual collector's formation is set, creating an aura of connoisseurship enjoyed among their refined peers.

But beyond the vast variety of old photographs they own, do all collectors understand a "photograph" to be the same thing? Some understand their position unproblematically as owners of photographic objects and feel no anxiety from showing them to others or even giving away digital copies for research or publication purposes. Especially custodians of family collections tend to understand and value photographs as unique material objects, probably because they have experienced photographs precisely as living objects, displayed or hidden, exchanged among friends and relatives, and handed down through the generations. Others are very much concerned about sharing copies of their images, being well aware of the market potential that scanned copies have recently acquired. One collector referred to a colleague as a "thief" who "stole his images." This colleague, a collector and publisher, requested particular scans for inclusion in a coffee table book, but once the book was published, he also sold them to a third party for another commercial project. Another long-term collector elaborated: "If I give someone a good copy [of a picture], I don't need the original. Why would I then have the original?" In a very reluctant interview he gave me over a coffee, he proudly acknowledged that he would happily sell his entire collection to the Getty, if they offered him the right price.[2] "But I am too small a fish for them, they can't really see me," he concluded.

Whereas this collector was anxious to preserve the value—the virginity—of his photographs to the point of refusing to show them, another had the opposite attitude; he carried his immense collection on his laptop and was emphatically eager to show it. His collection was eclectic, to say the least, and disappointing: it included scans of original photographs alongside poor-quality reproductions scanned from newspapers. It proved impossible to pin him down on the whereabouts of his actual collection; it was "on the computer," he insisted. He eventually described what he called "his collection"—on his hard disk—as originating from a core group of photographs he inherited

[2] Why he referred to the Getty specifically is unclear. Shaken by scandals involving the acquisition of looted art objects, the Getty has more recently concentrated on collecting non-western photographic collections. It is also involved in a regional archiving initiative (MEPPI), which I will discuss presently.

from his late, famous photojournalist father. Others he had bought on the market or accumulated through a long career as photo editor of an important government newspaper. Finally, many thousands of his images were downloaded (or "collected" as he called it) from the web. His idiosyncratic "collection" looked much like the digital database of the Library of Alexandria (detailed below), to which he acts as a major supplier. His other clients include big businesses and banks, which buy his digital images to produce marketing products such as calendars. He was especially proud of a large group of snaps of Egyptian royalty taken at various public and semi-private occasions, mostly shot by his father. He paused over photos showing King Faruq in his train carriage during a stately visit, stressing, "This is history as it really was, *as it should be*."

As he warmed up to our group and started narrating his long career in journalism, how he obtained parts of his eclectic collection began to emerge.[3] When he worked as photography editor for a large newspaper, he always kept for himself a copy of every photograph printed under his supervision. He was also occasionally commissioned to find and produce copies from important public archival collections, such as when the Army's high command commissioned him to select photographs from the Army Museum's photographic collections for a commemorative book. This was, of course, long before the arrival of digital technology, when publication still required the production of new negatives from existing positive prints, and he always kept a copy of the negative for himself. All of the images produced as part of his lifelong engagement as photo-editor were now *his photographs*. This middle-aged gentleman appeared to genuinely make no distinction between what was a material object in the possession of someone else (or a public archive) and what was now "his" on his hard-drive. However, toward the end of our interview he said (twice), "Those from Christies, they know me well, they come to me often." Thus, it appears that this gentleman was exploiting to his own advantage the two different regimes of value that coexist in global Cairo: a local market for "images," and another, global market for photographic objects. He saw himself as a smart businessman skillfully responding to different market demands and not in any sense as a transgressor on anyone else's rights.

Strikingly often, the ethos of saving photographic (or other cultural) heritage is defined negatively, as "against" other parties: the state, society, other private collecting institutions, or even researchers. "My things are mine only, I am the one who will look at them and who will speak about them," said one long-term collector of photographs and popular culture ephemera. He explained, "I have spent my life and my money collecting this. I am free to

[3] I visited this gentleman together with a team from CULTNAT, and our aim was to survey existing collections. He thought we were coming to buy his images.

do with it as I want. I picked it up from the trash. It was trash. Now they want to come and take it?" He referred most acutely to the Arab Image Foundation, which, for some of the collectors I met, bought "treasures" from Egypt and did not pay a fair price. This was over ten years ago, before the fashion for nostalgic value and ensuing narratives of saving began to take their current shape and market prices of vintage photographs skyrocketed accordingly.

This collector, an old acquaintance of mine, years ago used to show me his collection freely and generously, but he was markedly uncomfortable when he learned that I now "do research" on old photographs. "If I knew you were doing research," he said at the end of our talk, "I would not have even spoken to you." Another collector, a renowned cinema cameraman, had a similar change of mind. Ten years ago he repeatedly offered to show me his widely praised collection of cinema-themed photographs. Now he had become noticeably elusive on the phone. It would be difficult, he said, since he was very busy and most of his photos were now packed away in boxes. He suggested that if I wanted to see old photographs, I should buy them at *L'Orientaliste*, a downtown Cairo antiquarian boutique that sells overpriced vintage prints. I explained that I am not interested in buying old photos, but rather am a historian and wanted to see his collection for research purposes. Upon hearing of "research," his earlier vaguely elusive excuses turned to a challenging tone: "If you write your history [of photography] after seeing my photographs, then what will be left for us, owners of these photographs, to do? Why would we bother to buy things and then let *you* write the history?"

In the fall of 2011 a group of collection owners met to consider founding an Egyptian collectors' association. At this meeting a publisher of coffee table books with nostalgic, Old Regime themes exclaimed: "I like open access, but I have a huge problem with researchers. I don't like the way they use my material." The notion of having been "abused" by researchers was mentioned often on this occasion as well as in private conversations I had with collectors. There are two ways to understand this anxiety and even animosity toward researchers. The first is that many collectors report negative experiences with commercial researchers working on journalistic or cinema projects, or for television. "TV journalists are the worst," explained a friend. "Often they don't even return your material." The second relates to the excessive demand placed on a picture's visual content and the perception that the "picture" is all there is to be had. Taken at face value, an image contains evidentiary truth convertible to other regimes of value. From this perspective, it follows that image content has to be either carefully guarded from competitors, or else monetized. Owners of the image must control its use. Showing the image—particularly to me, an "expert" without money—might somehow diminish their options regarding an asset they spent time and money acquiring, and over which they have exclusive rights of exploitation. From their perspective, a connoisseur researcher allowed to compare and assess materials might

endanger the collection's aura in terms of both the collector's social distinction as guardian of "treasure" and that collection's commercial possibilities. The treasure must retain its mystique to maximize its potential market value.

Suspicion toward researchers was only one of the worries that Egyptian collection owners shared with me, explicitly or implicitly. While researchers might be a nuisance, they were not a threat to collection owners as such. For many, historically the worst enemy has been the state, which can take things away and impose its own version of history. This is the case with one custodian of a large family archive, a descendant from an important Ottoman-Egyptian family whose members through the nineteenth century and up until the 1952 revolution occupied high state offices and were close to the palace. The post-1952 history of this family, like many similar elite families, was shaped by real or perceived threats of dispossession. From his perspective, there was little difference between the nationalizing socialist state of the 1960s and the neoliberal Mubarak state from the 1980s onward. Functioning as a web of interconnected mafias, powerful actors within the Mubarak state could mobilize Egyptian national heritage laws to lay their hands on private property, which then ended up as de facto theirs.

This particular collector also had problems with the state's legacy of interpreting history. He felt strongly that his family was excluded from the writing of recent history, or even vilified, and saw his role as the custodian of his family's collection not just as a matter of protecting the objects themselves, but also a function of his duty to write his family "back into Egyptian history." "There has been too much history written by the state," he explained, "too much history as politics." This mistrust can be productively extended back to colonial history, as a history always written by someone else, though this particular person might not see it that way. In the Egyptian context, a feeling of history as somebody else's exclusive narrative applies equally to postcolonialism, as it does to postsocialism.

This gentleman plans to set up his family collection as a private archive and research institution, as do others with similar family histories of prominence during the Old Regime and subsequent marginalization by the postcolonial socialist state. Another collection custodian, heir to the largest film-distribution company in the Middle East, dreams of building an institution that will combine the functions of a cultural center and a museum, and host his extensive family collection of cinema documents, photographs, and paraphernalia. Virtually all of the dozen prominent Egyptian collectors I have met have talked of similar plans to found private archives and research institutions, which will produce books or make documentary films based on their materials, and indeed several of them have already done so. While some insist on a purely cultural or intellectual exploitation of their collections, with the aim to show "history as it *really* was," as one of them put it, there is often a commercial twist: selling images to third parties, such as banks,

businesses, and publishers for marketing purposes. The line between commercial and cultural exploitation is blurred, since the cultural products they make or envision making are also commodities, fully or in part.

Typically, such products emphasize nostalgia for colonial-era Egypt, and thereby both normalize and legitimize a retreat from economic and social models of the 1950s and 1960s. While this is not always evident to everyone who indulges in the consumption of such nostalgia, these products carry an underlying "history-as-politics" ideological message (see Ryzova n.d). What is important for my argument is that collectors, perceiving themselves as guardians of "correct history" or "forgotten treasures," also insist on being the sole producers of knowledge based on their material and on exploiting their collections commercially. They have two recent models to reckon with, to both emulate and compete with: the Library of Alexandria and the Arab Image Foundation.

THE DATA MONGERS

The Library of Alexandria positions itself as the key actor in saving Egypt's cultural heritage. At a 2011 presentation of a nostalgic documentary about the burning of the Cairo opera house in the early 1970s, the after-screening discussion turned around the dismal state of Egyptian heritage, and the familiar plea of "we have no archives, our cultural heritage is rapidly deteriorating, and nobody cares."[4] A middle-aged gentleman in the audience raised a voice of hope: "Luckily, now we have the Alexandrian Library." In the eyes of the general, middle-class, educated Egyptian public, the Alexandria Library represents a "new hope" for Egyptian "culture," meant to rectify the state's failure to care for Egypt's cultural heritage.

The library, a Mubarak-era mega-project sponsored largely by UNESCO, foreign governments, and private donors, successfully profiles itself as an important cultural center for Egypt's second city, hosting hundreds of cultural events each year. The survival of the library's pre-revolution leadership demonstrates that it is impossible to dismiss it as a Mubarak-regime public relations enterprise or money-laundering venture.[5] The entrance is constantly busy with school visits and foreign tourists. At any given moment the reading room appears to be well used, mostly by young Alexandrians. It has achieved an impressive reputation as a world-class institution that is run both "by" and "for" Egyptians, operating the latest imported hi-tech features. An important aspect of the high expectations placed on the library is that it is not connected to the state. Despite having a close relationship to the Mubarak family, the

[4] "Burning of the Opera House," documentary by Kamal 'Abdel 'Aziz, American Research Centre in Cairo, 21 Sept. 2011.

[5] Since the January Revolution, corruption within the institution has been periodically brought to the public's attention (see Ali 2012), but its leadership remains unshaken.

library is neither run by the state bureaucracy nor financed from its budget.[6] To many, this illusion of independence, coupled with foreign expertise, insures the library's success.

The library's strategic catering to both international and domestic publics rests on offering user-friendly, digitally processed heritage, which is much on display on both its website and its premises. The website describes its mission as being "the world's window on Egypt; Egypt's window on the world; a leading institution of the digital age; and a center of learning, tolerance, dialogue, and understanding."[7] The nominal vehicle for all these expectations is digital technology. Among the library's proudly displayed achievements is the Virtual Immersive Science and Technology Applications, or VISTA, a "walk-in virtual reality system" the size of a room that allows researchers "to experience 3D simulations of natural or human-engineered phenomena."[8]

Another achievement, located off-site in Cairo, is CULTURAMA, a multimedia projection facility consisting of a 180-degree panoramic, interactive computer screen 10 meters in diameter, made up of nine flat screens arranged in a semicircle. In this panoramic projection theatre, visitors, most of whom are tourists, can "experience" (rather than just "see") five different three-dimensional multimedia film projections: on Egypt's ancient, Islamic, and modern civilizations, respectively, and two virtual walking tours through Egyptian sites.[9] Egypt's contribution to this universe of digitally processed culture is a digital copy of the *Description de l'Egypte* that is prominently featured both on-site and on the library's web page. Through these media, knowledge is not only reduced to its lowest common denominator, but also becomes synonymous with its method of delivery. The "thing" on display assumes inferior importance; it is considered mere "data" that is entirely subservient to its technique of display. Put differently, the holding's raison d'etre is to provide content for its own delivery, which, as "digital spectacle," is the real purpose of the library.

The use of high-tech features to showcase Egypt's heritage caters to the library's two main interlocutors: it responds to the international publics' fascination with Egypt's heritage, and to a local middle-class public's pride in their

[6] The Library's administrative structure explicitly copies the U.S. model of privately funded cultural institutions governed by boards of trustees (personal communication from the personal assistant to the former head of the High Council of Antiquities, Cairo, Sept. 2011). Despite the library's formal independence from the state, it answers directly to the presidency, and the president is its nominal head. For annual reports showing the library's administrative infrastructure and budget, see http://www.bibalex.org/Publications/BA_AnnualReports_EN.aspx (accessed 11 July 2014).

[7] See http://www.bibalex.org/aboutus/mission_en.aspx (accessed Aug. 2011).

[8] See http://www.bibalex.org/Vista/vista_en.aspx; and http://vista.bibalex.org/vista/index.py/en/page?p=main (both accessed Oct. 2011).

[9] "CULTURAMA has enabled the display of information that could never have been displayed clearly using a regular computer display system." At: http://www.cultnat.org/General/Culturama.aspx (accessed Oct. 2012). These virtual tours suggest a possibility for virtual tourism.

authentic culture. The latter in this context is cast as both unique and yet part of world heritage, displayed in a form perceived to be global and state-of-the-art. The library's presentation of heritage is consistent with a century-old model of Egyptian modernity as a blend of authentic local culture and modern knowledge and technology (Armbrust 1996; Winegar 2006; Ryzova 2014). Many Egyptian intellectuals see in digital technology the solution to decades of deteriorating public education and academia, as well as to problems of storage, preservation, and access. International actors, embodied in UNESCO, view digital technology almost metaphysically as something that "unites the world" and causes borders to be "broken down" (Butler 2007: 139, 199). This expectation resonates particularly well with this project; rhetorically cast as a rebuilding of the Old Alexandria Library, it carries the promise of "once again" uniting "all world knowledge" in one place. Mastery of cutting-edge digital technologies serves as a further declaration to both local and global publics that Egypt is apace with the modern world, and that this new model for culture—combining the functions of a physical depository, research library, and no less than ten research centers with those of a tourist attraction and educator of the masses—"can deliver."

The library's aura of "worldliness," expertise, and over-funding translates into substantial assets vis-à-vis other, less powerful domestic actors. The library has become a substantial power player in the field of acquisitions, able to lay its hands on under-funded local public institutions and archives in the city, whose collections it takes over in order to "save" them. Its aggressive acquisitions policy is well known and felt on the market and among dealers of vintage photographs, and is acknowledged by the library's management.[10]

I was faced with this aura of success while preparing for a summer 2011 field trip to Alexandria as part of my research into the social history of photography in Egypt. I asked numerous Cairene friends for contacts and tips on old studios, photographers, and private and family collections. The response was univocal: you have to go to the Alexandria Library. Some of these suggestions were pitched in a pitying tone, suggesting that "they" (the Alexandria Library) "have done it all," and poor me for coming "too late," as if looking for sources equaled treasure hunting, and treasure can only be found once. This notion resonates with both my opening epigraph and some of the more protective attitudes of collectors. "They" have collected all there was to be collected about old Alexandria—its photographic heritage in particular, and all things old and valuable generally.

My expectations were thus high when I set off to visit the library, Egypt's first initiative to build a public photographic archive. What I found, however, were not photographs but "images" uploaded on the web or otherwise digitally

[10] Khalid 'Azab, personal communication, Sept. 2011.

processed on the premises. Nowhere in the depository collections were actual photographs to be found, and nowhere in the library's online catalog was there any mention of photographs. The online catalog for depository collections only gives search options for "books, magazines, periodicals [*sic*]." In the several museums and exhibition halls that form part of the library, again: no photographs, or to be precise, no originals. Later in my quest for photographs as physical objects within the library walls, I got the following answers from top executives of two different branches at the library: One said, "Whatever you need is on our web; we don't show originals once we scan them." The other responded, "I will not show you anything, because we are competitors." While the context of these answers will become clear in the next section, they are already familiar to my readers. The first resonates with the "photograph-as-image" position encountered earlier in the case of Dar al-Hilal and a number of private collectors; the second with another anxiety increasingly found among private collectors, namely the perception that photographs only have one level of meaning—the indexical evidence contained on their surface—which implies the need to guard this asset from others. From this perspective, "images" can only be used once, and sharing means losing.

PICTURE LAUNDERING

Let us now look at the "place" to which I was sent in my quest for old photographs at the Library of Alexandria. It is an online database called *Memory of*

FIGURE 1 The "Memory of Modern Egypt" database, from the website of the Library of Alexandria. At http://modernegypt.bibalex.org/collections/home/Default.aspx (accessed 29 July 2014).

Modern Egypt (see figure 1), which consists of digitized materials arranged into categories such as: "images," "voice recordings," "films," "press," "medals," "stamps," "coins," and "advertising." The categories themselves are internally inconsistent; while several overlap (e.g., most of the materials classified under "advertising" and "cartoons" are taken from magazines classified separately under "press"), other categories include diverse genres and media lumped together. There is no separate category for photographs, but only a category for "images" (*suwar*), which also includes drawings, paintings, and the occasional map or postcard.

The "images" are arranged into subcategories according to their subject: the person, place, or event they depict. Contextual information about each image's physical referent, its material properties, and its provenance is systematically denied. Moreover, database entries are often mislabeled, thus obscuring even the little information that we are allowed to know. To give just one example, figure 2, a photograph showing the old Cairo-Helouan road, is clearly scanned from an old book, which, however, remains unacknowledged. The description field—a rectangle that opens over the screen once we click on the "details" (*tafasil*) icon—gives the following information: "Description: Old Cairo." This is a literal Arabic translation of the first two words printed in

FIGURE 2 Database entry named "Old Cairo" from the "Memory of Modern Egypt" website, Library of Alexandria. At http://modernegypt.bibalex.org/imageViewer/mapViewer2.aspx?type=imagelucene&album=0&page=5 (accessed 29 July 2014).

English on the original page from the (unacknowledged) book. By translating only the first few letters ("Old Cairo" as opposed to "Old Cairo-Helouan Road"), the library's Arabic description manages to effectively misrepresent the place pictured. "Old Cairo" is an entirely different location than "Old Cairo-Helouan Road."

The brief "description" rectangle continues: "From the album: Egyptian Towns and Villages." By "album" is meant the digital folder under which this image appears in the database, not an album as a physical object. The only information we get about the artifact is: "Photographer/Author: Unknown"; "Source: Library of Alexandria"; "Subject: Social Life; Towns, Villages and Provinces"; "Keywords (Places): Old Cairo"; "Keywords (General): Egyptian Cities." There is no mention of medium, technique, size, author, date, or most importantly, the source and original context of the image. The description bends the artifact to the needs of the database. The only information supplied is its position within the database's own arbitrary categories and keywords. It is, of course, entirely possible that some information about an artifact remains unknown. But the lack of information in the library's database is systemic: it pertains to every single entry and appears to be a deliberate strategy. Also of note is the line for "source," which here, as in every other database entry, says simply "Library of Alexandria."

The scale of misidentification is often baffling. Figure 3 shows a map, again scanned from an old book, possibly a tourist guidebook. The publisher is identified, on the scanned object itself, as "Lloyd's Greater Britain Publishing Co, LTD." The database makes no mention of the source, stating again simply "Library of Alexandria." It is clearly a colonial-era map, given its references to "Anglo-Egyptian Sudan" and "British East Africa," but the database identifies the map as "Arab Republic of Egypt," a modern-day name for Egypt in use only since 1971.

In a similar vein, hundreds of cartoons and magazine advertisements under the category "press" are described and cataloged according to their subject (the person or theme in the cartoon, or the product in the advertisement), with no information about the source, date of publication, or author when appropriate (see figure 4).

My last example is an image from the subcategory "Muhammad Ali Pasha" (see figure 5). This is an oil painting by the Scottish artist David Wilkie held at the Tate Gallery in London, often reprinted in books on art history and on Middle Eastern history. In its incarnation in the *Memory of Modern Egypt* database, however, we see the usual minimal description: no medium, technique, size, or provenance. The line for "author" reads "unknown." The line for "date" gives not the widely available date of the painting's production (1841), but instead the lifespan of the painting's subject, Muhammad 'Ali (1769–1848). The "source," of course, is "Library of Alexandria."

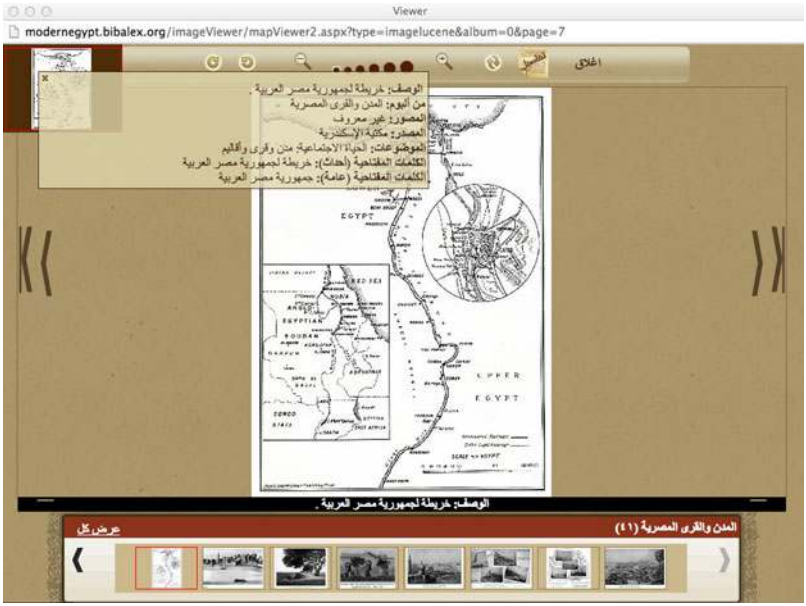

FIGURE 3 Database entry named "Map of the Arab Republic of Egypt," from the "Memory of Modern Egypt" website, Library of Alexandria. At http://modernegypt.bibalex.org/imageViewer/mapViewer2.aspx?type=imagelucene&album=0&page=7 (accessed 29 July 2014).

These entries offer no physical referent; in some cases they originate as scans of books or other objects housed in the library, in others they appear to have been copy-lifted from the web. Even if they originate as scans of actual holdings, links to their original material referent are denied. Such orphaned images are like ghosts devoid of any material identity (medium, size, technique), production information (author, date), or provenance (source, context of production and circulation). They refer only to themselves and the arbitrary categories of the database. The Library of Alexandria's database of Egyptian heritage may well infringe copyrights of third parties, but more importantly, it denies the rights of the objects to be properly identified, and the rights of the public to know *what* it is that we are looking at. At the same time, it remains impossible to locate the actual physical collections that the library is said to have (and acknowledges it has) acquired.

I saw the "production of data" with my own eyes. Probably sensing my disappointment at and disapproval of their no-show policy for holdings other than open-stack books, the director of the *Memory of Modern Egypt* project offered to show me something, having already proudly told me of his achievements in having acquired multiple private collections of photographs. The "something" turned out to be two glamorous photographic albums with royal

FIGURE 4 Database entry named "Cartoon drawing of Kamil al-Shinnawi," from the "Memory of Modern Egypt" website, Library of Alexandria. At http://modernegypt.bibalex.org/imageViewer/mapViewer2.aspx?type=imagelucene&album=1&page=3 (accessed 29 July 2014).

insignia dating from the mid-1930s. Each page contained a number of snapshots of Cairene streets and social life dating from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s. Presented to King Faruq by the Egyptian Photographic Society, these albums were meant to illustrate for the young king the progress achieved under the rule of his forefathers in terms of modernizing urban architecture and social customs over the past sixty years, as well as the skills and achievements of the Photographic Society itself.[11] Like any cultural artifact, these albums had both an internal narrative and an external context. The individual photographs, around half a dozen on each page, together made sense as part of a story they told. Yet, in the digitization process carried out by the Alexandria Library, each photograph was scanned separately and entered the database under arbitrary categories, such as different place names or types of social

[11] These are probably the two royal albums mentioned by the Egyptian historian Rif'at al-Imam in the introduction to his book on the history of local photography. He mentions having found them in the Ministry of Tourism archive, where they were assigned during the redistribution of royal property after the 1952 revolution. Al-Imam mentions how, upon his "discovery" of these albums in the ministry's archives, and revelation of their existence to their keepers, an order was issued from "higher up" to donate them to the Alexandria Library (al-Imam 2010: 13).

FIGURE 5 Database entry named "Muhammad 'Ali Pasha," from the "Memory of Modern Egypt" website, Library of Alexandria. At http://modernegypt.bibalex.org/imageViewer/mapViewer2.aspx?type=imagelucene&album=0&page=0 (accessed 29 July 2014).

customs. Never were pages or the albums scanned as wholes, and never was the fact that these images originated from the particular album set recorded.[12] Instead, these albums were transformed from a cultural object into some two or three hundred individual database entries. A historical and cultural artifact was thus "disappeared" in order to produce "more data." The primacy given to quantitative dimensions of the database, the success of which is measured in terms of how many images it puts on the web, was stressed to me during my enquiry with the project's director.

The *Memory of Modern Egypt* database turns all currently held principles of archiving and digital database making on their heads. First, it misunderstands what digitalization is for: instead of employing a digitized image (never equivalent to its analog original) as a tool for facilitating research and liberalizing access to knowledge, an "image" is here given absolute primacy. It is all there is to be had. Its analog referent—the object itself—is made

[12] This is in stark contrast to the basic archiving principle of "integrity of collections," in which artifacts (fonds) are always cataloged with the group within which they came into the archive, preserving the identity of the original collection. In this example, not even the integrity of the artifact was preserved.

superfluous and often literally disappears. The second offense is the systematic denial of the physical identity and provenance of every single image. The withdrawal of essential information, frequent mislabeling, and systematic claiming of all entries as the property of the Alexandria Library is consistent with the logic of understanding visual objects as "mere images" and treating them as "data," which in this context serves to fill content for the vehicle that truly matters: its mode of delivery, the library's digital database.

The rationale that until recently drove major digitization projects worldwide was that digitalization improves access to knowledge by democratizing access to archival and museum collections. It has since been pointed out that open access often remains illusory, since digitization itself creates new sets of restrictions. Just as they create the surface impression of "spreading knowledge," custodial institutions acquire a new set of powers to define access to their collections (Sassoon 2004: 187). This point could not be made clearer than in the case of the Alexandria Library database. Instead of "universal knowledge," the public—which is complicit with the Library of Alexandria's cultural project—is in fact presented with universal ignorance and mediocrity.

Placing a photograph into a new digital discursive space also means placing it directly into the marketplace. As Joanna Sasoon points out, "This space serves to exploit and commodify the aesthetic qualities of image content rather than to promote the research potential of the photographic object" (ibid.: 195). While this point remains valid for the Arab Image Foundation, which I will soon turn to, it is the exact opposite of what happens with the Alexandria Library database. Rather than promoting value, both the market and research values of each image are drastically reduced by the recurrent misidentification, decontextualization, and often simply poor quality scanning (which is significant because it undermines the very purpose of the enterprise—digital delivery). While physical objects might be devalued or even destroyed, the fact remains that when heritage is understood quantitatively as the number of entries in a database, what is being enhanced is the overall political value of an *institution* toward its two key interlocutors: the global market for cultural funding, and just as importantly, specific domestic publics that view the library as an alternative to failed state curatorship of their heritage.

The situation is possibly even worse. It is unclear whether anyone will ever again see the albums I was shown, given that the library has no mechanism to show artifacts other than their open-stack books and a collection of medieval manuscripts. From my perspective, the Alexandria Library is not just literally a "clearing house of meaning" (Sekula 1983), but also a black hole for historical objects, especially those of a fairly recent vintage that cannot be considered antiques from a legal point of view.[13] In a society inclined to value photographs

[13] Egyptian Antiquities Law protects all cultural and natural artifacts more than one hundred years old, which translates to a prohibition of trade and export of them (see Egyptian Antiquities

as mere "images," digitalization enables new avenues for theft by making material objects literally invisible and practically superfluous. There are precedents for thinking the worst. Photographs originating from public archives routinely appear on the private market, eventually enriching inaccessible private collections. Several long-established Egyptian public institutions recently embarked on extensive digitalization programs for their collections, including the Museum of Education, and indeed, the National Archive itself. Subsequently, photographs stamped "Museum of Education" appeared on the private market. They might have been stolen during the museum's restructuring, or they may have been discarded once digitized.[14] But is this still "theft" if photographs (or other documents) are understood as dematerialized "images"? How do we define theft in such a context?

Criticizing the Alexandria Library's digitization strategies from an academic perspective is beside the point to its curators. Researchers are emphatically not its intended audience. No archivist or historian was involved in the making of this database. Instead it was designed, and is hosted and maintained, by the School of Information Science, a branch of the Library of Alexandria. When display gains primacy over content, archiving becomes synonymous with database making understood as purely a matter of technological solutions limited to the expertise of information technology personnel. To understand what the Alexandria Library is doing, we have to go "out of the archive," so to speak, and understand the powerful interests that sustain the project as a whole. They are three: the former Egyptian presidency, sections of the international community embodied in UNESCO, and Egyptian middle-class publics. While the first is now history, the other two have proved much more resilient, and they work in tandem.

The project to build the Alexandria Library was pushed through in the 1980s and 1990s as part of President Mubarak's strategy of positioning himself on the international scene as a source of peace, tolerance, and enlightenment in the region. Developmentalist projects in the sphere of culture were nurtured and forcefully presided over by his wife Suzanne. The Alexandria Library project was cast in terms of "rebuilding" one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, a theme that struck a particular chord within UNESCO.

Law 117 of 1983). Photographs, however, alongside maps and books, are said to have been exempt from this definition. This is the understanding I was given by a number of private collectors in Cairo. I consulted a high-placed official at the Ministry of Antiquities about this definition and its "exemption." She knew nothing of any "exemption," but was genuinely surprised that photographs could fall under the definition of "antiquities" in the law that she helped to draft.

[14] Key institutions such as 'Ain Shams University and the American University in Cairo have legally and publicly sold some of their collections—of old books and magazines, respectively—once they were digitized. This might make sense from an institutional point of view insofar as books or magazines that exist in multiple copies across major libraries are concerned. But the issue is very different when it comes to unique objects such as photographs or written documents.

Since its foundation in the years following the Second World War, UNESCO has situated itself as the champion and protector of universal world heritage (Butler 2007: 45, passim). As it happens, the city of Alexandria is central to this narrative. Since the Renaissance, Alexandria has occupied a mythical role in European philosophy and culture, standing for the cradle of western universalism and cosmopolitanism. UNESCO presents itself as heir to such cosmopolitan humanism, in which the preservation and cultivation of "universal human culture" is perceived as something that leads to both development and salvation, or what Beverly Butler calls "redemptive cosmopolitics" (ibid.: 112).

The concept of universal human culture, of which the west functions as self-appointed guardian, has obvious colonial origins and ongoing neocolonial uses. While more recently the claim of representing universal human culture has its implicit nemesis in the "non-cultures" of the west's others (who may define themselves, or are perceived as defining themselves, against western culture and civilization), more historically, universal human culture has had its nemesis in nation-based notions of culture. Over the past century, the field of Egyptology has been a key battleground for conflicts over "who owns culture" and "who owns antiquities" (Reid 2003; Colla 2007). For the art and museum world, this debate has had important practical and legal repercussions on a global scale (Cuno 2008; Gibbon 2005; Scafidi 2005).

I see the Alexandria Library's model as politically and culturally powerful because it allows for a "third way"—more precisely the *illusion* of a third way—between the compromised colonial and nationalist paradigms of caring for cultural heritage. From UNESCO's perspective, care for universal world heritage is here entrusted into local hands—the hands of local elites who identify with the concept of universal human heritage; who perceive themselves as cosmopolitan and liberal, often in opposition to other nation- and religion-based constructs of culture and identity; and who believe their historical role and mission is to bring culture to the *other* Egyptians. Such elites hold in their hands two powerful "identity cards," so to speak: they are "native Egyptian" toward their western interlocutors and funding sources, and simultaneously "internationalist" or "global" in relation to the local scene, which gives them considerable social and cultural authority. This same, dual role is also held by the Arab Image Foundation, the Beirut-based photographic archiving initiative I discuss in the next section.

Having sketched out the wider context that sustains the Alexandria Library, let me briefly return to its "archive." I have suggested that the library's peculiar dealing with visual material—reflecting the perception common to many other Egyptians that photographs are "just images" reducible to the visual information they contain—might be explained as a cultural difference. The problem with such a conclusion is that many of those who currently manage Egypt's cultural heritage seem well aware of the difference between

a photographic object and a scanned copy, and the importance of provenance, context, and copyright, at least in certain contexts. As I was writing an early draft of this paper in August 2011, at the World Intellectual Property Organization's annual conference in Vienna, the library's director, Ismail Serageldin, was giving a keynote address, titled "Copyright Infrastructure: Enabling the Exercise of Rights and Facilitating Public Interest."[15] Another one of the library's top executives, Muhammad Awad, the U.S.-educated director of one of its research centers, and a professor at Alexandria University, is also a major collector of vintage Alexandriana and a long-time participant in the global market for vintage objects. When we approached him asking that he show us old photographs held by the library, he declined: "I will not show you any photographs until my book is published, because we are competitors."[16] He feared we might corrupt his images by making off with the evidentiary truth they carried, as had my colleague from whom money was demanded for seeing and taking notes in the Dar al-Hilal archive. But we had never asked to see *his* photographs, only *the library's* photographs. For him, there was no distinction between what was his and what was the library's.

Custodial elites who currently shape Egypt's photographic heritage maintain their authority to do so with powerful foreign funding supported by a host of developmentalist and civilizational narratives. The specific model of heritage-making that they put in place then allows them to exploit the ambiguity between photographs-as-images and photographs-as-objects to their own advantage. Egyptian middle-class publics and cultural elites are willing to accept the digitally processed heritage served up to them by the likes of the Alexandria Library, while those who dole out this heritage are well aware of the value differences between material artifacts and their digital copies as they are simultaneously but very differently constructed in global markets.

THE TREASURE HUNTERS

The Arab Image Foundation (AIF) presents an entirely different model of archiving and curating photographs. Based in Beirut, it houses a substantial collection of photographs produced in Egypt and is an important player in shaping photographic heritage in the region. This non-profit private initiative, run through local and foreign grants, was founded in 1997 by a group of artists and collectors (or artists who were also collection owners) who participate in global artistic and curatorial circles. The AIF enjoys an excellent regional and global reputation, which is partly well deserved. Its collection of over

[15] At: http://www.wipo.int/meetings/en/2011/wipo_cr_doc_ge_11/prov_program.html (accessed Aug. 2011).

[16] I came as part of a team from CULTNAT. The purpose of our visit was to see photographs in the library and to work out an agreement on possible cooperation. Administratively, the Cairo-based CULTNAT is part of the Alexandria Library. But the library's core executive staff saw us as "competitors." Heba Farid conducted this interview, while I was present.

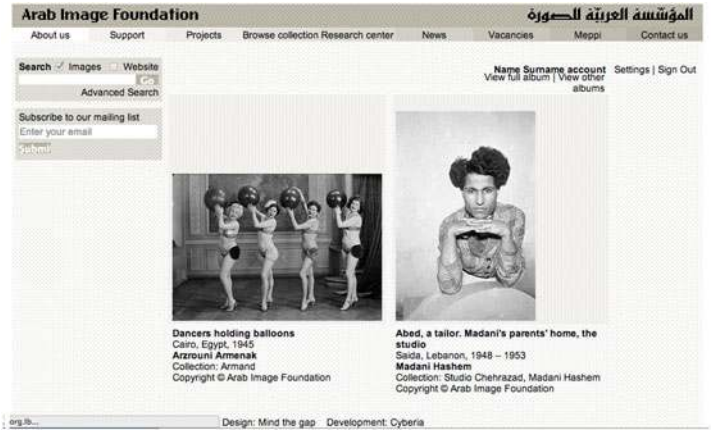

FIGURE 6 Website of the Arab Image Foundation. At http://www.fai.org.lb (accessed 29 July 2014).

six hundred thousand photographs is stored in a purpose-built cold-storage facility. The Foundation's online database is nicely presented—the author and source of every image are acknowledged on the main website (see figure 6), and those who register (registration is free) can use an advanced search option to access additional information about technique and size. The search function is relatively good, and the database was clearly designed for researchers and other artists, and conceived by archivists (or by artist-photographers who share the archivist's and historian's respect for the artifact).

Despite the AIF database's taste and apparent user-friendliness (compared to the Alexandria Library's database), it remains limited. It reflects the Foundation's institutional philosophy and its primary identity as an artistic initiative—the AIF privileges the understanding of photographs as discrete aesthetic texts, and this approach is apparent in a number of its database strategies. For example, the database can be searched but not browsed, and thus one needs to know what to look for, and try to fit into the database maker's particular mindset or research bias. Take, for instance, such highly subjective categories as "old woman," "smiling," or "frowning" (see figure 7). While information about photographic technique and artifact size is given, there is no indication of medium, such as *carte postale*, *carte de visite*, part of an album, or loose mounted/unmounted print. Nor does the database provide context, how a given photograph fits into generic groups within which it was created and circulated. In this way, the image content is privileged over its other aspects, particularly the social context of its origin, or whether it was someone's object, or part of a group of similar objects such as a family photograph collection or even a single album.

FIGURE 7 "Portrait of Gulperie Eflatoun by Armand, a high-end studio in Cairo, early 1960." Online archive of the Arab Image Foundation. At http://www.fai.org.lb (accessed 29 July 2014).

The stress on image content is reinforced by cropping (i.e., scanning without their edges visible) and by the presentation of images on the screen in a generic size and tonal range. This robs the images of visual cues pertaining to their materiality and social meaning. The AIF thus acknowledges the identity of the image as a photograph, but treats it as a singular object devoid of social context and thus of social meaning. Provenance is nominally adhered to but reduced to the only kind that matters to the artist (or art historian) viewer: the photograph's author, technique, size, and line of ownership.

Certainly digitization encourages departure from the understanding of photographs as historical objects whose meanings rest in their materiality, surface images, and contexts *together*. But there are ways to preserve some of that cultural meaning in a digital environment, the easiest of which is to acknowledge the material identity and generic context of every photograph (Sassoon 2004: 199). On the AIF database, by contrast, the viewer is encouraged to treat photographs as discrete, dematerialized, and decontextualized *aesthetic* texts. The available search categories facilitate a cross-textual relationship of each image to others that are formally related—say, other images of "frowning" "old women" in other times and places. But they deny the original context of any single "frowning old woman," who might have

been placed in an album or a bundle of prints next to images of "happy old women" or "frowning old men," the only context that makes "frowning" itself meaningful. This kind of semiotic reading is interesting but clearly limiting, privileging as it does an art historical reading over other possible historical, social, or ethnographic readings.

These shortcomings could be overlooked. Every institution has its own vision, and the AIF is unambiguous about its genealogy as an artistic initiative. Its bias for aesthetic aspects of photographs does not necessarily exclude their simultaneous use by scholars interested in other aspects of their material. The real problem with the AIF is access—like the Alexandria Library it has a no-show policy for originals (manager, email communication, Sept. 2011), and only twenty thousand of the six hundred thousand photographs it holds (about 3 percent) are available to the public online upon registration. Thus what may appear to be superficial problems with the AIF's online database are made much worse by the fact that the database is the only way the public can view any of the AIF's collections.

There have been criticisms of the AIF's lack of clarity in its institutional identity. The AIF is aware of these, but its members have repeatedly refused to be identified as simply "an archive," stressing instead the initiative's perceived fluidity as its single most productive engine of creativity. The "hybrid form" of the AIF as a cluster of artistic projects loosely based on its own archives is presented and celebrated as allowing "multiple perspectives" as well as a "broader mission." There is a concern, writes Michelle Woodward, a Beirut-based photography expert close to the foundation, "that the photographs not be treated simply as raw material, either in the collection phase or in their later usage by artists, publications, or curators" (Woodward 2011). Such reasoning echoes the positions of other regional custodians I have discussed who were concerned to control the use of their photographs. In a now familiar idiom, the custodian here functions as a gatekeeper and sole arbiter of the "true meaning" of the material. While the argument about institutional fluidity as an engine of creativity appeals to certain publics, most notably to global art connoisseurs, questions regarding the AIF's funding remain open: are they receiving grants for preserving cultural heritage, as some of their funders' websites suggest, or for making art?[17]

In the absence of any institutionalized, regularized access policy for the AIF's extensive collection, the public is left with the sole option of consuming their products: their exhibitions, books, and website database. The AIF's artistic vision is the only lens available through which to see material in their custody. This lens is more sophisticated than that of the Alexandria Library, but the material available to the public similarly remains *processed*. Despite surface

[17] Making collections publicly accessible was a condition of some of the European grants the AIF has received in the past.

differences, both institutions thus have much in common. Both host extensive collections that the public cannot physically access, and both, through acts of selection and presentation, decide what can be seen. In both cases, the principal message (the raison d'etre) of their heritage-making strategies privileges its mode of delivery, its presentation, its end product.

I have come full circle back to my opening quote. The AIF has recently launched an initiative called the Middle East Photograph Preservation Initiative, or MEPPI. My opening citation is taken from the MEPPI's mission statement. Described on their website as a "strategic initiative," the MEPPI has a double aim: to "map and survey" significant collections in the region, and to train local personnel in archiving and preservation skills (http://www.fai.org.lb/meppi.aspx). This initiative is the result of cooperation between the AIF, the Art Conservation Department at the University of Delaware, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Getty Conservation Institute, and the Qatar Museums Authority, and is sponsored by a generous grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (ibid.). The initiative's training program thus draws upon the expertise of some of the most respected archiving and preservation specialists in the world, while being hosted in the region by an institution that actively refuses to act as a public archive.

There is a similar mapping initiative based in Cairo. In the fall of 2010, Townhouse, a renowned Cairene gallery, hosted an international archiving symposium. Part of this initiative was to create an archive map that would give a comprehensive overview of regional archives. There is no question that such an initiative—now completed and freely available on the web—will benefit a great many researchers struggling to find their way through the rocky terrain of regional archives.[18] But this coin has another side. Both archiving initiatives originate within private-sector artistic ventures that represent examples of neoliberal culture production, where culture is understood as privilege. Like the AIF, Townhouse has a poor record of providing open access to their events. While Townhouse is a commercial gallery, the AIF can be glossed as essentially a publicly funded private archive. In this context, the act of "mapping Middle East archives" may also be read as a strategy for opening new markets. The markets currently being opened are for knowledge and expertise coming into the region, but they carry the potential to become markets for objects flowing out of the region. The collector who expressed his readiness to sell his entire collection to the Getty comes to mind. He considered himself a "small fish," but he is no small fish for the regionally based MEPPI. This is certainly not illegal, and whether it is desirable or not

[18] At http://www.speakmemory.org/index.php?p=3. The website was recently updated to include the following disclaimer: "We have deliberately decided to exclude private collections from this research to avoid an intensification of the purchase and export of privately held archives in the Middle East" (retrieved Nov. 2012; older version without disclaimer retrieved Nov. 2011).

is a very contentious issue with no simple answer. But we should not be naive: The emergence of a market is often the function of "discovery." By "opening the archive," we—historians, curators, or collectors, united by our search for new and previously unseen objects or sources—create value, and thereby create, feed, and encourage a market.

CONCLUSION

Current attitudes toward photographs in Egypt as well as the new models of heritage-making that are emerging in the region are less a product of local vernacularity than of a specific historical juncture that combines historical legacies of the past century with new concerns and anxieties. The attitudes discussed in this essay share many characteristics, particularly an overwhelming stress on image content, which leads to an undermining or discarding of both photographic materiality and historical and contextual meanings. The methods that new actors employ to construct regional photographic heritage broadly fall under two strategies: digitization and privatization. Privatization is meant here in a specific way: not as something that was once public now becoming private (though this occurs in isolated cases of theft), but rather in the sense that what used to be essentially private material (family and other private archives) becomes valorized as "public heritage"—whether national or regional—through the agency of private initiatives and the market. Both of the important new actors discussed here, the Library of Alexandria and the Arab Image Foundation, rely extensively on these strategies, though with different emphases. As elsewhere in the world, digitization is seen as a privileged solution for the preservation and democratization of cultural heritage. However, digitization is seen either as an end in itself, or, as in the case of the AIF, as a means to provide lip service to accessibility. The Alexandria Library's approach displays how digitization can lead to the actual loss of heritage understood in positive terms as a conduit for social meaning shared by a community. In both cases, the democratization of access to knowledge that digitization seemingly encourages remains a fiction, while also serving as a pretext to attract global funding.

Custodians, both old and new, remain preoccupied with fixing and controlling the meaning of the photographs in their custody. They understand their ownership in negative terms, as having "saved" something valuable from others who do not understand or do not care, or even destroy. Many justify their actions as a response to failed state custodianship of cultural heritage, but, by insisting that they retain sole control of the production of meanings of the material they hold, what they do amounts to very much the same thing. Curatorial elites often perceive the institutions they manage as personal resources. In Egypt at least, this rent-seeking culture is sometimes glossed as a legacy of the socialist economy and its overgrown public bureaucracy. While this might be partly true, such an attitude is also consonant with a neoliberal environment that encourages exploitation of cultural material as

primarily a private asset. The insistence on assigning a singular meaning to any given photograph—whether understood as "document," "data," or "art"—perpetuates and encourages such attitudes. Possessivity and negative, defensive ownership is shared by old-timers and newcomers to the photographic heritage-making scene. This can be a product of particular personal or group experiences, but it is equally perpetuated by the ways in which photographs continue to be understood, used, and exploited by the very actors who purport to be "saving" photographs from undeserving others.

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Abstract: The past decade and a half have seen the founding of new archival initiatives in the Middle East devoted to collecting and preserving photographs. This article examines critically the constitution of photographic heritage in the region ethnographically and historically. I look first at how historical photographs are understood in Egypt by their custodians old and new. Publics and institutions overwhelmingly see photographs as "images of something," and appreciate them for their visual content rather than as social and cultural objects. This facilitates their transfer from public collections into private hands in Egypt and abroad. I examine in detail key actors currently involved in shaping photographic heritage: the Library of Alexandria in Egypt, the Arab Image Foundation in Beirut, and private collectors in Egypt. I look at how these actors assign value to historical photographs in their custody and their strategies for collecting and curating them. They often define their actions negatively, "against others," historically against a state that they believe has failed to care for national heritage. Yet these very actors, and their rivals, often perpetuate such narratives and associated fears. Two models of photographic heritage-making are currently emerging in the region: a "digital" model that destroys artifacts in order to produce data, and a model of private cultural institutions that provide unclear and selective access to their collections.