

To be called forth by a speck of dust

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Abstract

Less a response, this commentary is a conversation with Anna Secor's 'Spacetimeunconscious', riffing off its offering. I trace one of the playful characters in Secor's article, the speck of dust that shapeshifts across the paper's 18 pages, folding and dispersing geographies and temporalities. I am wrestling with how to make sense of geographies that I care about, exactly at the same moment when these geographies are blown up into shards all over my screen. And I would like to think of Secor's paper as a companion for me, and for those who might be trying to figure a way to face the slow and fast breakdown of the surfaces of the present; a supplement, rather than an answer, to the question of where do we go from here, now?

Keywords

Cities of the Middle East, dust, elemental geography, geopoetics, loss

Summer of 2023

I am in my first reading of Anna Secor's (2023) 'Spacetimeunconscious' and I am mesmerised. You would be too, as you follow the cuts and sutures through the cosmic, poetic, traumatic, and elemental geographies that Secor assembles and dishevels along her way. I find myself pleasantly bemused by the image of water molecules getting colder and closer to each other until they reach a moment of suspension (Choy and Zee, 2015). Where do we go now? I imagine the panic of being paralysed with non-knowledge, by the inability to act, until a speck of dust calls the water molecules forth to ice.

Dust floats through the cuts in the paper: waking up, falling asleep, dreaming, dreaming within a dream, or a snowflake in a film. I follow the matter that makes up space in and between multiple rooms, rooms people wake up to or fall asleep from. Every cut (the speck of dust) 'breaks the surface of the world' (Secor, 2023) and the fragments that

make a home scatter. A full belly, a dresser that doesn't exist, a special angle of light, a roomless blanket, a phantom pregnancy are all on the run, untethered. The matter, energies, and affects that make up a room are oriented, re-oriented, and disoriented. And as I read on, I let them slip away through Secor's cuts. In 'Spacetimeunconscious', we skid from one scene to another, hoarding and losing shards of fantasy and trauma. Dust floats and settles as a snowflake in a final scene. The one we arrive at towards the end is one in which a film shows an unnamed homeless man in Istanbul. He is a Syrian refugee, under a blanket, under snowflakes, and who is at home when he dreams. In this last scene, we know what has been true all along the

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article's 18 pages. We meet the subject for whom 'the calamity is now ... the present moment is breaking down', and there is nowhere (and possibly no-when) to run!

Less a response, this commentary is a conversation with Anna Secor's 'Spacetimeunconscious', riffing off its offering. I trace the playful character in Secor's article; the speck of dust that shapeshifts across the paper's pages, folding and dispersing geographies and temporalities. I am wrestling with how to make sense of geographies of cities that I care about exactly at the same moment when these cities are blown up into shards all over my screen. I would like to think of Secor's paper as a companion for me, and for those who might be trying to figure a way to face the slow and fast breakdown of the surfaces of the present; a supplement (rather than an answer) to the question of where do we go from here, now?

Spring of 2023

In a recent article, and writing about post-2011 Cairo, Julia Elyachar (2022: 526) picks up a sense of 'slipperiness' in Cairo – a collective mood of 'feeling on unsteady ground. [As if] something in the relation of body to ground had come undone', where cars skid, and there is a glitch in a collective sense of a shared urban space. When Elyachar attends to this sentiment of slipperiness, she does so within a trajectory of revolutionary and post-revolutionary city. A city whose inhabitants encounter a sense of the aftermath slowly and every day in the unmade matter, the aggressive folding and refolding of things that make the city up: from neighbourhoods to historic buildings, from uprooted trees to pulverised cemeteries that have been razed to make way for bridges and flyovers (Ezzeldin, 2023; Omar and Watson, 2023; Yee, 2023). Whatever we think grounds the city, and grounds us in the city, is being relentlessly upturned. 'What happens when ground gives way?' (Secor, 2023). I carry with me Elyachar's opening vignette during a recent trip home to Cairo, as I battle to orient myself to all the new flyovers and bridges that snake by and above Cairo's pulverised old cemeteries. I pass over the city of the dead. I

attempt to snap a quick picture from above. I feel a light sense of vertigo. Something has glitched in my own relationship to the ground as I find myself on a bridge that I don't remember, that appears and does not appear on Google maps. I am suspended in the air where I did not expect to be.

Earlier that spring

This year, the dust storm appeared slightly later than its usual time, whooshing through an urban ground that is being aggressively upturned. It tore down billboards and stopped traffic on the government's beloved flyovers and highways. Dust storms, or *Kahmaseen*, sit interestingly between the enigmatic and ordinary in Egypt. They happen every year, almost at expected times of the year. Yet during the dust storm, urban life stops and we reorient ourselves differently to how we breath and how we survive. This year, in addition to the awkward timing, there was a new sense that the dust Cairenes were breathing in wasn't just the sand from the neighbouring deserts, which constantly threatens the small green strip around the Nile; it was very likely the actual dust of the ground of the city that was being upended, or more disturbingly, it was the remains of the graves that were being razed (*Egyptian Chronicles*, 2023). Sasha Engelmann (2023) invites us to think about our embodied experience of a storm. If we read Jerry Zee's (2022) opening vignette in his book, *Continent in Dust: Experiments in a Chinese Weather System*, we cannot but help dancing with the choreography of the dust plumes, as Zee swirls around his research partners, who swirl around the sand, that swirls within the dust storm, that swirls in the new Chinese city. But here we are. Here I am, with the bodies of our forebearers tossed in the wind, fended off by a vacuum cleaner, and where any possible choreography of this encounter is out of sync.

Meteorically what is happening within a dust storm is fascinating. We see a dance in which the ground we thought was solid is lifted in the air to be woven across seas. The earth, the territory, whatever we think of as fixed and stable, and even sedimented is on the move (Bhat, 2021; Papadopoulos

et al., 2021; Peters et al., 2018). Rarely registering at the cusp of the political, breathing the ground surrounding us, is nothing but political, especially when it appears as not. Amidst the dust storm, we don't know what we hear, we don't know what we see, and we definitely are not sure what we touch and what we breath. A dust storm is an interruption that might or might not be a calamity, might or might not be deadly. It puts a wrench into the accustomed urban rhythms we take for granted. Flights are suspended, work is suspended, laundry – indeed – is suspended, and we hold our breath. Where do we go from here?

Autumn of 2023

One deadline for writing this response breaks as the other sets in its place. My gaze, however, is elsewhere. The war on Gaza rages on, and I following the reel of newsflashes, statements, signatures, factchecking, and translations. Time implodes, bodies and affects are thrown together to the rhythm of an incessant carpet bombing that some of us don't get to hear, yet we see its echoes: bodies, spaces, and matter in dust. Everyone I know is acting all the time however they can but is also weighted by the inability to act: 'The present moment is breaking down'. I come back to this article. I look for clues on how we might act with 'knowledge that does not know itself' (Secor, 2023) suspended, on the cusp, perhaps anticipating a cut, a dream, and awakening, a speck of dust to call us forth.

It is one of the Saturdays, and images of one of the biggest protests in London trickle in. Captured from above is a shot of thousands of protestors on Westminster Bridge:

//Snap//

//Tweet//

//Retweet//

Egyptian friends who were in the protest could swear that they have been on that bridge before. It is Cairo 2011, a Friday, the 28th of January, on Kasr El-Nil Bridge at the heart of the city, just before occupying Tahrir Square for what would be later known as the Arab Spring. It is not just the winter of 2011 but also the spring of 2003, protesting the Iraq War. An explosion detonates in 1991 Baghdad, a shrapnel travels through 2003, and someone shelters their toddler from its debris in 2023.

The surface of the world is always breaking.

A decade ago, Secor (2013: 431) asked if cinematic urban experiences speak about 'what we want but fail to get from our stubbornly fixed cities', or if they are 'also symptomatic of how we do, in fact, experience the urban when folded both spatially and temporally?' I return to this question here in her article to ask why is there a lure of the spacetimeunconscious introduced through the montage? Is it because it opens speculative theoretical possibilities or is it called forth by how we do, in fact, experience geography as unstable breaks in the surface of the world? I think of dreaming and even daydreaming through explosive geographies, ones that are not easily recuperated by an archive or a *dérive*, ones that don't catch their breath to settle and sediment. I wonder if our inherited urban methods fall short in caring for them and acting within them. In holding these geographies, I have been interested in artwork, fiction, and poetics that capture the moment of unmaking halfway through (Nassar, 2022). These disintegrations might seem as quick, sudden, and eventful affairs (and they usually are) or might be slow. Yet what textures the background of this flash of loss? What if we slow the reel of unmaking the forms of our geographies? What if we linger in the gaps between fragments and shards? Is there anything there? Not in the wreckage and debris – we know that well, too well – but in the space of making dust when it is not yet the aftermath? I am drawn to the cuts that Secor employs throughout her paper as a method, not as answer, but as a companion. I am also drawn to the enigmas, and breaks, the lightening, and the speck of dust that carries a message, the twist in Möbius strip in which all surfaces vanish, and then we act in knowledge we forget until we are called forth.

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