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# SPACES & POLITICS OF AESTHETICS FORUM: PRACTICES AND CURATIONS

## Geopoetics as Disruptive Aesthetics: Vignettes from Cairo

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In this paper, I perform an approach for a material and affective geography of the postcolonial city that is developed from within the spaces of Cairo and its archives. I propose storytelling the city through its geopoetics, where geopoetics emphasizes the elemental materiality of space. Taking inspiration from Angela Last (2017), geopoetics in this essay denotes disruptive aesthetics: intersection between word, aesthetics, and the geophysical materiality. This essay proceeds with a series of personal vignettes based on fieldwork in Cairo, Egypt. What if the narrative of downtown Cairo as a paradigmatic starting point in its history was explored through its consumption in fire? What if dust—the banal and irritating feature of the city is made central in probing its affective making and breaking? The essay is concerned with the ways through which we narrate and make meaning of this megacity of the Middle East.

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> An aesthetics of the earth? In the half-starved dust of Africas? In the mud of flooded Asias? In epidemics, masked forms of exploitation, flies buzz-bombing the skeleton skins of children? In the frozen silence of the Andes? In the rains uprooting favelas and shantytowns? In the scrub and scree of Bantu lands? In flowers encircling necks and ukuleles? In mud huts crowning goldmines? In city sewers? In haggard aboriginal wind? In red-light districts? In drunken indiscriminate consumption? In the noose? The cabin? Night with no candle?
>
> Yes. But an aesthetics of disruption and intrusion.
>
> —Édouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation

This essay proceeds through a series of fragmented vignettes that I have accumulated along the process of thinking about Cairo as a postcolonial city. From the onset, I hope to undo the authoritative 'I propose' that inhabit the essay's introduction. The propositions I make are—more appropriately—a set of tangled practices that help me work through some *discomforts*

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I inherited from my disciplinary training in politics. Specifically, the core discomfort I deal with here is the task and desire to grasp a political order (or urban disorder), disclose it, and through that, capture its logic. Some of these discomforts I picked up from the ways I learned to make sense of Egyptian, postindependence history as a story with a clear narrative arch. This is especially confounded when an archive of the immediate past (in the broadest sense of the archive) seems to be perpetually out of grasp (on the fragmentation of postcolonial archives see: El Shakry 2015). There are other discomforts that I picked up as I searched for framings and grammars that are meant to capture space and places of "elsewhere." I have been wondering if the space of a postcolonial city is meant to be locked in representations of informality, cosmopolitan nostalgia, or neoliberal urbanism (the logics that are supposed to help me make sense of my world). Are there other ways to story-tell this city without scripting it in an already determined narrative form that fit the character of a Third World city, an Orientalized city, or a city of the Arab Spring?

Discomfort is "a politically fertile affect" (Singh 2018, 152). I have been thinking with Julietta Singh's articulation of "cultivating discomfort" particularly as she reflects on it as an ambivalent relation to the material world we seek to master and order (Nassar 2020, 2021; Singh 2018). For Singh, who draws on Jamaica Kincaid and Sara Ahmed, discomfort is an inheritance; we find it in our histories, memories, and spaces. It is also an ambivalence that requires cultivation, staging and sharing. Sharing this inheritance might occur through a myriad of decisions: attention to the materiality of space, as well as emphasizing contradictions and slippages in prose and in the formation of the postcolonial subject (Singh 2018, 158). Sharing discomforts, therefore, is not necessarily an act of transparent disclosure (see also McKittrick 2021, 22) but a dwelling in ambivalence regarding our words and worlds.

Discomfort allows us to recognize both our masterful fantasies as well as our already failed mastery over the objects of our own comfort (2018, 151–152): the archive as space of answers, the city as an academic object, the postcolonial subject as a local expert, or categories that capture and articulate. Katherine McKittrick dwells even further on this "desire to capture, something or someone" as something to be questioned by the stories we tell (McKittrick 2021, 18). Telling stories is central to the two disciplines I hold in tension here: politics and geography (see, for instance, Dauphinee 2013; Dauphinee and Inayatullah 2016; Edkins 2013; Inayatullah 2011; Ravecca and Dauphinee 2018 for interventions in world politics/IR; Cameron 2012; Lorimer and Parr 2014; Noxolo and Preziuso 2013 amongst many others in geography). In this practice piece, I follow the possibility of narrative via elemental geopoetics as disruptive aesthetics following Édouard Glissant. I work with them as cracks that help me juxtapose genres, thinkers, episodes and histories that would not always sit neatly together. I rummage through the hesitancies of picking up and putting down theoretical companions, architects, spaces, and times that might inhabit different shelves of a library. I also try to work *against* the desire to patch up a logic of relating to a city I try to write about. The vignettes are therefore fragmented and fragmentary. I propose here elemental geopoetics as a narrative tool that attunes us to the entanglement of the material and the metaphoric. A tool from which we might disrupt how our cities are to be made accessible and relatable in academic prose or even in anticipated and desired poetics. I return to this understanding of geopoetics towards the end of my piece. Before that, I proceed through three fragments of field and archival work that follow the elemental geopoetics of dust, fire, and mud and concrete.

## DUST RE-TURNS

Let's return to my discomforts.
One of my discomfort stemmed from downtown Cairo and its dust.

The years preceding my doctoral research saw this small patch of the city become an icon and an attraction of academic sightseeing. For 10 years, books about Egypt referenced Tahrir square, and its images grew to become an obligatory expectation in academic circles concerned with the Egyptian space of the Arab Spring. For me, it has been difficult to disentangle the affective implications of what had quickly become an academic cliché, which was also not to be avoided or overcome. Cairo around and directly after 2011 was risky and in flux, but it was also resourceful, attractive and researchable (Abaza 2011).

Even though I was uncomfortable with this particular space, my first proper day of fieldwork entailed a drive through the city's downtown. My notes from these times tried to keep up with the changes that were happening to the built environment within the span of a year spent away:

> Meanwhile, the buildings of downtown are being white washed. I know that many swear by their lives that downtown has become beautiful but I cannot spot it. Meanwhile also the Nile Hilton has re-opened as Nile Ritz Carlton, the building of the former National Democratic Party NDP [The Ruling Party] has been fully demolished into rubble and thus my familiar postcard image of my commutes is missing a piece, and the 60s science building of the AUC [The American University in Cairo] is currently being demolished as well. In the centre of Tahrir square is a huge flagpole, too tall to see it from your car if you are driving through. The buildings that are not whitewashed are covered by dust.

Then my visceral reaction to that kind of dust interfered:

> I hate dust because it is the materiality of noise. It interrupts the presences and the voids of the city. It either covers the past or takes its place in its entirety. It settles on the surface of the buildings that are shut down. It is what remains of buildings that are torn down. (Field notes 2015, Personal blog 2016, Facebook post 2016, Workshop 2017, Published article 2017 (online) then 2018, PhD thesis 2018, in revised form 2019, here and now 2019, 2021).

[Does this last citation look strange? Wouldn't references tell a story of how a thought traveled, landed, was borrowed, then discarded, then perhaps looked at fondly as a memory?]

I repeatedly took the last three sentences of this note and since then I have tended to quote my past self faithfully. These three angry sentences are cut from their context, ill thought, not very well argued. I do not agree with them now. I make space for them as a way to recognize the temporality of researching my city. I realize that they reflect my anxiety of losing grips of a space I thought I was entitled to know. Since writing them, I have come see in dust a process of reconciliation (Nassar 2018). Dust after all is the perfect archive (Barak 2012; Nassar 2018; Steedman 2001). I pick it up from fragments of field research: unpolished pictures or discarded word documents in misplaced folders with the hope that I might recognize its space …

the spaces it makes,
the space where it settles,
the space that it invades

A geopoetic of dust forces me to learn from it rather than from the academic accounts that have fixed it in discourse. Dust, after all, is the excellent unraveling traveler, wearing out whatever I thought, hoped, or feared to be intact (Nassar 2018).

## FIRE

A disruptive politics of Fire.
How promising!

The imaginary of fires and revolution is not a novel metaphor. Cairo, bits of it, burned multiple times. My discomfort with fire crept in when I was finishing my main field research trip. I was leaving with the sense that there were many untapped histories of the city. The "field" (that is; the city and its archival history) itself seemed vulnerable, precarious as if all its solidity could, indeed, melt into air. However, the city would always be there, wouldn't it?

After I left, a small fire broke out in *'Attaba Square*, a main and busy square in downtown Cairo. The fire spread into a hotel and the area's market and couldn't be controlled, resulting in "over 200 tonnes of debris" (El-Gundy 2016). Only the week before, a fire had broken in *Sednaoui*—one of the old department stores that go back to pre-1952 modernity's fabric of the city (Zenobia 2016). This fed discussions of conspiracy theories, suspicions of arson, fears, or dreams of whether or not street vendors should be moved out of downtown, and indefinite shift of blame. The latter included the agency of the human: shop owners, government officials, the nearby firefighters in *'Attaba*, and the nonhuman: the narrow streets, the nature of goods sold in this commercial area, and an "electrical short circuit" (El-Gundy 2016). The main *'Attaba* blaze was followed by several fires breaking elsewhere outside of Cairo (El-Gundy 2016). The last fire in this series targeted the building of the governorate of Cairo, in *'Abdein Square*. Egyptian bloggers called it the season of Fires in Cairo, and did not fail to gesture to the 1952 Cairo Fire (Reynolds 2012), and the Belle Epoch buildings that existed in downtown before that (Zenobia 2016). Fears rose about the loss of Cairo's documents, its tangible and material history lying dormant in governmental drawers.

Fire might not be considered much of an element, or a material, but instead as a reaction that brings together other elements (air, water, soil) into a single event (Clark 2015; Marder 2014). It gestures toward both destruction and generation and orients to a narrative of cities that is neither linear, final nor complete. This series of fires—which are now almost forgotten—sealed in my sense of the precariousness and volatility of the materiality of the city. In a span of few years, the large-scale destruction of the urban fabric in Cairo will raise anxieties about displacement, loss of heritage, and irreversible loss.

This loss has flirted with the imagination of architects and planners for decades. Fire, therefore, might be suitable to bring together two architectural discourses that laid claims on Egyptian modernity, both of which depended on a possible imagination of the destruction of the city. Fire allows for two different and—seemingly—contradictory expert architectural discourses to evolve. One expressed architectural modernity and urban planning based on the annihilation of the existing urban fabric and an espousal of "modern" architecture. Others worked with earthen material, mud, and an idea of vernacular aesthetics to also express a claim to national modernity.

## MUD AND CONCRETE

Most of my fieldwork was spent in a small archival unit that was concerned with curating, preserving and archiving the works of national architects. I consulted the collection in the same space where the curators worked on preserving, cataloging, as well as displaying parts of the collections. The archival collection began with the acquisition of the works of Hassan Fathy[1] and Ramses Wissa Wassef.[2] In one corner Fathy's whole library was set up with his books. Some of his paintings were either permanently on display or close at hand to show whenever there was a visit to the unit. His was a collection that was already sorted, archived, and visible, both digitally and materially. Meanwhile, I was working on the dusty collection of the architect Sayyid Karim, still uncatalogued, unpresentable, and not very visible at the time.

In the archive, I was working beneath the shadows of these two men, dead now; one surrounding me with his libraries and sketches of mud villages and his authoritative position within Egypt's architectural tradition, and the other drowning me with his boxes and piles and dust. One dominating the academic discourse (Miles 2006) and the other making his way in the recent appreciation of Egypt's modernist heritage (Elshahed 2015; Volait 1988). Their traces occupied the same space in the archive, even if they represented two very distinct positions on what should be the space characteristic of National Egypt.

The archival unit itself was located somewhere far away from central Cairo, and even further away from the villages Fathy sought to build in mud. To go to the archive, my commute would take me through the concrete neighborhood, which Karim eventually built, now, a site of traffic jams and disappointment (Nassar 2019). The two architects were contemporaries. They had different views on what the architecture of the time should embrace. Mud or concrete? Both had an encounter with fire.

### Mud

In 1954, a fire burnt down large portions of a village called *Mit-el-Nasara* and 200 families became homeless and needed to be rehoused. Architect Hassan Fathy calls it a "chance" in his book *Architecture for the Poor* (Fathy 2000, 130). Due to this incidence, the Ministry of Social Affairs invited him to consult on the project of rehousing. Fathy found in this a chance to implement what he saw as the shortcomings of his major experiment in *El-Gourna*. A few years earlier, Fathy had embarked on building a village (*New Gourna*) out of mudbricks, an experience that was documented in his book and that earned him local and international recognition. This is also an experiment that failed to come to fruition. The *Mit al-Nasara* fire offered Fathy another chance to prove that his mudbrick project of architecture was implementable, successful and doable and thus could be adopted as a national strategy of rural reconstruction in Egypt. While this was only 2 years in after the officer's movement in Egypt, Hassan Fathy was at pains to dispel the idea that the government's powers "were not divine and (sic) limitless" (Fathy 2000, 132), and that the villagers could negotiate their plans with him and end up with the vernacular mud houses he so desired. Fathy preached and wrote about the principles of self-help in housing (Fathy 1962), usually mediated by an architect. Even though this fire offered the architect the flicker of creative hope to realize his plans, the government retracted its offer and opted for "orthodox and expensive concrete ways" (Fathy 2000, 132).

I try to block out Fathy's voice which is already too loud in the archive. Students visit the unit to come to see his paintings, and they experience the overwhelming excitement when they see his books on display. I try to block him out and try to avoid characteristic yellow and gold paintings of the faraway villages. I muddle my way through the traces of this other architect, who is equally but differenty loud in his traces of black and white and gray.

### Concrete

During the 1952 fire, the practice office of architect Sayyid Karim was burnt (ʻAbd al-Jawād 1989, 46). The office was in one of the apartment buildings in downtown, overlooking two main streets. Along with the office, the fire also consumed the documents related to the magazine *al-ʻimara* that he had founded as a venue for a modern architectural discourse in Egypt (Volait 1988), as well as a lot of his plans and designs. Seven years earlier Karim had published a magazine article entitled "what if Cairo had been destroyed in the war?" in which he lamented the missed opportunity to rebuild Cairo according to modernist planning scheme that could have come if Cairo was damaged in the war and rebuilt according to more modernist principles (Elshahed 2015, 139–40). Karim had an eye on the architectural movement of postwar reconstruction within cities destroyed in the Second World War. He expressed one of the long-standing architectural and urban planning fantasies: to have a tabula rasa to build anew. Karim wrote with the sense that Cairo was depleted even if it has survived the war, this was a slow damage that hindered a proposal or fantasy of large-scale modernist re-planning. The article still imagined the total destruction of Cairo as a pretext for imagining its solution. Elshahed notes the irony of the architect's practice bursting in the flames in the same destructive consumption of the city that the architect wished upon the city (Elshahed 2015). Only a little less than a month following the Cairo Fire, Karim's imagined plan will be delivered in a lecture in February 1952 calling for the necessity of a complete master plan for the city, instead of minor rebuilding.[3] A lot of the themes in the lecture continued to be reiterated throughout his practice during postindependence as I have seen through the collection of his drafts and papers. Eventually, his career will be punctuated by a chance to realize his fantasies in the planning of the neighborhood from scratch in concrete.

My mornings and evenings are punctuated by a drive through this neighborhood; the afterlives of the modern fantasy I try to scavange in the cardbord boxes in the archive. I commute through the neighborhood, hoping to find it an archive. Some of the carefully designed buildings are cladded in billbords, others are cladded in scaffolding awaiting demolition. This future plan of concrete did not really work, although that is a story for another place.

## GEOPOETICS AS DISRUPTIVE AESTHETICS

> An esthetics of Cairo? In the half-starved dust … of Khamasin? In sticky sweaty traffic jams? In the concrete jungles? In the past future cities in concrete abandoned in the desert? In the faux granite and the cold AC? In the metal detectors and the smell of the peach-scented flood detergent? In the crooked tiling around the mud huts that became sea-side resorts? In the soot? In the disintegrating old magazine salvaged from a secondhand bookseller? In the smell of urine underneath the mushrooming flyovers?[4]

Following Angela Last, geopoetics denotes an intersection between word, aesthetics, and the geophysical materiality. While geopoetics draws on considerable literature that works at the intersection of poetry and geography (for an overview, see: Ferretti 2020; Magrane 2015), Last's use of the term emphasizes its "disruptive aesthetics" (Last 2017, 161). Geopoetics, in this formulation, cuts across the dichotomous representation and materiality. For this Practices and Curations piece, I wanted to work through the affordance of geopoetics as materials and elements to shake up the politics of narrating our relationship to the world we "study."

This world that has been, in my case, typically depicted as one that needs mastering, understanding, and ordering (on the historic articulation of the problem of order in Cairo, see: Mitchell 1991). Taking inspiration from Glissant, scholars have been engaging with poetics of relation as distinct from both the colonization of the logics of cause-and-effect and from the desiring self of politics that seeks to master the world (Glissant and Wing 1997, 11–13; Shilliam 2012, 112). Geopoetics in this sense disrupts the ways we narrate and disclose the world because it is open—as a grammar—to the multiplicity of the ways we can be narrated (Odysseos 2017). At the heart of this engagement with the imaginary of poetics is the political demand to resist the desire to constitute a masterful self or to master the domain we might want to understand (Singh 2018), or capture (McKittrick 2021). This desiring self is an ongoing source of companionship as well as discomfort that exists with the process of self-disclosure (and self-effacement) as I attempt to write about the postcolony in narrative form to patch up fragile fragments from the shadows and fantasies of archives.

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## NOTES

1. 1900–1989 arguably the most widely known Egyptian architect.
2. 1911–1974, an Egyptian architect who also taught art and architecture at the College of Fine Arts in Cairo University. Dalia Nabil; Curator, conservation specialist and archivist in (RAC)- Interview 12/4/2016.
3. Sayid, Karim, "al-Qahira kamadina; Takhtituha: Tatawurha: Tawsu'ha" [Cairo as a city: its design, development and expansion," Lecture, 26 February, 1952. Sayid Karim Collection. RAC AUC RBSCL.
4. Thanks to Elona Hoover especially for her conversation about this particular segment.

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