Some of the interventions I sought to make through this ethnography seem more urgent today than they were fifteen years ago when the book was first published. In *Writing Women’s Worlds*, I used the narratives, arguments, and everyday lives of some individual families living on Egypt’s northwest coast to try to do three things: to confront my discipline of anthropology with the ways it has tended to typify cultural groups, to challenge public discourse about women of the Muslim Middle East, and to show Western feminists that defining patriarchy is not at all a simple matter. While trying to remain true to my experiences of living with this single Arab Bedouin community in Egypt, and doing my best to convey the rich texture of “life as lived,” I deliberately positioned the ethnography to speak to these three imagined audiences. How successful have I been? And what has happened in the interval to change the context within which these audiences might now read a book like this? These are questions that I want to address here.

*Anthropology and Culture*

Within the discipline of anthropology, this book has perhaps become less radical. As I noted even in the preface to the first edition, many other anthropologists had, in the long period during which I worked on the book, come to publish narrative ethnographies. Moreover, the urgency of feminist anthropology seems to have passed, even if the reception of this book has provided evidence of the continuing
marginalization of work explicitly about women. Billed as a book about women and as an experiment in feminist ethnography—a genre that was ignored in the major statements on “the experimental moment” of the 1980s—it has not had the impact a less explicitly gendered book might have had, even though it deliberately differs in form from many ethnographies and provides glimpses of major social processes, such as the encompassment of marginal communities into the economy and institutions of a nation-state, the dynamics of ensuing generational conflicts, and even the local impacts of global history (World War II in northern Egypt, in this case), that should interest anyone. Its central theoretical contribution to anthropology, what I called “writing against culture,” did enter anthropological discourse, but not via this book. It entered through an article that was a preview to the introduction, and not in its title marked by gender (Abu-Lughod 1991).

The proposition that an ethnography that attends to the particulars of individuals and their everyday lives and to the contests and arguments that are constant in people’s negotiations of social life, and one that continually undermines generalizations about cultural patterns by simultaneously recognizing their existence and showing that they cannot fully account for actual experiences, did indeed provoke defensive responses from anthropologists in the 1990s. Many of the points my colleagues have made are sensible. One of the most direct responses was Christoph Brumann’s piece in Current Anthropology (1999) called “Writing For Culture.” This article linked my advocacy of “writing against culture” to a wider trend in anthropology represented by a diverse group critical of the culture concept (e.g., Arjun Appadurai, James Clifford, Jonathan Friedman, and Roger Keesing). My response to Brumann was that my desire to “write against culture” had emerged both from trying to do justice to the complexity of the lives of those I knew in this Bedouin community and from my strong sense of the ways that representations of people in other parts of the world, particularly parts of the world that are viewed with antipathy in the West, might reinforce—or undermine—such antipathy.

It could well be that the special meaning of culture that I was
challenging—as static, homogeneous, and bounded, as well as attached to groups characterized by particular patterns of behavior and thought—is not at all the one used by most anthropologists today. Anthropologists now tend to write about culture as contested, dynamic, and hybrid. And anthropologists rarely now try to write general ethnographies of whole communities. Instead it is more common to find multisited ethnographies that link incommensurate levels and groups or that focus on particular institutions or issues within complex wholes. Social work agencies, art worlds, local journalists' contributions to international news, minority interactions with nation-states, biomedical ethics of organ transplants, left-liberal feminists' play with modernity, and commemorations of martyrs are just a few of the subjects my own students have chosen for dissertations.

Anthropologists and other ethnographers may indeed be sophisticated and subtle in thinking about the workings and politics of culture. Yet I still think there is something important in this idea of "writing against culture" if we acknowledge that the culture concept does not belong to anthropology alone and that it cannot be kept under control by anthropologists. Even more today than fifteen years ago, the idea of a "culture," with its inevitable generalizations and typifications, has become a central component of the distancing and othering against which Writing Women's Worlds was written. The concept cannot be abstracted from its particular usages. If we look at the contexts in which the concept is put into play and at its historical acccretions, we can see that it is inevitably contaminated by the politicized world in which it is deployed. Brumann, in his defense of culture, admits that the concept of "race" had to be abandoned as scientifically invalid and so subject to devastating political uses as to be dangerous. Is culture different? The fact that it is such a successful or popular concept should be cause for suspicion. That the concept lends itself to usages so apparently corrupting of the anthropological ones as the pernicious theses of Samuel Huntington's (1996) clash of civilizations is, for me, no trivial matter. Huntington's glorification of Western superiority and his reification of cultural difference resonate with popular sentiment and racist politics. If civilizations are extensions of cultures and cultures de-
pend on culture and we do not question the notion of culture, then
we are not in a position to mount a critique of this kind of "cultural
fundamentalism," as Brumann describes such extremist uses.

The fact that a racist and largely discredited book from the early
1970s by Raphael Patai called *The Arab Mind* has been resuscitated,
reissued, and made recommended reading by the Pentagon for those
managing the U.S. occupation of Iraq is clear evidence that cultural
arguments are anything but dead. That the book acquired a new
foreword in 2002 by the director of Middle East studies at the JFK
Special Warfare Center and School at the U.S. Army base at Fort
Bragg makes clear its implication in a politics of culture. While it is
true that the slippage between "culture" as an abstraction signifying
shared features developed out of social routines and the notion of
bounded localized "cultures" is not intellectually necessary, if one
gives due weight to the social and political life of the concept as it
has developed historically, and as it is mobilized in such bellicose
forms of reading, one must remain reserved.

*Middle Eastern Women in the
"Clash of Civilizations"

This point about public uses of "Arab culture" brings me to the
second of my intentions in writing this book—to intervene in
representations of Middle Eastern women. In the 1980s and early
1990s, despite a long history of negative representations of women
in the Muslim world, I could never have imagined how charged the
trope of the "oppressed Muslim woman" would become in public
discourse in our twenty-first century. After the attacks of September
11, the partial rationale for the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001
was the rescue of such women (Abu-Lughod 2002). Media concern
over the status and suppression of Middle Eastern or Muslim women
(with a great fuzziness about the categories) proliferated. Popular
memoirs by enlightened Muslim women who detail the plights
of their sisters in Iran, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia now fill the
bestseller lists. Right-wing American women's organizations get
grants to teach democracy to women in a devastated Iraq occupied by American and British troops.

In this new political context, what *Writing Women’s Worlds* has to offer has become more urgent. Descriptions of the complicated interpersonal interactions, mixed emotions, clever storytelling, and beautiful poetry of the women in this particular Arab community, both like and unlike any other in the region, offer alternatives to generalized portrayals. The book is made up of stories from everyday life, where ornery matriarchs criticize their sons’ treatments of their wives but jealously guard them against outsiders; defiant young women want to prove to their fathers that education does not have to mean the loss of key values such as honor and modesty; encounters between Bedouin families and “sophisticated” urban Egyptians provoke feelings of mutual moral disdain; weddings occasion intense vulnerabilities, competitive family pride, and new embarrassments; and individual lives take different courses depending on the vicissitudes of deaths and divorces, wars and marital compatibilities, reproductive health and matters of personality. These particularities render absurd such blurrings as *Time* magazine encouraged when it illustrated an article on the launch of a major report on the empowerment of Arab women by the United Nations Development Programme with a photograph of Iranian schoolgirls.

The particularities of individual lives, discussions, and aspirations also render questionable generalizations, social scientific or popular, about the patterns of Arab social life that allegedly constrain and construct women’s experiences. These have to do, as I note in the introduction to this book, with patrilineal systems of descent and inheritance, marriage to cousins as part of a kin-based system of property and social organization, and even polygamy, justified in bold new ways these days, including in Egyptian television soap operas with famous actors, by the growing authority of Islam. Such generalizations about constraining social structures rely on assumptions about agency and conformity that are at odds with the ways the women I write about seem to experience themselves. In the stories in this book, individual women are clearly agentive, but not just in their assertions of rights or refusals of arranged marriages, but
in their fierce attachments to shared moral principles and their religious sensibilities. The extended families that modernist and Western analysts denigrate as imposing “traditional” tribal limits on individual freedom are, for the women who lament their relatives’ deaths, celebrate their brothers’ marriages, defend their families’ honor, desperately try to have children or limit family size, and argue with their uncles, daughters, and mothers, the grounds of everyday life. For the Awlad ‘Ali Bedouin women in this ethnography, family is the nexus of individual identity and personal development and the object of great love and loyalty, along with inevitable conflict.

That Time conflated Iranian and Arab women is a function of the almost unquestioned consensus in public discourse in the United States and Europe that Islam is the ultimate determinant of women’s lives in a part of the world closely associated with the Middle East, but extending to South, Southwest, and Southeast Asia. The “Muslim woman” is a trope of great symbolic power, restricted by her veil or burqa, under the thumb of her religion and her men. In 2004, the French government passed a law against head scarves in public schools, the items of clothing considered religious garb; in 2006, the British prime minister deemed the niqab (a form of veiling) offensive; by 2007, the Afghani burqa had become so iconic that it could serve, paired with a classic National Geographic photograph of an Afghan girl, as the costume for a group of dancers participating in carnival in Brazil. It could even become the absurd dress of a rock band called Burka Band–Burka Blue whose amateurish video clips can be watched on YouTube.

Again, Writing Women’s Worlds offers an alternative understanding of the relationship of women to their religious tradition. It does so in two ways, both made possible because it takes up the matter of what Islam means in one particular place and at one particular time. On the one hand, as I explain in the introduction, being Muslim draws the boundaries of the moral universe for everyone in this Awlad ‘Ali Bedouin community. Their everyday language is saturated with references to God, and their practices colored by a confident sense of belonging to a community of Muslims. And yet, in their grief-stricken funeral laments and their outrageous wedding
festivities, women recognize the tensions between their ordinary practices and Muslim ideals. Even in 2005, the easy mixture of religious piety and everyday Bedouin sociality was apparent. As Haj Sagr’s sons were driving me to Alexandria, they began the car ride with a cassette of Quranic recitation, as is often the case in Egypt. After a while, with a click, they switched the tape. I was surprised to hear Awlad ‘Ali music again. When I inquired, they identified this as a new tape someone had recorded at a Bedouin party and sent them.

On the other hand, Islam was coming to mean something quite new for this community. I had on this most recent visit also been surprised to see the newlywed daughters of Haj Sagr and Gateefa returning home with their faces covered in a new style of face veil. Just as the younger women in the village in Upper Egypt where I’d been working for the past fifteen years had traded their formal black flowing robes for Gulf-influenced coatdresses called abayas, so had women across Egypt come to wear what they considered modern modest forms of dress deemed more religiously proper, some influenced by fashions from the Gulf. And whereas in the mid-1980s Migdim had made fun of the new styles some pious educated women wore, women who were setting up practices in the area as dentists or doctors and giving Qur’an lessons in the mosques on the side, no one would now say they looked like ghosts. Instead, the repentance of born-again Egyptian movie stars is admired, and among the poorer families in the local Bedouin community women had adopted new forms of veiling that did not involve covering their faces but signaled forms of piety that connected them to national trends. (For excellent anthropological studies of Islamist women in other settings, see Saba Mahmood’s Politics of Piety [2005] for Egypt and Lara Deeb’s An Enchanted Modern [2006] for Lebanon.) Some young men were beginning to refuse to shake women’s hands. Small mosques were sprouting up all over in our community, mostly built by the poorer families.

Along with the rapid development for tourism along the northern coast (Cole and Altorki 1998), new forms of Islamic piety and authority were reshaping everyday discourse and practice, with contradictory results. Young men could now restrict the movements
of their sisters and defy their fathers and grandmothers to do so. But young women had also gained new confidence in asserting the necessity of their consent to marriage decisions. The Prophet, insisted the girls who had now had religious education in schools, said that a girl should be consulted. In short, Islam in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has brought for the Awlad ‘Ali gains and losses in the realm of rights. It has been interpreted to justify new forms of authority that are shifting generational and gendered power in the community. What it is to be a Muslim woman is historically specific, and the stories in this book show how.

Is the texture of Writing Women’s Worlds too dense to make it an effective polemic against the reification of the Middle Eastern or Muslim woman? Are its arguments not explicit enough, because of the indirect narrative style and emphasis on stories of individual lives? Are the findings too contradictory? It is my hope now that with the stark new political circumstances and the heightened obsession with the “oppressed Muslim woman” in our time, new audiences will be able to grasp more clearly the profound implications of the tales I tell in this book. I want its new readers to realize both what I was trying to do with these lives and stories and what I had not yet even realized I would need to do if I wished to intervene positively in numbingly repetitive appropriations of Middle Eastern women and “the Muslim woman” for international politics.

From Feminist Anthropology to Transnational Feminism

Over the past decade and a half, my own work and interests have shifted toward a more explicit consideration of international feminist politics. Feminist anthropologists had, in the 1970s and 1980s, been valued outside of anthropology for the ways they provided knowledge of other cultures and thus helped Euro-American feminist theorists think about then-pressing questions of the universalism or cross-cultural variation of male dominance or gender subordination. Patriarchy, to use a shorthand. As anthropology came under
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attack by feminist thinkers such as Chandra Mohanty (1991) for its objectification of other women, its entanglement with colonialism and neocolonialism, and its relativism, the authoritative space for thinking and writing about “Third World women” was taken over by what now goes by the name transnational or global feminism. Feminist anthropology was somewhat marginalized, limited to pressuring the discipline to include women’s voices and women’s writing, and eventually to attending to issues of gender (not women) and sexuality.

The period just after Writing Women’s Worlds was published was momentous for the development of international instruments and discourses of feminism. With the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing and the successful campaign to claim women’s rights as human rights, papering over deep differences in the situations of women and the politics of feminism in various parts of the world by defining violence against women as a unifying target, we entered in the mid-1990s a new era of exchange, NGO activism, and involvement by Western feminists in activism elsewhere in the world. (See Merry 2006 and Riles 2002 for good anthropological treatments.) In the academy, lively debates on women in minority cultures or from other parts of the world developed. Liberal feminists like Susan Okin (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (1999) and radical feminists like Catharine MacKinnon (2006), who condemned the patriarchy of other cultures and advocated universal standards of gender equity, have been countered by Third World feminists, who have exposed the bolstering of Western superiority that constructions of the plight of “other” women produce, and who urge intersectional gender analysis that pays equal attention to race, class, and geography (see Abu-Lughod 2006; Brown 2006; Mohanty 2003; Volpp 2001).

Unfortunately, many of the transnational feminists traffic in generalizations, since they do not do intensive fieldwork in particular places. Writing Women’s Worlds could provide for these discussions precisely the particulars needed both to evaluate crude statements about patriarchy and to nuance arguments for intersectional analysis. If, for example, someone as sophisticated as Inderpal Grewal argues in her critique of the universalizing discourse of human rights
that "the multiple subject positions of persons termed 'women' argue for differences that include gender as one aspect of their exploitation" (1998: 504), she does not herself have the space to show precisely how these subject positions differ. Similarly, Ratna Kapur's (2002) brilliant characterization of the flattening construction of the Third World woman as a "victim subject" in international discourse is not matched by any elaboration of complex alternatives. For her, the mark of agency rather than victimhood is sexual desire. The women in Egypt's Western Desert whose words are recorded in this book would not want their agency expressed through sexual desire, even if some folktales they tell make fun of the desires of old women and some songs they sing express exquisite longings. Their sharp criticisms of any lapses in modesty are heartfelt. It takes ethnography in particular places to show how women are not just victims.

The term that has gained the greatest currency in international forums and feminist discussions of women in other places—to mark the key problem and to justify intervention—is "harmful cultural practices." Whether genital surgery or forced marriage, selective abortion or polygamy, such practices can now be brought before human rights commissions. The legal anthropologist Sally Merry has detailed in her ethnography how the CEDAW Committee hearings on such practices have led to serious misunderstandings, because the complex histories of practices, including their entanglement in colonial and anticolonial projects and in processes of national transformation such as rural-urban migration, have so often been ignored.

An ethnography such as Writing Women's Worlds offers other ways to confront what the term "harmful cultural practices" conceals. By exploring the complex meanings of honor and modesty for young women as the community is incorporated into the Egyptian nation-state, or the actual workings of polygamous marriages with their ups and downs, unpredictable interpersonal dynamics, and the new opportunities for inequalities afforded by wealth and lifestyle alternatives, we can understand better the factors that combine to form experiences of these practices, as well as commitments to them. The material I was most ambivalent about including in this book was
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...that regarding weddings and the demands of virginity. Most shocking to twentieth-century sensibilities, both in Europe and in the urban Middle East, is the public display of the proof of virginity at Bedouin weddings. How is this most intense incident in young women's lives understood and experienced? What passions and fears are prompted? The extraordinary conversation I captured at one wedding about the tensions for the groom, the bride, and the families, side by side with the culturally elaborated sentiments of wedding songs about this critical moment, leave us with much to think about. Even more unnerving is to see our own practices viewed through Bedouin eyes, where their shock of hearing that bride and groom have real intercourse is mixed with pity for the "violated" woman.

It is not just Euro-American feminists but cosmopolitan or national elites with dreams of "modernization," who could have their assumptions unsettled by the stories in this book. The perspective of the 2005 "Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World," the fourth in a series of UNDP-sponsored Arab Human Development Reports, is indicative of the position of the urban secular Arab intelligentsia. They see things quite differently from my Bedouin friends. The report, for example, presents the strength of familial ties in Arab society as especially detrimental to women. In the chapter on social structures, the "traditional" tribal kinship system is condemned as "enshrining" male dominance and producing an unfortunate "absence of a clear dividing line between the personal and the familial." The report concludes that the weakest element of society (women) does not enjoy rights as individuals. The report ahistorically explains contemporary family dynamics by invoking timeless Arab origins and early Islamic history, rather than offering an analysis of the variations across class and region and the impact of twentieth-century transformations of economy, government, and society. It is clear from the stories in Writing Women's Worlds that Awlad Ali men draw no more of a line between the personal and the familial than women. Like people everywhere that capitalist relations have not fragmented the family, where economies depend on joint family enterprises, and all members of a family share the same resources, Awlad Ali men and women draw no line between the personal and the familial. The extraordinary conversation I captured at one wedding about the tensions for the groom, the bride, and the families, side by side with the culturally elaborated sentiments of wedding songs about this critical moment, leave us with much to think about. Even more unnerving is to see our own practices viewed through Bedouin eyes, where their shock of hearing that bride and groom have real intercourse is mixed with pity for the "violated" woman.
household contribute to the common project of sustenance or increase of the patrimony, and where individualism has not been enshrined as the dominant ideology, people in this community have strong positive sentiments about the family, whatever their particular struggles, negotiations, and even "bargains." How should we reconcile the simplistic depiction of the oppression of the Arab woman by family with this detailed picture?

The stories in *Writing Women's Worlds* actually force feminists to ask: What do we, and they, mean by rights? What do Bedouin women demand as part of their rights? Gateefa's plea "Aren't we all the same?" regarding her right to equal treatment by her husband, Migdim's confrontation of her eldest son when he wants to marry a new young wife, the alacrity with which women march off to their natal homes when they feel wronged by their husbands—what framework of rights justifies these? In the introduction to this book, I make some very general points about the way that Bedouin lives and stories confront feminist categories and assumptions. Yet as feminist legal categories have gained more legitimacy, and an international language of rights, including human rights, has disseminated widely in the last decade and a half, I now feel I can be more specific about what the stories do to "talk back" to feminists. There is ample material from the intimate details of one particular lifeworld in this book to reconsider definitions of rights, develop socially grounded understandings of choice, and shake up ideological and culture-bound notions of freedom and constraint. These terms are critical to feminist politics and theory but are disturbed by the grains of the particular.

*And Whatever Happened to . . .*

If the published work that engages with *Writing Women's Worlds* has been concerned with its core concepts—writing against culture, tactical humanism, the relations between ethnographers and subjects, and feminism and ethnography—the e-mails I receive from readers, often students, tend to be far more personal. Sometimes readers want to show me that they recognize commonalities. Eliza—
beth Gowans wrote from London to tell me that two of the folktales my Bedouin friends told (chapter 3) had close parallels in European fairy tales. Slaysla and her stepsister's adventures with the female ghoul are very close indeed to a story in Grimm's that goes by the name *Mother Hulda*. And the cow that feeds the orphan can be found in a tale called *Kari Woodengown*. Surely these are signs of the long history of intertwined civilizations.

Mostly, people want to know what has happened to the individuals they have come to know through this book. On periodic visits back, I keep finding out more. My last visit, in December 2005, was particularly memorable, since it occasioned a festive supper, complete with fresh lamb, attended mostly by the women of the extended family. The daughters all streamed home from their marital households, and I found myself squashed among boisterous women, some of whom, I realized, I had known for almost thirty years. Others I had held as newborns. What is the news? Migdim passed away many years ago. But she was surrounded, as the poem she recited would have it, by "the sons of her sons." Deaths in the next generation have diminished the community and been met with less equanimity: Safiyya, Haj Sagr's second wife, died of cancer, leaving her children bereft but giving some sort of explanation, finally, for her longtime ill health; two of the Haj's three brothers, including Hamid who brushed off his mother's advice, have died, leaving large families behind, now managed by their wives and grown sons. The diabetes of Haj Sagr's younger brother's first wife, a woman who had given me so many striking poems of marital bitterness, had led to blindness. Her death was a kind of blessing, even if she is missed.

But life goes on. The young men of all the households have developed deep voices, learned to drive, and carry most of the responsibilities now, along with their cell phones. Most are married. Two of them have been unable to have children, the awkward silences around this fact betraying deep disappointment. On my last visit, the youngest of the Haj's daughters with Gateefa tried to enlist me to cajole her father into letting her attend university. She was the fourth in a line of bright young daughters I had watched trying to convince their protective father. As usual, he blamed his reluctance...
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on the world outside. The world’s not a safe place, he argued. You can see it in the newspapers. Even if she is well brought up, he said to me, terrible things can happen. They can take advantage of her. And yet I was surprised to find a daughter of the Haj’s renegade younger brother studying sociology at Alexandria University; she was anxious to grill me on everything, since she realized now what kind of work I did. I’m wondering how long it will be until someone in the community reads Miral Al-Tahawy’s novel *The Tent*, a troubled mythopoetic rumination on Bedouin women and poetry by a talented Egyptian writer who is herself from a Bedouin-origin family from east of the Nile.

Many of the girls in the community have married cousins and remain nearby. Yet the Haj’s lovely eldest daughter, Sabra, after too many years unmarried, had finally married an older gentleman elsewhere as a second wife. She was the one who as a young teen had excitedly made the drawing of a wedding procession I reproduce on page 169. After a few years of marriage, however, she still had not conceived. She returned to live at home, waiting for her husband to build her a separate house to avoid conflicts with his other wife. But then he died. Her father said, “God bless him. He was a good man.” But this means that Sabra will remain at home. She shares the household tasks with her brothers’ new wives but is often to be found holding her new nieces and nephews in her lap. The kindly aunt. Her mother’s joy at having her back home is tempered by the sadness of knowing she won’t ever have a family of her own. It was not fated. Kamla, about whom readers tend to be most curious, did indeed marry the engineer and moved to the city of Marsa Matruh. She wears more sophisticated Islamic dress than her siblings; she goes on outings to the seaside and gets her children ice cream cones. But she had four children, not the “modern” two she had planned on when she was a schoolgirl writing essays. Although she is happy in her apartment and her life, her husband is away most of the time, since his work in the oil industry takes him elsewhere: first to the Red Sea, and now overseas to the Gulf. She telephones home regularly.

L. A.

July 1, 2007

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