A Hospitable Encounter: Conversing Radio Ghetto Relay and Experiencing Tahrir

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A Hospitable Encounter: A Conversation Between 'Radio Ghetto Relay' and Tahrir

Shaimaa Abdelkarim and Alessandra Ferrini

This collaborative piece stems from a conversation about *Radio Ghetto Relay*, a short video directed by Ferrini in 2016. Commentary on the film is interweaved with reflections on Abdelkarim's research on documenting the legal reception of the 2011 Egyptian uprising. *Radio Ghetto Relay*[118] is based on the archived radio broadcasts of Radio Ghetto Free Voices,[119] a project of 'participated communication' that gave voice to the dwellers of the Gran Ghetto of Rignano Garganico (Puglia, Southern Italy). Until its demolition in March 2017,[120] this shantytown housed up to 2500 migrants and refugees, mostly from West Africa, who were (and continue to be) systematically exploited in the local tomato plantations by the local mafia through the so-called gangmaster system. [121] The 2011 Egyptian uprisings initiated a

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[118] *Radio Ghetto Relay* is available online: https://www.alessandraferrini.info/ghetto-relay

[119] I will be referring to Radio Ghetto Free Voices as Radio Ghetto only throughout the rest of the text.

[120] Radio Ghetto is now broadcasting again after a period of inactivity, although using a different format as it is no longer hosted in a fixed place – it travels to various shantytowns and follows harvesters' demonstrations currently breaking out in different parts of the country. As such, the direct involvement of the harvesters in the running of the radio is more marginal now.

[121] The gangmaster system is a form of modern-day slavery that has been on the rise worldwide, especially within the agricultural sector. In Italy, it has been growing exponentially since the 1980s. Oftentimes migrants get trapped in this system after being lured to Europe by international criminal rings with the promise of a decent job. Other times they end up in the plantations because there are no other options to earn a living at their disposal. Working under the scorching sun and being beaten if not fast enough, they work for about ten hours a day, earning around €1 per 100kg of tomatoes harvested. Gangmasters act as intermediaries between the plantations' owners and the harvesters, getting a percentage of their salary. It is worth noting here that this practice extends to other crops too. The disenfranchised 'guest' thus represents a fundamental part of the agricultural industry on a national level – his/her labour is turned into valuable capital for the

relocation of the Egyptian identity outside the docility that Mubarak's regime had constructed. Through re-narrating the occupation of Tahrir, the current legal constraints on acts of resistance are questioned towards asserting a presence of the events of the 2011 uprisings. Conversing about both Tahrir and Radio Ghetto, this discussion explores the notion of hospitality through Radio Ghetto and Tahrir as spaces of negotiation in which the roles of guest and host are constantly questioned and redefined. These reflections emerge as we consider the two case studies, our positioning and personal investment in the objects of our studies, as well as the ethical implications of such work. In so doing, this conversation scrutinises the researchers' relations to their subjects advocating for the possibility of creating a hospitable encounter – namely, a subversion of the hierarchies implied in the guest/host relations.

Shaimaa Abdelkarim: I wanted to initiate this conversation by linking two relationalities: the first one is that of the intellectual in relation to her subjects, oscillating from being a host welcoming their experiences to a guest intruding on those experiences; and the second considers how we navigate this oscillation through reimagining the space of resistance, a space that both our researches frame as a space of negotiation. As a researcher working through marginalized narrations, you sometimes consume your subjects within your narration of the event; but you still expose yourself to your subjects, not only by being hospitable but also you are burdened by a responsibility, as Derrida asserts: to disrupt or possibly resist your privileges, as an intellectual. This disruption is quite vivid in Derrida. For Derrida, to resist is to sabotage irrationally what our internal presumed coherence dictates. It is a disruptive force as it puts the intellect in a position of responsibility towards the unpredictable guest who may/may not come: to open the door for her. But then, in another instance Derrida, traces a moment of his own fascination with the word 'resistance'; a word 'loaded with all the pathos of my nostalgia' that never loses its appeal even when its parameters are

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host nation. It follows that this form of enslavement is not exceptional, it is a systemic issue that is enabled by existing regulations on migration and hospitality.

being questioned.[122] It 'magnetizes' the legal realm to host resistance, to curb it, to limit those acts of defiance, to legalize yet never fully consume it, breaching the parameters of legality.[123] For example, the current anti-protest laws in Egypt demands that protestors acquire permission from local police stations before protesting, giving the police arbitrary powers to dismiss any such requests. [124] Law conditions the presence of resistance within its parameters; yet, with every condition legality self-deconstructs with the absurdity of the legitimate, asserting a space for negotiating its limitations. There are moments that assert this possibility of a radical openness; when hospitality becomes momentarily attuned to the uncertainty of the to-come (*à venir*). Think of Tahrir in 2011 right before Mubarak was unseated; being there in the stagnant present yet empowered by a will that is anticipating the ousting of Mubarak: that is where I try to position myself as an intellectual who experienced Tahrir. What is fascinating about Tahrir and *Radio Ghetto Relay* is that both spaces navigate suffering and empowerment, renegotiating a regenerative form of resistance that we, as researchers, narrate. You communicate your subjects through this space of renegotiation, of repositioning yourself through that space that Tahrir and Radio Ghetto open up.

Alessandra Ferrini: Working with Radio Ghetto was challenging on a personal level because I was dealing with people suffering extreme hardship. I became very aware of the uneven relation at the basis of this project.[125] While I sat safely at my desk, the migrant workers were

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[122] Jacques Derrida, *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Peggy Kamuf et al., (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1996), 2.
[123] Jacques Derrida, "Hostipitality", trans. Barry Stocker and Forbes Morlock, *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 5, no. 3 (2000), 3.
[124] Amr Hamzawy, "Egypt's Anti Protest Law: Legalising Authoritarianism," Aljazeera, November 24, 2016,
https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/11/egypt-anti-protest-law-legalising-authoritarianism-161107095415334.html
[125] *Radio Ghetto Relay* emerged from a series of online conversations with Radio Ghetto's team, through which we selected the most representative clips from their archived broadcasts. This exchange also helped me to define my approach to this material, leading to a focus on translation rather than mimetic representation or direct visual documentation.

actually living in a great degree of insecurity, risk and violence.[126] Whenever I caught myself feeling too comfortable or convinced that I was somehow entitled to tell this story, I forced myself to step back. I believe that feeling constantly unsettled and doubting myself was perhaps my attempt at disrupting my privilege, to echo Derrida's words. This operation obviously demands that you attempt to expose and resist your own bias and habits, even as these may be blindspots. This is why you needs to keep mistrusting and, as you put it, sabotaging yourself. I had to have constant discussions with the Radio Ghetto team and to systematically ask them for either validation or harsh criticism. As I listened to their voices, I kept reminding myself of how privileged I was for the trust they gifted me when they decided to host me. I was the guest in this relation and by being invested with this trust I also, in turn, became a sort of host: the film has become a repository for their voices – it hosts the workers' experiences.

Alessandra Ferrini, *Radio Ghetto Relay,* 2016, video still. Courtesy of the artist.

SA: True, I understood your approach, which you define as a 'remote collaboration,' as a form of contesting conditions on hospitality,

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[126] The harvesters are exposed to great violence and risk, even beyond that perpetrated by the plantation owners and gangmasters. For example, many fires have broken out at the Gran Ghetto, the last one claiming the life of two young men from Mali. Moreover, the ghettos have no running water or electricity and the harvesters are forced to sleep in overcrowded shacks.

reengaging constantly with what Derrida framed as 'the thought' of hospitality.[127] How did you interpret your role in putting the work together; this oscillation of the researcher as host/guest? I struggle with this in my research. Even though I tend to theorize from my own experience of the event, being present in Tahrir square, there is still a gap between my role as a researcher – tasked with communicating and 'mastering' this experience – and the openness of the event that makes me aware of my imposition. It is, somehow, this 'mastering' and closure of the final product that I refuse to reconcile. Yet, it is a necessary closure; a decision of exposure that, however, only revives a space to potential communication and/or interaction to deconstruct the closure: the very condition of being hospitable. I somehow cannot reconcile, or more precisely I refuse to reconcile, the radical in me that experienced Tahrir on the ground with the researcher that is indoctrinated in post-structuralist thinking, who has to produce/clarify/write down/archive the experience of Tahrir square through my academic baggage. But sometimes it feels as if the radical in me is searching for some resonance in western thinking that can critically legitimise the event to be able to communicate it against other impositions that narrate the 2011 uprisings as a victory of westernization. The uprisings were not a site for development in a Western sense, but a site that renegotiated an alternative agency for Egyptians. The event negated the legitimacy of emergency law that Mubarak's regime nurtured and relied on to create docility in everyday living. Tahrir was a site to regenerate the Egyptian identity and connect it to its possibilities to-come, outside those constructed by the regime.

AF: Since the early stages of this project, I envisioned my role as a translator relaying a message from afar. However, I have wondered if, by not having exposed myself directly to life in the Gran Ghetto, I might be participating in exploiting the suffering of its dwellers. Still, I feel that my legal status of host (as an Italian citizen) rather than guest would prevent a truthful identification. My privilege over their condition as either undocumented migrants or asylum seekers would still persist. I felt that their broadcast was already offering me the tools

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[127] Derrida, "Hostipitality", 10.

to start understanding their struggles and that I could use my privilege to their benefit – namely, to increase the reach of their voices through translation and dissemination.

Alessandra Ferrini, *Radio Ghetto Relay,* 2016, video still. Courtesy of the artist.

On the contrary, your research is based on your first-hand experience and this further complicates the research process because you have been directly affected by the event. You are both the witness/subject and the researcher and by not having these two roles clearly separated, you have to deal with the uncertainty of the blurring of these roles. Likewise, you seem to oscillate between the role of host and guest. However, it is exactly this ambiguity that allows you to introduce a different perspective and deal with the 'real' (the event) in a very direct way, without risking the reduction of your analysis to a pure intellectual exercise. I think that we often forget about more visceral ways of knowing that your work brings to the fore. So, my question for you is: how do you negotiate your position as both host and guest within your research?

SA: I think my answer to that is simple: I struggle. I continue to struggle to understand that experience and I believe that this is, perhaps, how I am supposed to feel. For example, in *Radio Ghetto Relay*, what galvanized my thoughts was the shift of control from you (the researcher) to your subjects (the migrants in Gran Ghetto); I

wanted to offer that empowerment to my 'visceral' experience, as you put it, against my oscillation as a host/guest of the subjects of Tahrir. However, in your video the operation of tracing the migrants through the radio signals and over Google Earth and Streetview is also shown; you somehow managed to address the migrants through the interaction between you and them within the 'threshold' of hospitality, as Derrida puts it.[128] It is a paradoxical position; on one end, we start by opening up the door, being hospitable to our subjects; on the other end, we are oscillating between being the host and the guest not knowing what hospitality could hold. You relied on the potentiality of Radio Ghetto and I relied on Tahrir. I navigate my experience of Tahrir by trying to focus on its potentiality: what is left of Tahrir within me and everyone who experienced it. The researcher in me attempts to bring out the 'undesireable guests' of my encounter with Tahrir not to inscribe them within the limits of legality but to question the constituents of legitimacy within the horizon (to-come). As Derrida articulates it, the 'to-come' is not a futurity that will end or will come but a constant renegotiation of the potentiality of what is lacking.[129]

AF: You are right – this oscillation between the roles of guest and host within our researches can lead to paradoxical choices. For example, on one hand *Radio Ghetto Relay* departs from an intrusive documentation – one that would have showed the migrants in what they experienced as a disempowering environment and to which we were opposed. But on the other it attempts to subvert this through a compromise: the documentation of their presence in the rural landscape surrounding the ghetto through footage recorded on Google Earth and Streetview. As you suggest, this choice has to do with me: it is a need for proximity, a desire to be directly affected – or at least as much as technology allows. I guess that for a hospitable encounter to occur, there must be a willingness for the host to be affected by the guest and vice versa; to be as close as possible to a 'welcome without reservations or calculation.'[130] In your case this

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[128] Derrida, "Hostipitality", 10.
[129] Derrida, "Hostipitality", 10.
[130] Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine*, trans Rachel Bowlby (Stanford University Press, 2003), 66.

notion is further complicated because host and guest coincide; the navigation of the affective and transformative power of Tahrir is both your departure and end point.

Alessandra Ferrini, *Radio Ghetto Relay,* 2016, video still. Courtesy of the artist.

SA: I liked the absence of the physical body in *Radio Ghetto Relay* and I think that the focus on the transmission/communication of the struggle through radio recordings redefines how we theorize the violence of the struggle. It problematizes the epistemic alienation and inhospitable approaches to the body of the migrant, to allow the body of the migrant to communicate through her sensual voice rather an objectified physical pain; she speaks through her own laws of language on her economic exploitation beyond occidental understanding of pain as physical harm. The migrant, present through radio recordings, has a platform; like the people who took on Tahrir and other streets in Egypt to assert their presence. They exceeded the rules of hospitability by being ahead of its conditionality; here I see Tahrir and Radio Ghetto as spaces that renegotiate the rules of hospitality, possibly extending a radicalness to hospitality. They subvert the oscillation of host/guest to the agency of the subjects of Tahrir and Radio Ghetto.

AF: By having the harvesters speak on their own terms, the radio circumvents the highly problematic – yet so often reiterated – convention of the victimization of people living at the margins.

Although it was set up by a group of activists based in Rome, they did not try to force a model or a set of rules that we oftentimes see within practices of governmental or humanitarian hospitality. Rather, they let the workers use the resource as they saw fit, somehow turning the radio itself into a host. As a result, I believe that we can think of the radio as an example of radical hospitality, in which hierarchical relations are subverted and temporarily neutralised. It allows for the state of peripheral existence experienced in the ghetto to be sabotaged by its ability to reach a wide audience while letting their voices and messages take the central stage and resonate with full force.

As such, in *Radio Ghetto Relay* it became imperative to let the broadcasts speak for themselves while using the medium of the video first and foremost as a tool for translation that could create an opportunity to rethink how migrants' voices are often mediated, filtered and appropriated to serve other agendas.[131] Listening directly to their opinions on those political and social issues that concern them is a chance to understand their organisational and militant power whilst recognising their struggles – which are, in turn, a result of the politics and policies of the hosting countries and so they are not confined to the migrants' lives but affect the hosts too. By concentrating on their political agency and the impact that it can have within the environments they inhabit, this strategy creates a fertile ground to rethink and renegotiate what hospitality means: how it has been regulated and enforced through an arbitrary, top-down relation between guest and host but also how it opens up to the possibility of learning from the practices of resistance devised by the guests. And this is also true for Tahrir.

SA: It is Radio Ghetto and Tahrir that navigates the middle ground between the privileges of the researcher and her subjects, which Derrida framed as an interruption of the face-to-face.[132] That middle space empowers the subjects; and it does so by attempting to suppress the authority implied in the role of the researcher: power remains in

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[131] Here I refer to some of the ways in which governmental and humanitarian organisations, NGOs, artists and journalists have been exploiting the voices of migrants and refugees.

[132] Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, (Stanford University Press, 1999), 29.

the hands of the subjects. Like you as a privileged researcher in relation to the Gran Ghetto residents whose identity is contingent on their actions and how they are 'interpreted'; and how I, as a privileged researcher, navigate my experience of Tahrir against all other experiences like those of the subaltern identities that occupy Egyptian slums, many of whom did not choose to be part of the event but got tangled up with the uprisings. Such a middle space attempts to navigate through the *experiences of its subjects* rather than through the *exposure of the researcher to the subjects*, a strategy that calls on a third positioning to initiate a re-narration of justice, as Derrida asserts.[133] It is this subversion of the agency of the researcher that the 'third' encounter somehow opens space to engage with the parameters of legal justice and 'protects against the vertigo of ethical violence.'[134] My intellectuality becomes subverted against the space of Tahrir as a space that renegotiates its relation to justice. Likewise, your exposure to Radio Ghetto is not centralized in *Radio Ghetto Relay*, which constantly refers the audience to the question of what Radio Ghetto actually meant to its subjects. And a more compelling question to me as a researcher, how did your video respond to that burden of communicating the workers' struggles?

AF: I see my practice as a site to engage with theoretical and political debate. I do not aim to propose some sort of resolution; rather, I wish to engage the viewer in an exercise in critical thinking in which the endpoint is not closure but a nagging question, an appeal to enquire about and challenge assumptions. *Radio Ghetto Relay* was especially difficult to conceptualise, although its apparent formal simplicity might betray all the negotiations and hard questions that I had to ask myself. It was important for me to focus on the empowerment that the radio offers (and the force of the different speeches and conversations) but also that the heart of the matter – 'bare life,' to quote Giorgio Agamben[135] – would be exposed alongside the more 'human' aspects of the radio, such as the humour that is still present even in the face of adversity. Rather than reducing the migrants' lives

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[133] Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 29-30.
[134] Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 33.
[135] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998).

to pain and suffering, I was hoping to paint a fuller and more complex picture. The radio is not just used to discuss living conditions and ways of bettering the migrant workers' lives: it is also used to sing, freestyle, hang out and charge mobile phones because the electric generator is running.[136] Broadcasting, thus, also promoted leisure activities as well as providing basic services. On the other hand, it is used to send messages to those people who are at risk of falling prey to the gangmaster system: to warn them of the dangers. I tried to balance these different aspects in the video and provide a nuanced representation of the harvesters' lives, personalities and preoccupations.
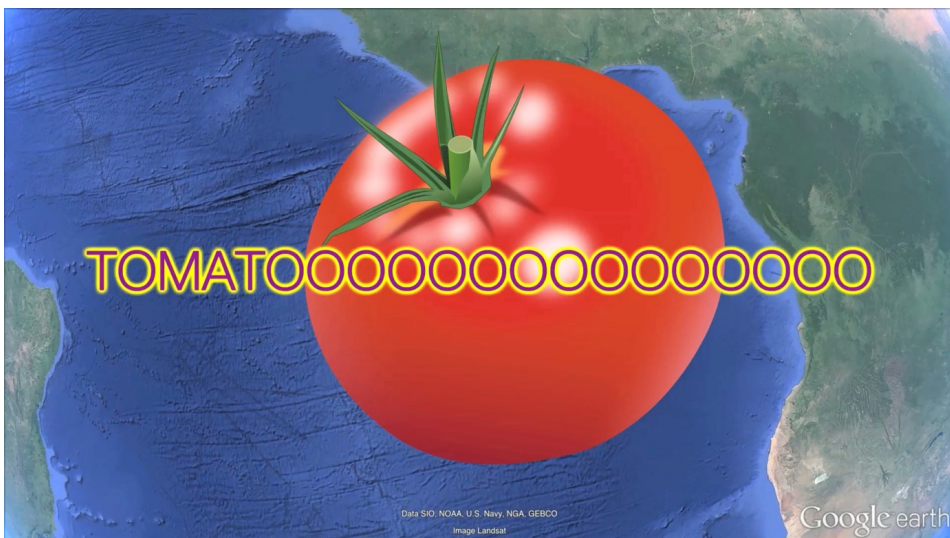
Alessandra Ferrini, *Radio Ghetto Relay,* 2016, video still. Courtesy of the artist.

SA: I was interested in knowing how you came to navigate your subjects, not as victims but rather as the 'third' reinvigorated identities that somehow contest their subalternity through Radio Ghetto. It is a task of subverting the epistemological barrier between subject-object in the production of knowledge. In my case the object, Tahrir, acts as a space for asserting the agency of its subjects, while the subjects act within a de-homogenised 'fable' offering different relationalities to

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[136] In the ghetto, basic amenities such as electricity or running water were lacking. Moreover, in the nearby villages local bars charge migrant workers a fee for the use of their sockets.

Tahrir.[137] Somehow Tahrir exceeds the intellect and its subjects as well, as the event exceeds their struggles, constructing a communicative space for resistance. It is as if, even when the communication stops, the potentiality of Tahrir persists as a trace against the authoritative legal forces that threaten the proliferation of the political. The feeling of familiarity that everyone in Tahrir Square felt to each other in the 2011 uprisings, even though this is somehow lost when walking down Tahrir now it has returned to being a bureaucratic hub, still lives within the archives of what we witnessed, or continue to witness through the absence of a hospitable – a negotiable – space for resistance within the current protest laws. Currently, the memory of Tahrir Square is celebrated by the regime not as an attestation of the constituent will of the people but to make sure that the event of Tahrir Square never happens again. The process of statist remembering imposes limitations on the revolution's memory from the moment of its construction through to speaking of it as part of the (finished) past: a process that aims 'to repress the archive while archiving the repression,' which Derrida interprets in relation to the violence of archiving the event.[138] It becomes a question of how to address the temporality of the struggle. Even with the absence of Tahrir or Radio Ghetto's transmission, there is an unconditional affirmation of the possibility of the coming to the event. Justice becomes an act of remembering what is forgotten from the archive; a reiteration of Derrida's 'third.' The process of forgetting signifies the violent process of remembering.

AF: Surely what we are left to deal with is an imposing absence. Not so much for me, as the demolition of the Gran Ghetto happened months after I finished the video. Yet, this sudden disappearance greatly changed the meaning and potentiality of the work. Especially because it feels as if state repressive forces have managed to annihilate this reality while refusing to take any coherent steps towards finding a

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[137] Jacques Derrida, "'Eating Well,' or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida." In Cadava, Eduardo, Peter Connor and Jean-Luc Nancy (eds.), *Who Comes After the Subject* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 102.
[138] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: a Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 77-78

real solution – namely, actively fighting the gangmaster system.[139] So now the question is – similarly to what you must be asking yourself in your research – how to deal with this event that was Radio Ghetto? Perhaps, we ought to think about what these archives of resistance can teach us in the present. It does not really matter that the Gran Ghetto no longer exists: what matters is that these voices keep being heard. Because that struggle is not over, it is still very much present.[140] And so is the struggle of the Egyptian people. I guess our work, as researchers, is to make sense of what happened and somehow turn it into an event anew: one that is able to keep retaining its transformative power. In other words, we need to become 'good' hosts, remaining open to the unexpected guest. The question thus is: how do you address the absence of the revolution that took place in Tahrir Square in your work? But also, I am curious to know, what do you think might be the best way to archive such a powerful event so that its legacy can do it justice?

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[139] The local council has taken some steps to close the ghettos and relocate their dwellers in host structures within the closest cities. But moving out of the ghettos means being too far from the plantations and so being unable to work. As a result, many migrants prefer to stay in the shantytowns. That shows how the system of hospitality in place does not work: it does not take into consideration the needs of the guest. It is a system based on reaction to emergencies rather than one of planned and calculated hospitality.

[140] As I write this article in August 2018 the tomato pickers have been on strike after sixteen harvesters died of work-related injuries within a week in southern Italy.

Alessandra Ferrini, *Radio Ghetto Relay,* 2016, video still. Courtesy of the artist.

SA: I like the resonance of an ongoing archive: as a negation of the linearity of time; as a constant exposure to Tahrir through bringing events of the past to the present; to pay homage to its presence and to dwell on its absence; to expose myself to its everyday loss through the brutalities of the current regime; but still to never lose sight of Tahrir. And I mean Tahrir as an ongoing archive; one that cannot be pinpointed to a date, a place or an event like 2011 but one that can extend relevance to what is left out of the archives: how, for example, Tahrir could be read as an extension of the sparks of the Egyptian labour protests in 2008. Just like Radio Ghetto, Tahrir attests to a presence of the radical and I like to relive that presence with all its agonies even while not being able to claim such space now. I think we, Egyptians, need to speak out on how, during the 2011 uprisings we wanted to negate the presence of Mubarak and his regime in our everyday lives; but we did not acknowledge the extent to which we collaborated in maintaining the normalcy of excluding certain identities from being a legitimate 'nationalist Egyptian'; we did not acknowledge that we were part of the regime, constructed by its orders. I feel that taking responsibility for that is necessary for reviving an identity for Egyptians that is non-hegemonic alongside rejecting the dominant 'nationalist' narrative that the current regime is utilizing to justify its repression of freedoms. We can start by questioning what is left out of our research, such as different

experiences of the Egyptian 2011 uprisings that surpassed my exposure in Tahrir and Cairo, or different aspects of Radio Ghetto such as, like you mentioned, the fact that it was used as a source of electricity, for survival and not just for political resistance. To answer your question briefly, if we speak of justice, it has to be a conversation on our certainties and privileges, on our annotation of the event, and on our hospitable encounters like this one: to converse on our ethical conflicts within our positions as hosts/guests to the possibilities of the event.