

The Interpretation of Culture(s) After Television

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If we were to open, as Clifford Geertz did one of his most celebrated (not to mention controversial) essays, with a story about how I began my recent fieldwork in a village, there would be telling differences.(1) I would confess that rather than walking anonymously around the Upper Egyptian village with the feeling that people were looking through us as if we were "gusts of wind," my spouse and I were immediately recognized and firmly placed – in a social network of Canadian, American, and French scholars, journalists, and archaeologists whom the villagers had known. On the west bank of the Nile and a ferry ride from Luxor, the hamlet was in and among the Pharaonic temples that for over a century archaeologists had been unearthing and tourists – now in air-conditioned buses, on donkeys, or riding bicycles – had been admiring.

When I arrived in the spring of 1990, the friendly welcome I received was also due to intense curiosity. Here, finally, was "the wife." My husband had preceded me there, following the trail of an American writer who in 1978 had published a popular life story of a village youth. This was a story that had (too) closely echoed earlier accounts by Jesuits and Orientalists of "the Egyptian peasant," a timeless creature of habit and violence.(2) My husband had sought out a few individuals whom a friend of ours from Cairo, a folklorist writing a dissertation on Upper Egyptian funeral laments, had told him about and to whom she had sent greetings. He had made a special point of meeting Zaynab, whose household had been our friend's haven.(3)

I, in turn, found Zaynab serious and gracious. Her weathered face and unkempt hair, peeking out from her patterned black head shawl, betrayed exposure to the sun and the pressures of being a mother of six (at that time) whose husband had migrated to the city. She asked for news of the folklorist "Leez," as she would do every time I arrived in the village over the next five years, whether from Cairo or the United States. I was forced to exaggerate my knowledge of Liz even as I tried to distance myself from other foreigners I did not know and whose morals and behavior in the village could not be guaranteed. I played on my half Palestinian identity to distinguish myself. But in the end, Zaynab knew I was from the world of the foreigners she had met, and she took advantage of our time together to improve her understanding of fellowships, dissertations, the cost of living in the United State, research, and books, among other more troubling aspects of Euro-American life. I was a message bearer and informant as well its a researcher.

In my story of rapport, moreover, instead of a dramatic police raid on an illegal cockfight that people passionately cared about, I would have to make do with the quiet pleasure of recognition that Zaynab and her children, like most families, evinced when I professed an interest in television. Would I like to watch? They brought out their little television set. They apologized, as they fiddled with its homemade aerial, that the set was black and white. And they invited me to come watch with them any evening, pitying me for not having access to a television set of my own. Television, not the spontaneous common fear of the police, bonded us. And this bond began to separate me from other foreigners, people who generally, as the villagers knew, did not follow the Egyptian television melodramas they loved.

Thick Description, Still

Despite the differences my story suggests in the kinds of worlds people now inhabit (more interconnected) and, not unrelated, the kinds of subjects anthropologists find worth studying (mass media), I want to argue that Geertz's call for thick description as the method of ethnography is still compelling.(4) But it needs some

creative stretching to fit mass-mediated lives.

Many of the studies of popular culture, and especially television, that I have come across are disappointing. They do not seem to be trying to offer profound insights into the human condition, or even into the social, cultural, and political dynamics of particular communities – goals anthropology has always, perhaps with hubris, set for itself. Is it the object, television, that thwarts us? We are not dealing with intricate rituals or complex kinship systems, or even with histories and structures of conjuncture in colonial moments, all of which have deep traditions in the discipline. Television partakes of the ephemerality of the postmodern and is associated, whether here or there, as Geertz likes to put it, with the kind of ordinary people some call the masses.⁽⁵⁾ It is also associated with either commercial entertainment or state propaganda, both always suspect. Does the taint of lowbrow status and the apparent banality of television rub off on those who study it? Or is it, as Jean Baudrillard might have it, that in a world of simulation and simulacra, of which television is such a conspicuous part, notions like the human condition have become hopelessly obsolete?⁽⁶⁾

I would like to argue something else here: that we are only beginning to find the right point of entry for the ethnographic work – in the field and in our studies – that it would take to draw out the significance of television's existence as a ubiquitous presence in the lives and imaginaries of people in the contemporary world. In a recent review of some studies of "resistance," Sherry Ortner diagnosed their weaknesses as being caused by "ethnographic refusal." This strikes true as all apt diagnosis for media studies as well. If there is one theme that has dominated the study of media, especially television, in the last two decades, it is resistance. And if there is one thing that can be said about these studies, it is that despite their considerable theoretical sophistication they are ethnographically thin.⁽⁷⁾

Ironically, for the last decade in cultural studies, the calls for ethnography as the solution have been insistent. Janice Radway's study of romance readers is hailed as a classic that proves the value of ethnography in analyzing popular culture.⁽⁸⁾ Yet researchers seem reluctant to heed the call. Books with promising titles like *Television and Everyday Life* intelligently criticize the finest examples of what are known in the business as reception and audience studies and propose that more ethnographic (and psychoanalytic) case studies are needed. The author of this particular book argues that "an enquiry into the audience should be an enquiry, not into a set of preconstituted individuals or rigidly defined social groups, but into a set of daily practices and discourses within which the complex act of watching television is placed alongside others, and through which that complex act is itself constituted."⁽⁹⁾ Yet the author himself does nothing of the sort. Making appropriate excuses, he defers the practical engagement this would require in order to pursue some (culture-bound) general theorizing about suburbia, modernity, and domesticity. When researchers do pursue ethnography, as one of the most persuasive and subtle advocates of "the ethnographic turn" admits, they use a notion of ethnography that little resembles the anthropological ideal.⁽¹⁰⁾

What can anthropologists offer when we begin to take television seriously? In her overview of the emergent field of the anthropology of media, Debra Spitulnik claims that anthropologists "have in some way already bypassed many of the debates within media studies ... because they implicitly theorize media processes, products, and uses as complex parts of social reality, and expect to locate media power and value in a more diffuse, rather than direct and causal, sense."⁽¹¹⁾ In her "(mild) polemic" on the same subject, Faye Ginsburg locates anthropologists' distinctiveness in their less ethnocentric stance, their attention to the contexts of media texts, and their recognition of "the complex ways in which people are engaged in processes of making and interpreting media works in relation to their cultural, social and historical circumstances."⁽¹²⁾

And indeed, the theoretical arguments by anthropologists for careful ethnography – ethnography that illuminates what Brian Larkin calls "the social space" of television – are promising.⁽¹³⁾ In a powerful analysis of the politics and interpretations of a television soap opera that gripped China in 1991, Lisa Rofel argues that ethnography – defined as "attention to the contingent way in which all social categories emerge, become naturalized, and intersect in people's conception of themselves and their world, and further, an emphasis on how these categories are produced through everyday practice" – is necessary to the study of encounters with media because "the moments of immersion in a particular cultural artifact are necessarily enmeshed within other social fields of meaning and power."⁽¹⁴⁾ Drawing more directly on the insights of cultural studies, Purnima Mankekar's study of women television viewers in New Delhi, India, shows how "their interpretations are profoundly influenced by the broader social discourses [primarily those on gender and nationalism] in which they are interpellated; they are shaped by events in the viewers define themselves."⁽¹⁵⁾

But just how do we trace this enmeshment of television in other social fields?(16) The key, I would argue, is to experiment with ways of placing television more seamlessly within the sort of rich social and cultural context that the sustained anthropological fieldwork that has been our ideal since Bronislaw Malinowski is uniquely able to provide. The special challenge we face in doing so is that the cultural forms transmitted by television have no obvious and simple community and are always only a part – sometimes larger, sometimes smaller – of people's complex lives. Moreover, they are produced deliberately for people, under conditions that vary politically and historically.

Anthropologists are probably best prepared to study what in media studies is narrowly called "reception." But how can we get more than its fragmentary sense of the everyday lives, social connections, and concerns of the people interviewed, or of the diversity of viewing communities? What we often have is only the anecdote or the fragmentary quotation of a decontextualized television watcher. How can we get more than a partial sense of the everyday lives, social connections, concerns, and complexities of the people quoted, not to mention of, the much larger group who consume the cultural forms and share the country or community?(17)

As I have argued elsewhere, television's messages are deflected by the way people frame their television experiences and by the way powerful everyday realities inflect and offset those messages.(18) Roger Silverstone's image of the television audience as positioned in multiple spaces and times suggests how daunting the task of fully contextualizing television is. He notes that people "live in different overlapping but not always overdetermining spaces and times: domestic spaces; national spaces; broadcasting and narrowcasting spaces; biographical times; daily times; scheduled, spontaneous but also socio-geological times."(19) Which means we should somehow try to include these various spaces and times in our thick descriptions of people who watch television.(20)

Yet even this is not enough. Anthropologists cannot dispense with "textual" analysis, the equivalent of the symbolic analyses of rituals and myths that have illuminated so much. Even more important, they need to do ethnographies of production. Television programs are produced not just by specialists of a different social status than viewers (like priests and bards), but by professionals of a different class – often urban rather than rural, with national and sometimes transnational identities and social ties – who are working within structures of power and lives and by the relationships in which those viewers organizations that are tied to and doing the work of national or commercial interests. For a truly thick description, we need to find ways to interrelate these various nodes of the "social life of television."(21)

When I argue that part of the solution to the thinness of studies of popular culture lies in returning to the insights of Geertz's "Thick Description," I do not mean that our goal is necessarily the same as his was – to develop an interpretive theory of culture or to translate cultures – even though I share Geertz's faith that a good analysis demonstrates "the power of the scientific imagination to bring us into touch with the lives of strangers."(22) Rather, I think we need to recall that when Geertz calls for microscopic ethnographic description, he justifies these "protracted descriptions" of distant events as – to borrow a phrase from someone I consider irredeemably wrongheaded – good to think. Thick descriptions of social discourses in particular places have general relevance, he argues, because "they present the sociological mind with bodied stuff on which to feed." With their specific knowledges, anthropologists can think intelligently about, and imaginatively with, the megaconcepts of social science.(23) Or of the humanities, one might now add. Along the same lines, Geertz warns that though anthropologists often study in villages, they don't study villages. They confront the same grand realities and big words as other social scientists – but in homely locations and forms.(24)

Extending these ideas, I want to suggest that we can still profit from trying to use careful contextualizations of small facts and events – in this case of television consumption in particular places, including homely villages in Upper Egypt – to help us reflect on some "big words." If television seems banal, then one of Michel Foucault's most memorable phrases should inspire us: "What we have to do with banal facts is to discover – or try to discover – which specific and perhaps original problem is connected with them."(25)

In what follows, I try to show that among the problems that stories about women and television in an Upper Egyptian village can speak to (or be made to speak to, as Geertz reminds us) are those about the nature of "culture" and "cultures" under the conditions of what many would call postcolonial postmodernity. Along the way, I explore a method, a kind of appropriate technology for media studies. In the conclusion, I suggest that

the study of television encourages an anthropology that engages not just with the academy and its "big words" but with other social fields of the world in which we work.

Cultural Texts and "Multisited" Ethnography

In January 1996, when I returned for a short visit to the Upper Egyptian village I had been working in intermittently since 1990, I watched, with friends, some episodes of the current television serial, *Mothers in the House of Love*. Set in a retirement home for women, the program's central drama concerned an attempt by the unscrupulous brother-in-law of the widow who ran the place to take it over so he could achieve his dream of building a twenty-two-story hotel. Armed with a newfound purpose, the women residents banded together to defend their threatened home. They forgot their squabbles about which television programs to watch, mobilized their talents to raise the money to buy out his share, all stood up to him.

The serial had been written a few years earlier by Fathiyya al-'Assal, a vibrant and self-confident writer, and one of only a handful of women of her generation writing television dramas in Egypt. Active in the Egyptian leftist party, she had occasionally been jailed and had had numerous story ideas tabled and serials canceled by the television censors – civil servants working for state-owned television – and even by those higher up in the government. Her serials were known for their social concerns, and she considered women's issues critical. She had also done some ethnography in a retirement home to make her script more realistic.

How can we study the encounter between some Upper Egyptian village women and this television serial? With television programs, one is forced to talk not so much about cultures-as-texts as about discrete cultural texts that are produced, circulated, and consumed. Thick description of television therefore requires a multisited ethnography wherein, as George Marcus has put it regarding commodities in a world system, one can "follow the thing." (26) The relevant system here is national. Therefore, I will start with the villagers and their responses to the television serial, using this focus to explore basic structures and meanings in their lives. But I also want to keep tracing the serial back to Cairo, where it was produced in a very different milieu by a leftist intellectual and some urban professionals working with and against a state-controlled medium and with imagined audiences for their work. This approach will, in the end, allow its some insight into the dynamics of "culture" – one of those big words.

I watched several episodes of *Mothers in the House of Love* with my neighbors who, though intrigued, kept up a running commentary, laughing at ludicrous characters like the compulsive knitter of pullovers. After an episode in which a widow had finally consented to marry an old sweetheart, one person joked. "Now all sixty-year-old women will want to marry." The next day, though, Zaynab commented more realistically on the episode, simply contrasting it to local attitudes: "We say when a girl is past thirty she won't marry.... It is shameful. If a woman over thirty does marry, she'll do it quietly, far away, without a wedding celebration."

Zaynab's comment was revealing in so many ways. Directed to me, it posited the difference between the villagers (and Upper Egyptians in general, by extension) and the urban, wealthy Alexandrian women of the television serial as a cultural difference within a moral frame. This construction of difference was partly for the edification of the anthropologist. Zaynab's long years of watching her mother's wealth of funeral laments being carefully noted by our folklorist friend as well as her own regular experiences of being photographed by tourists had no doubt helped her objectify her own culture. Her gifts to me over the years suggested she had learned her lessons well. Her first gift was a crude earthenware casserole dish of the sort locally made and used. The second was a traditional piece of black cloth, offered with the confident announcement that she had got me something I would really like, something rare nowadays. The third was a black shawl, the latest local design for what "traditional" women wore on their heads. Each represented something unique to Upper Egypt and something that those eager to become more sophisticated – like her daughter – would have rejected as old-fashioned.

Yet for Zaynab, a woman very much at home in her social world, a little old before her time and confident as one of the adult women of the village who took her social duties – sick visits and funerals, for example – very seriously, the cultural differences within which she framed her response to the serial were also personally meaningful. Her own experience of marriage was very different from what she saw on television.

Zaynab, like most women in the village, had had an arranged marriage – but, following the lines of closest

practical kinship, it was to a maternal, not a paternal, cousin. Zaynab's mother had been a second and younger wife, widowed shortly after she gave birth to her only child. Not close to her husband's patrilineage, she had turned to her own relatives for support, and eventually, for a husband for her daughter. She had inherited from her father some land, on which she and Zaynab later built a two-story mud-brick home. Zaynab's husband had worked on and off in Cairo since he was fourteen, leaving her mostly alone with her mother to raise her children. Secretly, he had married a second wife in Cairo; Zaynab now knew about this and was resigned to the fact that he would probably never return to live in the village.

As the years went by and Zaynab had more children, conceived on her husband's visits home, she had a harder time coping. It was especially difficult when her milk dried up after she gave birth to twins. Not long after that, she and her mother were forced to sell all their livestock because they couldn't take care of them. Then her mother died, leaving Zaynab on her own.

One cannot ignore the possibility that Zaynab had remarked on the episode of the older widow's wedding because it was meaningful to her own personal situation. The idea of remarriage might have been appealing. She was alone, managing a complex household, and her children provided her with her only company most evenings (when they all watched television together). She had no man to help her make decisions about the children's schooling, about what to plant and harvest on which strips of land, and about which domestic livestock to buy or sell. For help with the work in the fields, she had to call on young male relatives or pay for labor. Certainly she had no one for companionship or love. She said about her husband's visits home: "He's like a guest; he doesn't know anything about our lives."

In fact, a recurrent theme in my conversations with Zaynab was the situation of the five or six older women from Switzerland, Germany, and the United States who had married – or had affairs with – village youths they met while on holiday. Some were divorcées with grown children, as Zaynab noted. Using me as an informant about the strange behavior of foreigners, she would ask me how these women could do it. She was puzzled about how their behavior might be acceptable, especially to their children. She was not the only village woman to talk to me about this phenomenon, but I wondered if her curiosity about these older women who had had second lives, second chances at love or sex, might not have had a special resonance, as had the episode about the widows remarriage. Nevertheless, as a woman whose respectability rested on her marriage, she distanced herself in moral language from what she perceived as a cultural difference between life here, in Upper Egyptian villages, and there, in Alexandria, Cairo, or other cities.

Zaynab could not even begin to recognize that for the Cairene writer of *Mothers in the House of Love*, a progressive activist engaged in arguments with more conservative intellectuals and politicians, this episode about the value of love in the face of social pressure was not meant as a simple portrayal of the middleclass values of Alexandrian society but as a universally applicable revolutionary alternative to enhance women's status and lives.

Another serial of which al-'Assal was proud was about a woman who, rejected by her husband because she is uneducated, goes out and gets herself an education. When her husband then wants to take her back, she refuses, even though they have a son together. Al-'Assal said of this serial, "My point was to emphasize the value of a home as a home. That is to say, a man and woman should only enter on condition that they love one another." Marriage, she contended, should be first and foremost about mutual understanding and love. She contrasted her ideas about companionate marriage to prevailing values that place financial considerations first.(27) Her reference point was urban and middle class, and her views were those of the most progressive and modernist end of a continuum. While the ideal of the bourgeois couple and some version of the idea of companionate marriage have been increasingly idealized and realized by the middle classes in twentiethcentury Egypt, al-'Assal's stress on the equality of husband and wife was meant to be more radical than the mainstream middle-class vision.(28) Yet Zaynab's marriage did not even fit the ordinary middle-class ideal; the vocabulary of rights to love and personal happiness was foreign to her.

There are other examples of how the serials both raised relevant issues for village viewers and yet were unassimilable because of fundamental differences of perspective related to social location. In one of the first conversations I had while watching television with Zaynab, she animatedly told me about the program that had just come on the air. This extraordinary weekly show was called *The Confrontation* and consisted of interviews – more like interrogations – of actual criminals serving prison sentences. Imitating the Cairene dialect, Zaynab

recounted a memorable interview with a woman drug dealer. When the interviewer asked if she would do it again, the woman had replied, "Of course. As soon as I get out I'll deal in drugs again." Asked why, she replied, "I have to eat." Zaynab added that the woman had become used to a certain way of life and so had to keep it up. Zaynab quoted her again: "They'll jail me and I'll get out and deal. They'll put me in prison, I'll get out and do it again. That's how I make a living."

That Zaynab found this female criminal so compelling seems as significant as the fact that she responded to the television theme of marriage at a late age. The woman drug dealer, trying to make a living, must have represented something intriguing for this person of great integrity who was insulted by any hint of disrespect. Zaynab's whole life was organized around trying to feed herself and her family – in the larger sense of managing a household and educating, clothing, and raising her children. She farmed three small plots of land (each far apart from the others) as well as raising sheep, a water buffalo, chickens, ducks, and pigeons. She baked bread. Work and economic struggles were the most persistent themes in her conversations with others and the main concerns in her day-to-day life.

The television serial we watched in January (*Mothers in the House of Love*) also treated this theme. But the way women's work and social usefulness were framed made them awkward for someone like Zaynab to assimilate. One of al-'Assal's goals in writing this serial was to show that the perceptions of "old age" and "senility" in women were, at least in part, the results of their not having had any social role. As she put it,

I wanted to create a new role for older women.... In the retirement home itself, they started a class for teaching English, because one woman had been an English professor; another woman who had been a silversmith opened a small silver workshop and taught women the skills needed for this work. They participated in the eradication of illiteracy by teaching neighborhood girls to read and write. They also gave classes on household management, and even agriculture.... My message is that women can still learn at this age, and we can still benefit from what they have to teach us as well.

The dynamic Cairene writer claimed to speak from her own experience, explaining,

I am sixty years old now. In the past, when a woman was sixty she was supposed to sit at home waiting to die, having already married off her children. I now have four children and eight grandchildren, but because I have my own concerns and ambitions as a writer and a politician, I do not feel that I am getting older. I wanted to communicate this in a serial.

Al-'Assal's socialist feminist message – advocating socially useful roles for women, skills and activities that could take them beyond their place in the family and home, and economic independence that would alleviate the worst effects of male domination – is impressive. Going somewhat against the grain of current conservative sentiments being voiced in the media and Parliament in favor of women's return to the home (at a time when large numbers of women must work out of financial necessity and when professional careers are common), this politically motivated position is underwritten by al-'Assal's own anger. Her father was a wealthy businessman who married twenty women after marrying (and eventually divorcing) her mother, a housewife without the power to object. Al-'Assal was determined to become educated herself and still believes in education as the key for women – and for social progress.

Historically, this is a political position that had its origins at the turn of the century, when elite and some middle-class reformists (both male and female) began advocating women's education. But it was given real support by programs to provide mass education in the 1960s.⁽²⁹⁾ It was in this era that al-'Assal began her career as a serial writer – when she found that the students she was teaching to read and write would desert the classroom to listen, with the janitor, to the melodramatic serials on the radio. She still tries to work the importance of literacy into many of her plots and proudly told me about one. serial called *Moment of Choice*, about a woman of fifty whose husband has run off with another woman, leaving her with no skills or identity. As al-'Assal described it,

It was about how she was able to deal with life, how she refused to ever return to being the wife of so-and-so, how she had to become a person in her own right, how she worked in a publishing house and read and expanded her horizons, and finally how she wrote stories and won a prize for them. The serial ended up on that note, in order to show how she was able to win the prize herself – she was the sole master of the victory.

How might a theme like becoming literate affect Zaynab? Just the year before *Mothers in the House of Love* was broadcast, government-sponsored literacy classes for women had been set up in and around her village. Attending was out of the question for someone as busy as Zaynab. Women went for a variety of reasons, but all those who attended had two things in common: they had no children (or only a few that someone else could watch for a while) and their family situations were such that they could be released from work for a few hours in the afternoon.

When I went to pay a call on Umm Ahmad, another woman I knew and liked, I asked if she was going to the classes. With her eyes bright and a big smile, she said she really wanted to; she was dying to learn to read and she hated it that she couldn't even sign her own name (she had been trying to collect her recently deceased father's pension). "But can I learn?" she asked me dubiously. "No, I'm too old. I've got no brain," she laughed. Then she added, "An old woman – why, they'll talk. They'll say, 'Why does she need to go and learn?' " I asked her who would talk, and she said, "The men. The men will talk."

When her son, a young man in his early thirties and the father of two young children, walked into the room, I teased, "Hey, you should let her go to the literacy classes." He replied, "Fine, that's fine. She can go." Turning to her with a smile, he added, "In fact, I'll get you a book bag." This was an amusing idea, since village women never carry satchels or handbags. If they go to market or visiting, they carry a basket on their heads. Otherwise, what they need is tucked inside their long black overdresses. Only schoolchildren and city people carry bags.

But Umm Ahmad was no downtrodden, superannuated old woman lacking any socially useful role or skills, as al-'Assal might have feared. She was a grandmother, but a wiry and energetic one – working in the fields, caring for her water buffalo, and selling cheese and butter locally. Her situation was somewhat unusual, but in my experience everyone's story in the village was unique. She had had a bad marriage and returned to live in her father's household. She had only one son who, also unusually, lived with her and worked her father's fields while holding a night job as a guard at a nearby Pharaonic temple. For years she had taken care of her father, who was in poor health and not always lucid. A founder of the hamlet in which they lived, he had been an important figure. Umm Ahmad had been in charge of running her father's household and farming enterprise, especially the livestock, while her son was growing up as well as after he left, desperate for income, to work briefly for a Lebanese-owned chicken-breeding factory near Alexandria.

What significance could a group of wealthy or formerly wealthy women, sitting around a comfortable retirement home and suddenly putting aside their individual troubles and overcoming their sense of helplessness and uselessness, have for Umm Ahmad? What about the modernist feminist ideal of women's rights to education and a meaningful career, or at least socially useful work? What about the idea of winning a prize for writing? Umm Ahmad had to contend with a gender system that constrained women, but this was hardly her main impediment to securing a decent life. Other concerns were more pressing: the cost of farming with more expensive fertilizer, the depressed prices the government paid for crops, the IMF-enforced lifting of subsidies for wheat that made provisioning households with bread a strain for most local families, the higher cost of living in an area where hotels catering to tourists drove up prices, the felt need to get children educated so they might find employment, and the vast inequalities between large landlords and the majority of households.

What possibilities did Umm Ahmad or other village women have for careers that would provide personal fulfillment and the financial independence necessary for a marriage based on equality when even the finest local men who had become educated might have to content themselves with being foremen at archaeological sites? Or perhaps with waiting for five or six years after graduating from teaching college for a government job as a librarian in the local high school, working a couple of hours a day and making barely enough to pay for cigarettes?

The problem is not just that cultural producers like al-'Assal come from a different social class than these village women who watch her programs, though this is significant. Nor is it a matter of the difference between urban and rural experiences, however considerable. Al-'Assal has actually tried to bridge this kind of difference by writing a serial, broadcast in 1993, about rural Upper Egypt. The serial showed the cruelty and power of large landlords and the powerlessness of peasants who don't seek common cause. But the main theme was revenge (the feud), the metonym by which Upper Egypt has been known to generations of northern Egyptian

writers (the violence it signifies now transferred neatly onto Muslim militants whose strongholds are located there).(30)

Al-'Assal wrote this serial out of genuine concern. She even spent months living with a rural family to prepare herself to write the script, just as she had studied a retirement home to write *Mothers in the Home of Love*. As a radical politician she was deeply concerned with social conditions and the terrible poverty of the region. But her focus on vengeance and the solution she offered reproduced a discourse of enlightened modernity against backward customs that continue to denigrate Upper Egyptians, men and women. The hero and heroine of the program were a young couple, a latter-day Romeo and Juliet, whose modern education and enlightened ideas led them to reject the feud (a "backward" tradition still nurtured by older women) and to attempt to break the hold of the feudal lords (and their wives) by supporting the peasants' efforts to set up a collectively owned factory.

Al-'Assal's feminism, like tier progressive politics, is part of a public discourse of reform and uplift whose contours can be traced to colonial and anticolonial nationalist efforts to transform Egypt into a modern place. Tempered by ethnography and broad sympathy in al-'Assal's case, this general attitude of knowing what is good for "society" (seen as an object to be manipulated by one's expertise) underlies the work of many of the writers of television serials, just as it shapes the myriad projects of reform, from schooling to public health plans, in which villagers find themselves involved. In places like Egypt and India, television is the main instrument for the transmission of both expertise and these public narratives of the state and the urban middle classes.(31)

Such discourses of enlightenment have their dark side. Had Umm Ahmad been able to attend her local literacy classes, she would have learned to read and write using textbooks filled with didactic stories about the value of small families, neighborly cooperation, and national responsibility. Until she gets her book bag, she is subjected to this pedagogic discourse mostly by watching television, which she does.(32) How does this discourse help her place herself? As someone who could carry a book bag? As someone whose life is different from the ones portrayed? Or as someone whose life is hopelessly inferior?

Television makes obvious the fact that the same cultural texts have different imports in different contexts. When Zaynab interprets a scene like the marriage of a sixty-year-old as a matter of cultural difference – linked to region, way of life, and morality – this is because she is so disadvantaged in terms of class and education that she fails to grasp the intentions of the more privileged creator of the program. For al-'Assal – working as an oppositional politician within the national context of a postcolonial state and arguing with fellow intellectuals, critics, and politicians in Cairo and across the Arab world while trying to reform the public – this episode was meant to represent a revolutionary and enlightened feminist option. Only a mobile ethnography can do justice to the ways these different worlds intersect. And this intersection must be part of any thick description of television.

I hope this extended reflection on the encounter between some village women and a television serial has illustrated the way stories about book bags, marrying at sixty, and television can speak, as Geertz suggested, to big words and mega-concepts. Taking television seriously forces us to think about "culture" not so much its a system of meaning or even a way of life but as something whose elements are produced, censored, paid for, and broadcast across a nation, even across national boundaries. The hegemonic or ideological – and thus powerrelated related – nature of mass-mediated cultural texts in the service of national, class, or commercial projects is undeniable. This, in turn, should lead us to think about the ways that aspects of what we used to think of as local culture, such as moral value about the proper age of marriage or the propriety of women's education, are themselves not neutral features to be interpreted but the sometimes contested result of other, more local, projects of power that are worth analyzing.

From Cultures to Cosmopolitans

More interesting, perhaps, is the way ethnographies of television – because its cultural texts are produced elsewhere and inserted into local households, communities, and nations – confirm for us the need to rethink the notion of culture in the singular, as a shared set of meanings distinct from those held by other communities sometimes called "cultures." This observation has become something of a commonplace in anthropology. Ulf Hannerz uses the term "cultural complexity" and has developed a distributive theory of culture to capture the

ways that culture is not necessarily shared.(34) Critiques of the way the culture concept has tended to homogenize communities and create false boundaries (perhaps articulated most eloquently by James Clifford) appear in introductions to major interdisciplinary readers and in arguments like Arjun Appadurai's that "natives" – people incarcerated in place and in modes of thought – are fictions of the anthropological imagination.(35) In my own argument for "writing against culture," I too registered discomfort with the internal homogenization produced by the culture concept.(36) I explored ways to write against the typifying of communities that results from thinking of them as "cultures," and I tried to highlight the contestatory nature or discourses within communities.(37)

This is not to deny that the notion of having a culture, or being a culture, has become politically crucial to many communities previously labeled "cultures" by anthropologists – Solomon Islanders invoking *kastom*, diaspora Indians supporting Fundamentalist religious organizations that glorify Hindu culture, Catalonians and Jordanians setting up national or regional Folklore museums as part of what could be called the heritage industry. As Marshall Sahlins, following Norbert Elias and others, has noted about the origins of the culture concept, it is related to relative disadvantage. It developed in Germany, "a relatively underdeveloped region (as opposed to the imperial and colonial powers of Western Europe), and as an expression of that comparative backwardness, or of its nationalist demands."(38) The similarities to the conditions in regions where today the idea of culture is gaining currency are obvious. Appadurai has called this phenomenon "culturalism," in which identities are mobilized in the context of nation-states, mass mediation, migration, and globalization.(39) It is no accident that in the Upper Egyptian village I know, it was Zaynab, the woman with the most experience with foreigners, who knew what kinds of gifts I would appreciate: objects from a distinct local "culture." This "culturing" process is related to encounters with others, many of whom arrive already primed with notions of culture.

However, these reactive processes are balanced by many others that unsettle the boundaries of cultures. Much has been written on travel and migration, which has certainly been a growing part of Upper Egyptian reality – Zaynab's husband, for example, joining generations of Upper Egyptians in the city of Cairo, long dotted with clubs devoted to migrants from particular villages. Much, too, could be written about colonialism and other forms of political and economic interpenetration. In this region of Upper Egypt, for example, local life is shaped by the economics of the international sugar industry since, from the late nineteenth century, sugarcane has been the major crop.

But television is an extraordinary technology for breaching boundaries and intensifying and multiplying encounters among lifeworlds, sensibilities, and ideas. Television brings into Zaynab's home, her conversations, and her imagination a range of visions and experiences that originated outside her community (in such places as Cairo, Alexandria, Hollywood, Bombay, and even Tokyo). At the same time it places her in a particular relation to them. And with UNESCO's 1993 estimate of more than six million television sets in Egypt, Zaynab's exposure is hardly unusual.(40)

What is critical is that television's meanings are produced somewhere – for most viewers, somewhere else – and consumed locally in a variety of localities. Even if it ultimately helps create something of a "national habitus," or hints of a transnational habitus, television is most interesting because of the way it provides material which is then inserted into, interpreted with, and mixed up with local but themselves socially differentiated knowledges, discourses, and meaning systems.(41) Television, in short, renders more and more problematic a concept of cultures as localized communities of people suspended in shared webs of meaning.

Thinking about Zaynab watching Egyptian dramatic serials and films, interviews with criminals, broadcasts of Parliament in session, American soap operas, imported nature programs that take her to the Caribbean or the Serengeti Plain, and advertisements for candy, ceramic toilets, chicken-stock cubes, and Coca-Cola leads me to begin thinking about her and others in this village not as members of some kind of unified Egyptian, or Upper Egyptian, peasant culture – one in which it is improper for women over thirty to marry or older women to be out and about going to school – but in terms of the cosmopolitanism they might represent. The introduction here of the concept of cosmopolitanism might seem surprising or glib. Since it is generally associated with those who travel, those who feel at home in several parts of the world, and those who are professionals, the concept would seem to apply more readily to the progressive television writer al-'Assal.(42) Although her political and social concerns are passionately focused on Egypt, her political vocabulary is international; she is well aware of foreign literature, film, and media; she has grown children who work in Finland and France; and

she expresses frustration that the work of many fine Egyptian women writers is not translated into foreign languages. She reads television texts in terms of their political perspectives, criticizing fellow writers for being conservative or caving in to government expectations. She worries about television's social impact, disapproving of an American soap opera like *The Bold and the Beautiful* for the immorality it normalizes.

However, what village women like Zaynab, her daughter Sumaya, and her neighbor Fayruz can help us understand is how wealth, education, and particular experiences in everyday life combine with television to mark out other varieties of cosmopolitanism. These are the kinds of cosmopolitanisms one finds in many rural areas around the postcolonial world and that confound the concept of "cultures."

Poverty, for example, impedes full access to the consumer culture and commodification of signs that are so conspicuously a part of a postmodern cosmopolitan's life. Yet Zaynab's life is not untouched by these features of cosmopolitanism. Television advertisements in Egypt insistently traffic in such signs, their jingles – written by advertising firms with names like Americana – enticing people to buy brand-name shampoos and yogurt. Unlike her children, Zaynab remains fairly unmoved by these advertisements. One promoting a national brand of luncheon meat suggests the complicated reasons why. This commercial, which aired regularly in the early 1990s, shows the large factory where the meat is processed. From displays of carcasses hung from butcher hooks the commercial moves to a shot of the workers, technicians in lab coats busy at gleaming stainless-steel machines. The advertisement is selling modernity – with its scientific procedures and hygiene. But to gain consumers beyond those already attracted by convenience foods, it has to overcome the aversions of women like Zaynab (who raise chickens, ducks, and pigeons at home) to eating anything "from outside." (When well-meaning German tourists give her children packages of prepared cheeses and meats, Zaynab snatches them and throws them disgustedly to the sheep.) In any case, these meat products are expensive and mostly unavailable locally, except in a few up-market grocery stores across the river in Luxor – stores Zaynab would not go to.

This is not to say that Zaynab's imagination is not broad or that she does not have great knowledge of other worlds, gleaned not just from television but from foreign friends. The hamlet she lives in, with its Euro-American folklorists, journalists, political scientists, tourists, and aging divorcées, is only an extreme version of the kinds of communities in which many villagers in Egypt and elsewhere live. Migrating husbands and imported fans and television sets (brought back from wealthy labor-importing countries) are also familiar figures and objects – the products of unequal economies, nations, and states. The postcolonial state is there, too – in a national curriculum disseminated by newly literate teachers in overcrowded classrooms with barely any resources; in literacy textbooks promulgating family planning messages; and in television serials promoting modernist ideals forged in the anticolonial nationalist movements of the first half of the century.

Yet Zaynab's life is anchored by economic constraints in her house, family, and village; the aspiration to educate her children is the only modernist national ideal within her reach, and, like most village parents, she sacrifices much for it. Zaynab has spent time in Cairo, getting medical treatment for her son. While there, she stayed in the Canadian folklorist's apartment – which was decorated with Egyptian antiques, folk art, and Bedouin rugs, but also boasted a transcriber, cassette player, and lots of books. Zaynab's subaltern relationship to this metropolitan world, related to her poverty and lack of education, is symbolized best by what she wore in Cairo. Despite her versatile knowledge, she wore the only clothes she had – clothes that announced her regional and rural origins.

This is in contrast to the form of cosmopolitanism that characterizes her wealthy neighbor, Fayruz. The first time I heard about this young woman was from her mother, the wife of the largest landowner in the village. During our first visit in 1990, I had talked to the mother about *The White Flag*, a television serial about the struggles of a retired diplomat to save his historic villa from destruction by a nouveau riche developer. She told me how some Egyptian tourists had knocked on her daughter's door and begged to watch the program there. Her daughter Fayruz, she proudly said, had cooked them dinner. She implied that Fayruz possessed both the sophistication to feel comfortable with these urban types and the "traditional" generosity to invite them to a meal.

Fayruz lives around the corner from Zaynab in a house that looks quite different. In front sits a small shop, its shelves stocked with the usual contents of a local store anywhere in rural Egypt – laundry soaps, cans of tomato sauce, halvah, cooking oil, cigarettes, and candies. The shop is also the center for an immense

wholesale grocery business, which, combined with their agricultural efforts and its monopoly on government-ration distribution, has helped her husband and his brother consolidate their father's wealth.

Down the driveway is an odd structure that says worlds about Fayruz's social location. A mud-brick house adjoins a concrete-and-brick house, complete with balcony. This is the type of "villa" people with money now aspire to build. When I first met Fayruz, she lived in the spacious and tidy mud-brick house. Like all village women, she baked bread in her outdoor oven. But her house looked cleaner, because she did not need to keep livestock to boost the household income. When I returned in 1996, she had moved into the adjoining structure, with its stone floor tiles and bright blue ceramic-tiled bathroom, complete with toilet and bathtub. She showed me around the house so I could see all the furniture – beds, wardrobes, couches, armchairs, and side tables. (In contrast, Zaynab owns only a couple of locally made benches, a low table for eating, one large wooden bed, and a number of other beds made from palm reeds pruned from her four trees.) The new "modern" house had been prepared for Fayruz's younger, educated brother-in-law. But, when he finally found a bride, a girl from a wealthy local family, she refused to live in the village – even in what locals might have considered a sophisticated "palace." She insisted on living in an apartment across the river in Luxor.

Compared to the distinctions that can be marked by goods in a city like Cairo, where the wealthy, educated cosmopolitan elite can have the best imported appliances and furniture and where distinctions of taste can be subtly marked (decorating at least one room with Arabesque furniture was common among the most "cultured" in the 1970s and 1980s; in the 1990, folk arts are more popular) the distinctions in a provincial area like Luxor are cruder. Fayruz's household had furniture, a telephone, and a color television set. These set its members apart as people with money and a "modern," worldly – not rural and backward – orientation. In contrast, her father (from an older generation and, like Zaynab, more locally oriented), though perfectly willing to invest in tractors and harvesters for his agricultural enterprise, would not consider moving from his mud-brick house or buying a bigger television set.(43)

When Fayruz unlocked her wardrobe and started pulling out dresses to show me, I understood even better how her wealth enabled a different form of cosmopolitanism than Zaynab's, while her lack of education and her location in the provinces still distinguished her from urban professional cosmopolitans like al-'Assal. Fayruz showed me amazing dresses of chiffon and silk, with sequins and gold buttons, all long and with long sleeves (only the urban upper classes and movie stars would wear anything more revealing) – some with surprisingly curved bodices and extravagant flounces. I was surprised, because around the village she wore the usual black head covering and an overdress only slightly more sophisticated than most women's.

This ornate wardrobe full of extraordinary dresses out of a lavish television serial reveals a great deal about urbanity, class distinction, and the national context in which these figure for a provincial. When Fayruz went to Cairo to get medical treatment for her migraines, she stayed, unlike Zaynab, in a shabby part of town where few foreigners would live. She and her husband called on business contacts her brother-in-law had developed while attending the business school run (as part of its parallel educational system) by the venerable mosque-university al-Azhar. Whereas Zaynab, despite her contact with foreign cosmopolitans, had worn her village clothes, Fayruz, whose knowledge of other worlds came from television and Upper Egyptians with urban experience or aspirations, plucked her eyebrows, wore makeup, and put on some of the more modest dresses she had in her wardrobe. She also replaced her black head cloth with the *higab* – the head covering associated with modest Islamic dress – thereby erasing her village identity. This adoption of the *higab* is not surprising. For rural Egyptians, as for urban lower-and middle-class women since the 1980s, to become "modern" and urbane has meant taking on a more identifiably Islamic look and sound.(44)

We can read in these differences a contrast of cosmopolitanisms: between the resolutely national frame of an up-and-coming provincial and the sharp juxtapositions produced for a poor woman by the intersection of neocolonial travel by folklorists, anthropologists, and tourists; postcolonial nationalist modernization projects; and transnational flows of television programs. Fayruz, with her chiffon dresses and *higab*, can more easily imagine herself in the Egyptian serialized melodramas than can Zaynab, who distinguishes the moralities of marriage at sixty. Yet because she has neither the education nor the real urban experience of serial writers like al-'Assal (a staunch opponent of the new veiling), Fayruz asserts her sophistication by placing herself in the middle-class moral world symbolized by veiling. This is a world deliberately excluded from television.(45) Fayruz's imaginative participation in the nation, with its power centers in the cities, will be intensified if she continues with her literacy classes. But it should be noted that she is attending more out of wounded pride (and

loneliness) than any desire for female emancipation. When her brother-in-law's new bride refused to stay in the household with her, the bride apparently put on airs because of her education. Telling me these stories, Fayruz had fumed. "is she better than me?" Look at who my father is, she would add. Yet the bride's claims to superiority rested in part on her school diploma. In the national context, where standards are set by the urban and where television glorifies the educated and cultured, Fayruz realized she could not rely only on her wealth and family name for status.

For yet a third type of village cosmopolitanism, let us consider Zaynab's twenty-year-old daughter, Sumaya. She has the education Fayruz lacks without the wealth that enables Fayruz to live in a "modern" house and have a wardrobe full of dresses that cannot be worn in the village. Because of her education (she has completed agricultural secondary school), she too wears a version of the *higab* when she goes to school or dresses up, replacing the locally tailored gowns she ordinarily wears with a bright polyester store-bought outfit and high heels. She saves up to buy face creams she has seen advertised on television, and she knows how to bake cakes because of her home-economics classes. She occasionally reads the newspaper and plans to have a small family, as national propaganda urges. Sumaya's first gift to me, so different from her mother's, bespoke her generation's form of cosmopolitanism. Shyly, she presented me with a color postcard framed with green and blue twisted yarn. The postcard – outdated, printed in Italy, and of the type widely circulated across Egypt – portrayed a European bride and groom gazing into each other's eyes. The frame was her own handiwork, a design no doubt learned at school using materials only the teachers could provide. A gift her mother could not appreciate, it was a homegrown amalgam of elements originating in various communities and places, expressing her romantic fantasies (encouraged by television) and signifying her modern, state-initiated vocational education.

What the situations, cultural knowledges, code-switching abilities, and imaginative possibilities of these three village women mean for the interpretation of culture(s) after television – and everything that has made television possible and widely present in villages around the globe – is not only that (post)colonial processes of cultural hybridization have undermined the utility of more static and homogenizing conceptions of culture or cultures.(46) Nor is it just that these multiple situations, knowledges, and abilities confirm the importance of, as Bruce Robbins so nicely puts it, attending to "discrepant cosmopolitanisms."(47) It is that the hybridizations and cosmopolitanisms are worth specifying (Fayruz's, Zaynab's, Sumaya's, and al-'Assal's each being different), and that the effects of media on what Appadurai calls "the work of the imagination" and "self-fabrication" are worth tracing to particular configurations of power, education, and wealth in particular places – like an agricultural village in the heart of the tourist industry in a disadvantaged region in Egypt in the 1990s.(48)

Anthropology for Whom?

If, as I have shown, thick descriptions of television can be made to speak to "big words," we are still left with the question of which words to choose and whether, in the end, it is only to colleagues concerned with those big words that we want to speak. The dilemma goes back at least as far as Max Weber, who, of course, noted that our questions about the flow of life were set by our value orientations. As Ien Ang puts it now, in advocating radical contextualization as the method for critical television studies, it is difficult to know where to stop or where to focus.(49) In this post-Orientalist, postcolonial-critique-of-anthropology, post-crisis-of-the-authority-of-science age, Geertz's formulation of the anthropologist's vocation as placing in the consultable record the answers others have given to our deepest questions seems less complete than it used to.(50) Closer to home, and apropos of the development of critical audience studies, Ang's call to recognize that we offer only partial and positioned truths takes us not much further.(51)

My own inclination has been to approach television as just one aspect of late-twentieth-century lives, just as I approached the poetry of the Awlad'Ali Bedouin as an aspect of their everyday lives rather than as the object of a study of poetics. One of the benefits of working on television as a way into these lives – as opposed, for example, to focusing on poetry, religion, kinship, or political economy – is that it offers particular possibilities for worldly intervention.(52) It does so both in the way it enables us to represent to outsiders people in places like Egypt and, more appealing, in the way it enables us to work as intellectuals within the national frame that is such a crucial context today for most people, including the women and men in this Upper Egyptian village.

In *Writing Women's Worlds*, I suggested that we could write critical ethnographies that went "against the grain"

of global inequalities, even as we had to remain modest in our claims to radicalism and realistic about the impacts of these ethnographies. Television, I believe, is particularly useful for writing against the grain because it forces us to represent people in distant villages as part of the same cultural worlds we inhabit – worlds of mass media, consumption, and dispersed communities of the imagination. To write about television in Egypt, or Indonesia, or Brazil is to write about the articulation of the transnational, the national, the local, and the personal. Television is not the only way to do this, of course; Anna Tsing's reflections on marginality in a remote region of Indonesia and her attention to people like Uma Adang – a singular woman who brilliantly hybridized national, local, and foreign discourses to establish herself as a shaman – were developed without talking about television.(53) But television makes it especially difficult to write as if culture and cultures, despite their "infirmities," were the most powerful ways to make sense of the world.(54)

Working on television also enables more local interventions – at the national level, with intellectuals who are our peers and counterparts. These are people I can admire or disagree with, and who themselves can read, criticize, and debate my work. If through my thick descriptions of television in particular places I can begin to tease apart the structures of power within which subaltern groups live their lives and the ways television is a new part of that – in households, in communities, and in imaginations – I perhaps can also then enter into debate with concerned writers like al-'Assal, often nationalists and modernists, regarding how to think about their audiences and political projects.

I would like to do this because I respect their social concern but I also know that from the vantage of Upper Egyptian villagers like Zaynab and Umm Ahmad, the answers they offer to social problems facing ordinary people often appear unrealistic or patronizing. Television intersects with and extends the discourses of experts. It is directed at stereotyped audiences, the same generalized objects targeted by social reformers. Is there away thick descriptions of such communities could complicate urban intellectuals' understanding of Egyptian villagers? Or lead them to take more seriously the complexity of the forms of cosmopolitanism found across Egypt? Is there away to begin to question modernist dogmas about literacy, education, and companionate marriage as panaceas? To al-'Assal's credit, one of her aims in writing the serial on Upper Egypt was to show, as she put it, "that the real vengeance would be to lash out (through development) against the circumstances that have led them to be attached to the vendetta in the first place." But by continuing to subsume much more complex stories of rural life under the familiar modernizing trope of a negative "tradition" and "backwardness," she, like most Egyptian intellectuals, risks reaffirming the marginality of such women as Zaynab.

The dramas such writers produce are not without their effects, if more in the cities and among government officials, businessmen, and intellectuals than in the villages they hope to reform. One wonders, for example, how television serials with modernist messages may affect the latest developments in Zaynab's hamlet. The Luxor City Council and the Supreme Council for Antiquities have recently publicized plans to relocate the villagers and raze their hamlet as part of the plan to remove the population living adjacent to, or on top of, Pharaonic ruins.(55) Justified in terms of the need to preserve the Pharaonic monuments and to stem trafficking in antiquities (another persistent complaint has been that tourists are pestered by locals),(56) this plan is also in line with the terms of an earlier World Bank proposal for the development of tourism in Luxor, and other plans going back to the 1940s. Of course, the buses that rumble up and down the new roads and idle in large parking lots, spewing exhaust, must surely damage the monuments as much as the village households, and it is well known that tourists' breath and perspiration have nearly destroyed the tombs. But in the wake of "terrorist" attacks on tourists, a big investment has been made to spruce up the ancient temple closest to the villagers. The hamlet is bathed at night by the floodlights on the ramparts and everyone talks about the day the president came.

Having heard rumors about the relocation, the distraught villagers protest to one another, "They can't move us. We have title to the land." Nevertheless, the plan calls for moving them out into the desert – away from their fields, away from the water, and away from their palm trees, as they note. Some of the houses have been designed in cooperation with the people of Gurna, the major village to be removed; others are the despised boxy concrete houses found wherever the government has built new settlements.

Whether or not the plan will come to anything only time will tell. But the question for television writers is whether they may be inadvertently providing support for those who confidently brush aside the needs of such villagers. They would do this if they were to dramatize the joys of becoming modern – of living in modern houses built for nuclear families and designed for hygiene (with no room to guard valuable water buffalo inside)

– or, if they were to celebrate the heroic patriotism of an amateur Egyptologist pitted against a local tomb robber and his Foreign cronies. (This was the theme of a serial that aired in 1997 just as news was breaking that 250 houses in Gurna had been bulldozed.) Such plots would complement the regular programs promoting Egypt's magnificent tourist treasures in making clear what the national priorities are.

Or can television writers offer this community more possibilities for imitating the Alexandrian protagonists of *The White Flag*, the popular serial that the Egyptian tourists had knocked on Fayruz's door to watch? The final episode of that program showed people standing together, hand in hand, to block the bulldozers. Of course, they did this to save a historic villa that represented art and culture and nationalist politics. What about saving a house made by hand out of mud brick, where pigeons fly in and out of the windows and where five or ten children might be born to an uneducated and hardworking farmer?