Technologies of Trust: Introduction

Shaila Seshia Galvin
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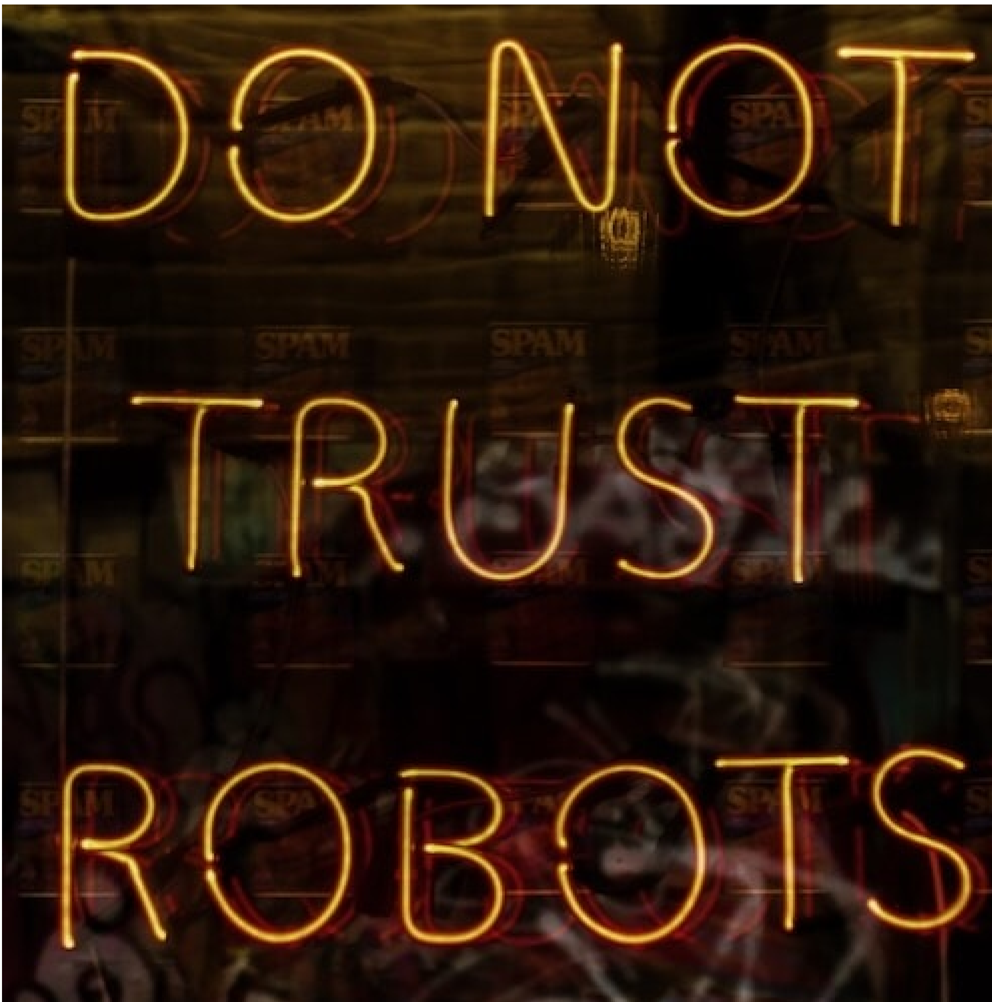

This post is the introduction of our thematic thread on Trust, *curated by Anna Weichselbraun (University of Vienna), Shaila Seshia Galvin (Geneva Graduate Institute) and Ramah McKay (University of Pennsylvania).*

What do we mean when we talk about trust? Contemporary discourses figure trust variously as a problem, an aspiration, an object of intervention, and even

something to be dispensed with all together. An abiding social fact, trust appears to nourish not only interpersonal relations but also scales up to the social orders of governance, politics, and publics. Girlfriends and governments as much as experts and executives are concerned with inspiring, maintaining, and growing trust. To do so they implement a wide variety of measures: from communicative reassurances, to certification schemes, technologies of transparency and objectification, and legal measures of accountability and compliance. Despite all these efforts, the Edelman "Trust Barometer," itself an instrument worthy of examination, notes that trust in government, media, NGOs, and business has dramatically declined since the beginning of the new millennium. And, we observe, blockchain technology is touted by some proponents as necessary for producing trust, while others see its virtue in permitting trustlessness. In the midst of this confusion and supposed crisis of trust we ask: what is trust and what does it do?

What is trust and what does it do?

Contemporary social, political, and economic life demands new ways of thinking about and theorizing trust. We approach trust not directly, but through technologies such as certification, verification, and inspection as well as institutional arrangements such as aid organizations and health care, which promise to be solutions to problems of suspicion, doubt, corruption, and uncertainty. These and related world-making practices constitute our objects of observation (Trouillot 2003; Galvin 2018; Weichselbraun 2019), and we track how they attempt to materialize and stabilize social relations, with the aim of producing what is often
understood or named as trust. We mobilize ethnographic inquiry to study how these technologies, and practices—not unlike more familiar forms of infrastructure (electricity grids, water networks, highways and rail lines)—constitute "dense social, material, aesthetic, and political formations" (Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018, 3).

Our collaboration brings together scholars within and outside the academy, spanning junior to mid-career stages, as well as MA and PhD students. Across our different essays, we parse the qualities of trust and their modes of production, asking how material objects, bureaucratic and regulatory practices, as well as diverse kinds of technologies—from forensic testing to blockchain—work to configure and condition trust. The settings of our research vary—from the corridors of humanitarian action to the securitized perimeters of wildlife sanctuaries and sugar plantations, from Zoom calls to organic farms in Switzerland and India, and from the digital worlds of Web3 and Facebook livestreams to the clinical environments of covid testing centres.

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Across these diverse sites, trust emerges as a fragile, situated, often ambivalent and always a relational accomplishment. Sometimes it is built up through the provision of a predictable structure with familiar routines as in Hesse's analysis of the Covid testing centres in which seemingly superficial changes in the protocol can raise suspicion/doubt in the efficacy of the process. In Billaud's contribution, the ICRC's careful work of building trusting relationships in communities victimized by urban violence is undermined by efforts to formally produce "trust" at a different level of the organization through bureaucratic procedures and techniques geared to producing measurable results. And from a Malian sugar plantation, the setting for a global health workshop, Biruk reflects on the need to locate (mis)trust in global health in the material, historical, and infrastructural realities of the
plantation itself.

In this regard, several essays explore the relational dimensions of trust, considering the range of human and nonhuman actants implicated in the work of trust-building. McKay asks how trust is "facilitated and foreclosed" as medicines

move across jurisdictional boundaries, from pharmaceutical importers and inspectors, to laboratory testing, to online pharmacies that fill prescriptions for overseas customers. Spurred by a Zoom call about self-managed medication abortion in the US, McKay explores ways that trust in pharmaceuticals is not generated by pharmaceutical regulation itself, but comes to encompass a wide array of human, technological, and political actants. Such an array of human and nonhuman actants are found, too, in McClellan's essay which examines how recurrent demonstrations of the efficacy of technologies of security and surveillance within a Jordanian wildlife sanctuary prove crucial to establishing and sustaining the trust of both local residents and the sanctuary's captive animals.

> *In a world where crises of trust are proclaimed in things as diverse as political institutions, food, pharmaceuticals, health care, and news, trust can no longer be a rarefied object of scholarly inquiry.*

A spatial and relational focus on trust commonly contrasts the proximate and the distant, the personal and impersonal, distinctions that Borghi queries in his study of an organic farm and market in Geneva. Yet a number of essays in this thread foreground instead issues of mediation and immediation, which prove equally germane for understanding relations of trust and suspicion. Both Weichselbraun and Zhang's contributions highlight the role of media (semiotic) ideologies in the construal of the trustworthiness of mediated representations of reality. The promise of immediacy as a solution to problems of socially based mistrust or uncertainty informs both the use of Facebook Livestreams by Peruvian peasant leaders as well as motivates the development of blockchain-based cryptocurrencies and communities. In Galvin's essay, it is instead mediation in the form of techniques of verification—from forensic tests to certification protocols—that promises to bring organic quality into being as a tangible truth, while the question "is it really organic?" points to the underlying complex interplay of (mis)trust, truth, and a persistent desire for immediacy. Finally, Plüss demonstrates the ways that trust is commodified

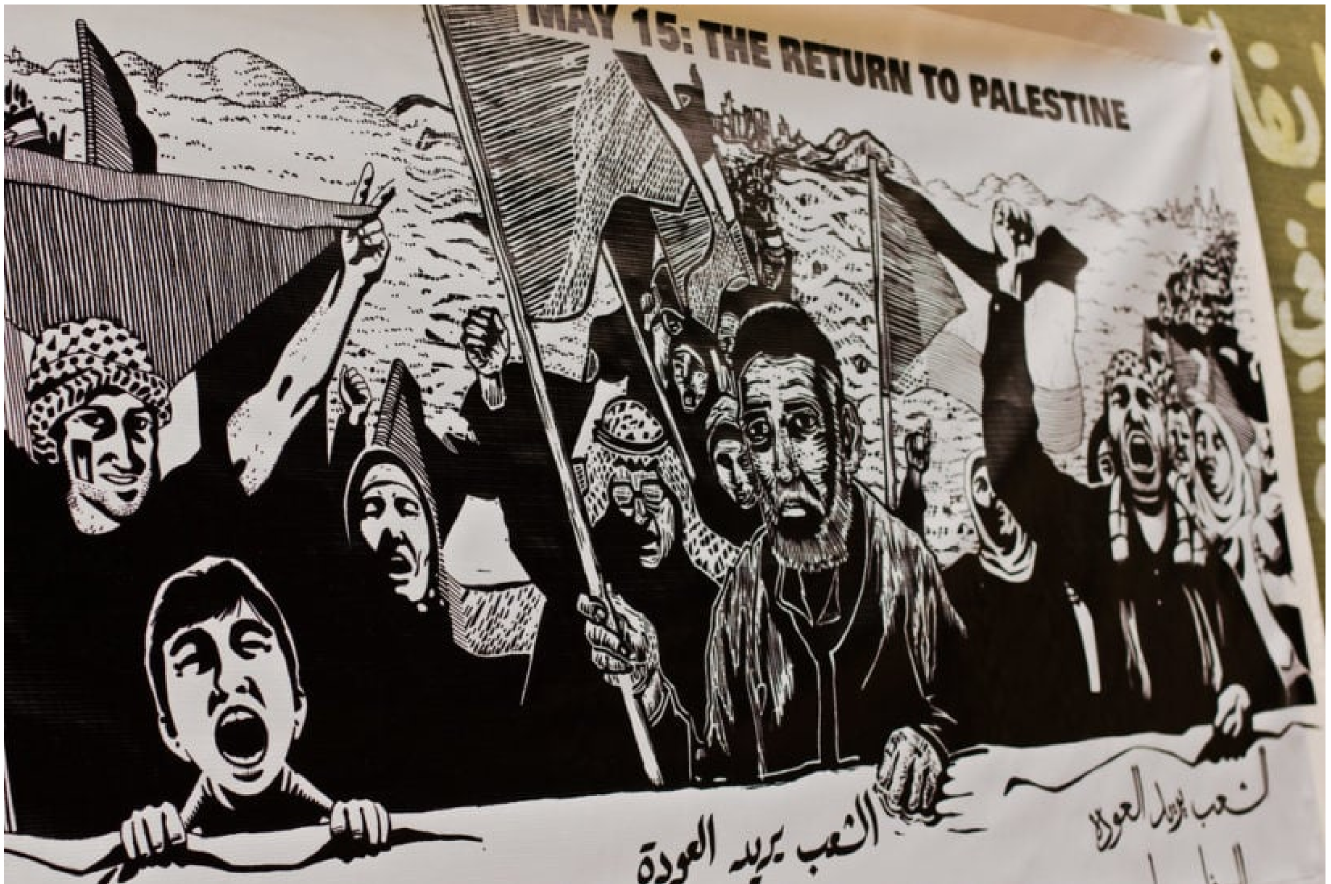
through the integration of
blockchain technology into food supply chains, notably IBM's Food Trust platform. Unlike the cryptocurrency developers who laud the potential of blockchain to replace or dispense with trust all together, companies such as IBM promote blockchain technology as a solution to the problem of mistrust.

In his reflection on the essays in this collection, Taylor Nelms offers a broad conceptualization of trust as a pragmatics of social life. Indeed, these essays show how technologies and tools of trust are mobilized in various ways to address intractable and practical problems of uncertainty, risk, and unknowability, among others, and so are located within, not outside of, social relations. In a world where crises of trust are proclaimed in things as diverse as political institutions, food, pharmaceuticals, health care, and news, trust can no longer be a rarefied object of scholarly inquiry. Ethnographic approaches that foreground the inescapable complexities of social relations move us closer to developing a critical anthropology of established and emergent technologies of trust.

IMAGE: Photo by Nick Fewings on Unsplash.

What Do We Owe Students

Shahram Khosravi
September, 2022



This week when I went back to Stockholm University the encampment was not there anymore. All songs, music, debates, seminars, whispers, shouts, and slogans were replaced by a deafening silence. A familiar silence. A silence that guarantees order but not justice.

I have taught at Stockholm University for 27 years. I have worked with students since 1997.

And I still love it. Youthful curiosity saves my adventurous and passionate academic soul from the soullessness of the growing bureaucratization of higher education. Despite all controls, the classroom can still be a space for fugitive pedagogy, a space for radical imagination, and speculating the impossible—a space to foster a future otherwise.

In the past nine months, I have seen how the gap between students and professors has expanded. The questions they struggle with are not addressed by

our curriculums.

The war against Palestin has intensified the gap which had started long before. The young generation grew up witnessing ruination after ruination caused by our and previous generations. They ask difficult questions we often cannot answer or are not willing to address. The ruination of the earth, of society, the expansion of bordering practices, and the increasing ruthlessness of capitalism. The curriculums we offer are often outdated and students see it. Reading the Port Huron Statement, which was the political manifesto of the American student movement, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in 1962, one wonders; has nothing changed since then?

"Our professors and administrators sacrifice controversy to public relations; their curriculums change more slowly than the living events of the world; their skills and silence are purchased by investors in the arms race; passion is called unscholastic. The questions we might want raised–what is really important? can we live in a different and better way? if we wanted to change society, how would we do it?"

> *The students reminded us what a university should look like, a vibrant, dynamic, and engaging learning milieu.*

The gap has been manifested in the pro-Palestinian encampments at university campuses in the US and Europe. In the second week of May students at Stockholm University started a protest encampment in solidarity with Palestine. Our students had clear aims and demands: support for a permanent ceasefire in Gaza and an end of cooperation agreements with Israeli universities. They set up tents, ate together, studied together, decided together. They practiced their citizenship. The Brazilian educator and thinker Paulo Freire rightly said that the classroom is not a place for the accumulation of commodified knowledge. It is rather a public sphere where citizenship is practiced. When they did not find the classroom a space for asking their questions they created an alternative space where education became a process of self-actualization and empowerment. The

encampment became a way for the students to develop their language, which is derived from their own social realities, and to read their fear and hope.

The encampment was where theory was inseparable from practice. Suddenly isolated and atomized learning individuals got together and changed learning into acts of citizenship. The encampment was a space to learn and teach how a society is possible. The encampment has challenged the boundaries between education and life; knowing and thinking; thought and action; theory and practice; academia and the public sphere. The encampment was a critical thinking combined with practices of freedom.

In the second week of the encampment, one student asked me about the chances of success of the encampment. I told her that it was already a big achievement. Resistance generates new subjectivities. The encampment liberated students from perceptions, restrictions, and self-images that have long restrained them. As we have learned from Frantz Fanon liberation is already won during the struggle for it. The student movement itself is full of potential for a radical mutation in consciousness.

From 1991 when I started to study at Stockholm University to 2024 I have never seen a single protest organized by the students, let alone a student movement. The student encampment created something that never existed before at Stockholm University. Through courageous pushbacks of restrictions and boundaries, the students added a quality to the Swedish academia. The students reminded us what a university should look like, a vibrant, dynamic, and engaging learning milieu. The Stockholm University encampment was a continuity of student movements, that aimed to break the crust of apathy and inner alienation that remain characteristics of neoliberal higher education. They practiced what we professors only speak about, the virtue of parrhesia. The ancient Greek term means having the courage to speak the truth despite potential dangers. It means to speak honestly and to speak freely even if it might mean taking risks. Through practicing parrhesia the students have defended academic freedom.

We should recognize what they have done for academia and for all of us.

This is what we owe them.

Multimodal Digital Curating as (anthropological) research, collaboration, and engagement

Anja Dreschke
September, 2022

Introduction

Curating has become a popular concept in anthropology in recent years, extending beyond traditional museum and gallery contexts to encompass social media profiles, feeds, websites, and algorithms. Everything can be understood as curating nowadays. This broad interpretation of curation has also gained traction in the field of media and digital anthropology, where anthropologists and ethnographers engage in digital practices such as developing online exhibitions, creating web sites, or using social media platforms as research tools. These efforts aim to produce and present research in multimodal digital formats to foster novel forms of knowledge production. This expands the scope of research practice to encompass modes of research presentation, while also engaging a broader audience.

Digital curating and exhibiting often embrace multimodality, reflecting diverse modes of fieldwork, production and representation that transcend the often implied online/offline divide. In this context, the digital and multimodality are not regarded merely as technologies or methodologies but "as intensely social and potentially transformative" that "creatively refigure the grounds of ethnographic encounter and, in this process, to recast what counts as academic knowledge" (Deger 2017, 318). Multimodal digital curating in this sense is "actively participating in, and commenting on the cultural-historical-technological dynamics from which they arise" (ibid).

> *Digital curating and exhibiting often embrace multimodality, reflecting diverse modes of fieldwork, production and representation that transcend the often implied online/offline divide.*

Considering these perspectives as presented by Jennifer Deger, along with more technical and hands-on take aways, the online workshop "Multimodal digital curating" on January 19-20, 2023, served as a platform for scholars and practitioners engaged in multimodal digital experimentations. Organised by Anja Dreschke, Simone Pfeifer and Anna Lisa Ramella in their capacity as co-speakers

of the media anthropology working group (https://agmedien.de) of the German Association of Social and Cultural Anthropology (GASCA/DGSKA) (https://www.dgska.de/en), the workshop was the third instalment of an ongoing series of workshops, offering an opportunity to share practical experiences and theoretical insights. This reflection on the workshop incorporates six out of eight contributions (due to the authors' choices and copyright issues) and contextualises our understanding of multimodal digital curating while highlighting key epistemic, ethical, theoretical, and practical aspects discussed in the various contributions.

Curating, the curator and 'the Curatorial'

In its most fundamental sense, curatorial practices involve the selection, organisation, ordering, contextualisation, and public presentation of content. Departing from the (colonial) traditions of curation in ethnographic museum and exhibition contexts, anthropologists have expanded their understanding of curating beyond a representational mode to view it as a form of experimentation and critique (Elhaik and Marcus 2010; 2020). This shift towards curating in anthropology has brought the anthropologist as curator to the forefront of recent discussions, considering the different professional roles of the curator such as a mediator (see the contributions to Sansi 2020). On a theoretical level, drawing on critical art practice, 'the curatorial' has been differentiated from cura*ting* as practice as a process of knowledge production and mode of exploration (Rogoff and Bismarck 2012). 'The Curatorial' is conceptualised as a form of posing questions, reflecting on curatorial practices and decisions as integral components of exhibitory practices. When applied to anthropological contexts, 'the curatorial' is described as "an expanded mode of *research* rather than exhibitory practice" (Schacter 2020, 193; emphasis in original). In his workshop talk, Rafael Schacter explored 'the curatorial' as an ongoing critical research form and an anthropological method that "asks more questions than it gives answers" and engages in "knowledge production rather than representation," moving "away from illustration and exemplification" [see video ca. minute 8:00-13:00]:

Drawing on his co-curatorial work in the exhibition at the Brunei Gallery in London, Rafael Schacter discusses the artworks by Filipino artist Cian Dayrit to elaborate on what he terms “collaborative intensity.” This concept is a form of condensed and intensified research and fieldwork that can only be achieved through a collective undertaking and project.

Digital Curating, Collaboration, and the Archive

The term curating has also been extensively applied to digital contexts, a theme explored by Carolin Höfler and Johanna Mehl in their contribution on “collaborating in design processes” [see video minute 2:22-ca. 5:10]. The widespread use of the term in the digital encompasses activities such as the selection of playlists of streaming providers as well as the collecting, indexing, displaying, and archiving of ever-increasing digital data. Moreover, algorithms play a role in this collaborative digital curatorial process. In this context, Höfler and Mehl pose questions that include examining how physical curatorial practices are incorporated into the digital landscape and vice versa, and how the onsite relates to the online:

Christoph Bareither’s research focus on methods of digital curating also ties in with this topic, particularly looking at digital curating as an everyday practice in social media use. He explores social media users as curators of popular culture and positions them as an integral component of participatory research strategies. His work employs an analytical framework of digital image curation to examine the interactions between museum visitors and users of digital image archives. Currently, he and his research team are actively developing a museum app aimed at prompting critical reflection among young visitors on the pervasive influence of “populist truth-making” in daily life. This endeavour is viewed as a form of ethnographic co-design, fostering interactive encounters to enhance the app while concurrently advancing ethnographic inquiries into the intersections of museums, populism, and the everyday experiences of young people.

Larissa-Diana Fuhrmann introduces digital projects that exemplify the intricate relationship between physical and digital realms. One noteworthy instance is the visual and digital design of the co-curated exhibition platform “reclaim: art as resistance against political violence” (https://reclaim-platform.de). Fuhrmann describes how this platform employs the “Petersburg hanging” [see video minute 18:00] wherein images of artworks are displayed closely above, below, and next to each other in an overview, reshuffling them based on selected keywords. Another of her examples refers to the exhibition “Mindbombs” at the “Kunsthalle Mannheim” where a digital tour and audio guide accompanied the physical exhibition [see minute 28:20], expanding and complementing the overall experience also after the physical exhibition terminated:

Throughout the workshop, numerous examples of digital curating were presented, showcasing a diverse array of curation technologies, including audio- visual media, VR-video, blogs, podcasts/videocasts, design-based web-applications, social media platforms or the critical use of AI technology. Importantly, these examples addressed hybrid formats and offline spaces as integral components of the digital curatorial.

Within these hybrid spaces, participatory and collaborative curating modes emerged as essential ways of knowledge production and social practice (Walton 2016). As emphasised earlier, digital curating is neither a form of representation of a physical exhibition, or a tool to inform or provide an overview of such. Instead, it serves as a means to initiating exchange and collaboration processes that extend beyond content sharing, clicking or amassing followers [see video of Höfler’s und Mehl’s talk]. These diverse collaborative curatorial practices involve not only research partners as co-curators but also researchers, designers, programmers, and other institutional actors, ideally fostering collaboration in non-hierarchical and asymmetrical ways. As Höfler and Mehl have scrutinized, collaborative curation involves a series of practices such as aggregating and transposing, sharing and versioning, re-enacting and pre-enacting. The resulting modes of collaboration and curation lend themselves as approaches to inventive

and future-oriented research, as can be seen in Mehl and Höfler's *Attending (to) Futures* conference and publication (Mehl and Höfler 2023).

Multimodal Digital Engagements

Multimodality has also been conceptualised as a promising avenue for reimagining anthropological practice, and as a reflection on the evolving landscape of media ecology (see Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón 2019). Rooted in the idea of the "(relative) democratization media production" (Collins, Durington, and Gill 2017), multimodality is recognized not only as a methodology but also as a collaborative and experimental approach to connect with diverse audiences and explore various publication formats (Nolas and Varvantakis 2018; Westmoreland 2022). As Harjant Gill has stressed, multimodality not least fosters modes of knowledge production that defy the structural hierarchies research practices are often subject to (Gill 2019). In this context, digital curating in multimodal forms opens avenues for a more experimental use of audio-visual media that "evokes the heterogeneity of anthropological research across multiple platforms and collaborative sites" (Collins, Durington, and Gill 2017, 142). Moving and still images, drawings, designs, and sounds that are (re)combined and presented in novel ways, expand, and reflect upon traditional forms of exhibitions, and transcend geographical constraints.

However, we must not take for granted that collaboration always calls for a close examination of power dynamics in collaborations between diverse actors and professional spheres. Especially in an era in which diversity has become a welcomed flagship campaign inside of institutions (Ahmed 2012), collaborative efforts need to account for the ways in which underlying asymmetries shape the collective process and output. This ranges from personal as well as political and technological biases, to the challenges of economic constraints or the unequal access to resources for research.

Roger Canals introduced the concept of eclectic assemblage in his workshop talk, advocating for relating multiple outcomes and multimodal formats as a bricolage of research, that bring together different actors, discourses, and modes of representation (Canals 2022).

Also Paolo Favero emphasises the potential of multimodal and audio-visual publication formats, with a specific focus on the visual essay and digital visuality in post-digital times (see also Favero 2020). Addressing the post-digital in relation to multimodality, Favero argues that the distinction between the digital and the non-digital is transcended in everyday life. He contends that "we are digitally connected almost all the time, even amidst the most "analogue" of situations. And we are analogue bodies involved in material relations with the surrounding world even when we are online" (Favero 2020, 7):

The multimodal as a means of sensory involvement was also reflected in Shireen Walton's talk. Expanding on the focus of publication in multimodal digital curating, she explored the potential of co-curating to mediate, communicate and indulge in diverse worlds. In her workshop presentation, she shed light on the methodology of two projects she has actively curated over the past decade: photo blogging within and outside Iran, and the intersection of smartphones and ageing in Milan, Italy. Walton presented the varied routes and experimentations she undertook, ranging from digital exhibitions of photo blogs to graphic illustrations and translations. For her, digital multimodal curating encompasses creative methodologies, analytic approaches, and incorporates theoretical and epistemological dimensions [see video minute 37:27], fostering "multiple ways of doing anthropology – and the resulting multiple anthropologies – that create different ways of learning and knowing together" (Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón 2019, 220):

Conclusion

The current developments of digital and multimodal epistemologies in ethnographic research respond to the changing realities and research conditions in a globalized world. In order to engage with the prospective challenges in increasingly mediatized research fields, many scholars feel the need to expand the methodological spectrum and employ more-than-textual research means. They embrace multimodal approaches as an attempt to call into question the hierarchy of venues in academia that still privilege single-authored, text-based monographs and journal articles over collaborative, co-creative, decentring and more egalitarian forms of knowledge production. In this context, digital curating offers new opportunities to undo intellectual dichotomies and hierarchical relations that for long have been inscribed in ethnographic research.

Despite the numerous advantages and possibilities that open up for ethnographic research, we should not neglect the challenges of multimodal methodologies: in numerous instances they do not fit in existing structures of academic institutions and research requirements, and are thus not accounted for as scientific publications by our universities. This criticism is not new, so it is even more surprising that institutions and funding mechanisms still seem to be unable to create when it comes to creating sustainable structures for practice-based research. As a consequence, the use of digital curatorial approaches usually remains a surplus or an “activity on the side” (Westmoreland 2022) to text-based research. Thus, they create new ways of inequality and (self-)exploitation that often remain hidden behind the necessity to present an optimized, digitally curated CV on personal websites or commercial platforms like Academia.edu. Leading us to wonder whether every scholarly social media output can or should be regarded as “curated”? And if so, are we thereby creating new modes of gate keeping and exclusion that become even more complicated when we consider that the distribution of content within these platforms is influenced and shaped by algorithms whose functions most of us are not aware of. Moreover, digital curation can create an ethical dilemma since it frequently has to rely on commercial platforms and applications. This dependency not only raises questions

concerning data protection and copyright issues but also touches issues of sustainability of digital environments. Practices and platforms can be rendered obsolete, both from a media ecological perspective (regarding the socio-technological devices employed) and in an archival perspective (since the technologies employed can be resource-consuming and oftentimes fast-moving regarding technological standards). Furthermore, new hierarchies are inscribed in the use of digital technologies, especially when scholars have to rely on commercial platforms and tools. As Collins et al. (2017: 144) have contended, “the exposure of multimodality to the vicissitudes of capital accumulation, commodification, transformation, transnational circulation, and spectacle serves to critically locate the anthropological enterprise within a political-economic apparatus that the discipline as a whole has paid scant attention to”.

> *Digital curating offers new opportunities to undo intellectual dichotomies and hierarchical relations that for long have been inscribed in ethnographic research.*

Emphasising the intricate complexities of multimodal engagements, Takagarawa et al. (2019) pose a critical question about how and when multimodal and collaborative anthropologies may inadvertently perpetuate, reproduce, or reinforce existing power structures, extractivist logics, experiences of violence and exclusion. They advocate for nuanced critiques of technologies and their infrastructures within the context of a capitalist power system, highlighting as a crucial step to critically examine multimodal encounters (2019, 522). Additionally, they stress the need for a close and critical examination of the disciplinary underpinnings and inheritances of the multimodal approach, acknowledging its embeddedness in global capitalism and technoscience. In resonance with Sara Ahmed’s work, the inclusion of elements such as refusal and disorientation can enhance this analytical process. Extending these insights to multimodal curatorial practices or ‘the curatorial’, such works possess the potential to actively comment on the cultural, historical, and technological dynamics from which they emerge. Multimodal digital curating, in our sense,

therefore, has to be viewed as a relational and ethical practice of care, aligning with the tradition of black and indigenous curators and scholars. Against this backdrop the guiding questions for future engagement with digital curating will be: how it can/does influence and transform ethnographic research in terms of methodology as well as epistemology and knowledge production?

Contributions

Shireen Walton: Multimodal Explorations: Digital (Co-)Curations In And Between Iran And Italy

Larissa-Diana Fuhrmann: Curating Artistic Appropriations Relating to Political Violence

Roger Canals: Research as an Eclectic Assemblage

Rafael Schacter: A Curatorial Methodology for Anthropology

Paolo Favero: When the Old is The New New

Carolin Höfler and Johanna Mehl: Collaborating on Design Processes

Abstract

This paper explores the multifaceted approach of multimodal digital curating, emphasizing its transformative potential in shaping ethnographic encounters and academic knowledge production. Drawing on insights and the talks from the "Multimodal Digital Curating" workshop organized by the Media Anthropology Working Group of the German Association of Social and Cultural Anthropology, this framing paper contextualises our understanding of multimodal digital curating while highlighting key epistemic, ethical, theoretical, and practical dimensions discussed in workshop contributions. Furthermore, we explore the

collaborative nature of digital curating, its experimental potential, and the challenges it presents, including economic constraints, technological biases, sustainability concerns, and power dynamics in collaborations. Ultimately, this report illuminates multimodal digital curating as not only a mode of knowledge production but also a dynamic social practice with far-reaching epistemic implications for the production, dissemination, and reception of anthropological research.

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Denial ain’t just a river in Egypt: On the importance of ambiguity in an authoritarian state

Karin Ahlberg
September, 2022

In 1931, an American newspaper competition asked its readers to submit the best use of the word denial in a sentence. The winner was “Denial ain’t (just) a river in Egypt” (Quote Investigator 2012). A play on the words the Nile and denial, the pun jokingly suggests that someone is in denial. The saying is ensnaring. If the Nile (denial) were only a place in Egypt, denial as a social phenomenon would not exist. There is no way out of the statement without either denying the existence of denial or admitting its presence. Illustrating the convoluted nature of denial, the linguistic enigma presumably never intended to say anything about denial in Egypt. When analyzed as a statement about the world, however, it is spot on. Denials as social strategies and rhetorical devices are integral to Egyptian public and political life; so commonplace that Mariz Tadros (2011) named the country a “Republic of Denial”.

Public denials are infamous for creating bizarre situations. In 2014, a stork ended

up in jail in Upper Egypt. The bird, called Menez, was arrested on suspicion of espionage after a farmer spotted an electronic device on its upper body as it rested by the Nile. Soon, Egyptian and international media started to circulate images of the bird behind bars. The comic drama got more surreal when local authorities denied any wrong doing. The refusal to admit that arresting a bird-spy was an embarrassing mistake prompted satirical commentators to conclude that detaining animals in prisons was standard practice or that the Egyptian authorities made no difference between human and non-human prisoners. The spy bird was released into the wild after spending some time recovering in the bathroom of an ecologist, but it was soon caught again, this time ending up not behind bars, but as soup (Ahlberg 2014).

The story of the stork is just one example of surreal events involving ridiculous public denials. Why then are denials so common in Egypt? What functions do they perform in social and political life? In this post, I suggest that the social power of denial emerges from the concept's capacity to override binary logics, while providing a form of semantic ambiguity that protects the speakers and triggers absurd situations.

According to dictionary definitions, "denying" means "declaring something untrue" or "refusing to admit or acknowledge it." Hence, a speaker can deny a claim because they believe it to be false, but they might just as well deny the claim because they think it is correct. They may have reasons for not acknowledging this – only the speaker knows. As a social strategy and rhetorical device, a denial can provide a form of semantic ambivalence that makes it impossible to gauge the "inner position" of the speaker from a statement alone (Berthomé et al 2012, Carey 2017).

> *In this context, denials offer a semantic shield for the speaker who does not have to disclose what they know or think. […] But absurdity not only lends itself to crude power exertion; feelings of absurdity simultaneously serve to inform people that something is not quite right in the land of the Nile.*

Decades of misrule and impunity in Egypt have nurtured a social and public climate of fear, secrecy and mistrust. Dysfunctional legal procedures and institutions have eroded citizens' expectations when it comes to processes that seek to establish truth, justice or demand accountability (Mbembé 2001, Navaro-Yashin 2002, Cherstich 2014). In this atmosphere, where information is potentially dangerous, telling the truth is not a prime concern. On the contrary, social actors often avoid pinning down another speaker's inner position or revealing their own. In this context, denials offer a semantic shield for the speaker who does not have to disclose what they know or think. Used in this way, acts of denial are not seen as immoral but expected and warranted social strategies to create ambiguities, alliances and protection for oneself or others (Taussig 1999, Wedeen 1999, Johnson 2020). If denials in everyday life emerge from the need to conceal potentially dangerous information/truths, public denials tend to generate absurd or surreal situations due to their blatant disregard for truth. Public denials often mock the truths and undermine people's sense of sanity. They signal a fantastical side to authoritarian politics, in which, for instance, storks can be considered spies. But absurdity not only lends itself to crude power exertion; feelings of absurdity simultaneously serve to inform people that something is not quite right in the land of the Nile.

The smokescreen of the bazaar

My fascination with denials as a social phenomenon emerged during my doctoral research in Egypt's tourism sector in the early 2010s. In the field, I struggled to navigate the social dynamics of denials. I could not get my head around when a denial was a "truthful denial" and when a speaker refused to acknowledge insight into a topic for other reasons. At the time, I spent most of my time in Cairo's tourism bazaars, a social space pregnant with rumours, gossip, and smokescreens. Playing with "truth" was part of everyday entertainment among the shopkeepers in the market (see, Alexander 2017 for comparable game playing in the Turkish bureaucracy). One game involved telling unbelievable stories,

ideally about someone else in the market, and seeing how long it would take for the listener to catch the lie. The excitement of the game, which I did not master, emerged from a shared understanding of information as inherently dangerous (Gilsenan 1976, Carey 2017). According to this rationale, the less people knew about you, the better. The more you knew about others, the better. And the less they knew about *what* you knew, even better. As a form of deep play, however, the seemingly innocent timepass allowed shopkeepers to gauge the validity of rumours, plant suspicion around characters and signal insights into others' affairs.

Denials were important in this environment. Remember, one tenet of the social dynamic rested on pretending to be ignorant of others' affairs. Applied to mundane matters, however, this practice struck me as curious, as if the shopkeepers were lying for the sake of lying. I was flustered when my best friend, the shopkeeper Hussein, subjected me to such a denial. After a visit to a factory supplying products for his souvenir shop, I expressed surprise over the rather decent salaries that the workers had reported, to which Hussein cryptically responded, "If you say so." Later, when I learned that the salaries cited were indeed gross exaggerations, I was not surprised. By then, I had realized that any statement in such encounters had to be critically assessed in relation to context and speaker. But I was nonetheless annoyed by Hussein's behaviour.

When I confronted Hussein about why he had denied insight into the workers' salaries, he laughingly told me how stupid I had been to believe the workers in the first place. Then he just shrugged. "Like me, you have to find out who you can trust, and who you can't. Time will tell." It was comforting to realize that I was not alone in the struggle to navigate the social politics of denial and misinformation. It was less reassuring to discover that one of my closest interlocutors could be so disconcertingly economical with the truth. More importantly, this time by direct confrontation, I had managed to pin down Hussein's inner position. I had also established that his denial was not "truthful" but clearly "intended"; spoken with the aim of concealing the truth. I was upset. Later I understood that my anger stemmed from a western principle of truth-

correspondence, and the notion that lying is fundamentally immoral, at least when you don't have good reasons for it.

> *In a climate where information is potentially dangerous and talking is associated with a risk of social repercussion or punishment, social actors are guided by the principle of secrecy-exposure rather than truth-lying.*

But hierarchies of principles differ. In a climate where information is potentially dangerous and talking is associated with a risk of social repercussion or punishment, social actors are guided by the principle of secrecy-exposure rather than truth-lying. In Hussein's world, what was fundamentally immoral was to reveal information about others. If Hussein had told me what he knew about the workers' salaries, he would not only disclose information that the workers had chosen not to share, but he would also reveal that they had been meddling with the truth in their interaction with me (cf. Carey 2017). In this social dynamic, lying is still seen as immoral, but *not* revealing information is different to a direct lie. We can see how denials offer a way out of this dilemma. When I confronted Hussein, I put him in a difficult situation. Either he had to lie or admit that he had been lying. Up until then, he had been protected by the semantic ambiguity of denials.

In everyday life, denials provide a smokescreen around the subject who can conceal their insights into potentially dangerous information without being untruthful or lying. The relation to truth is also key to understand why public denials propel absurd situations. Scaled up to the level of national politics, public denials tend to create absurdity because of their blatant disregard for truth and truthfulness.

Notes on the prison-hotel complex

In the summer of 2023, Moushira Mahmoud Khattab, the President of Egypt's

National Council for Human Rights (NCHR), spoke to the media following allegations of mistreatment and deplorable conditions in the Wadi al-Natrun prison. Khattab refuted the accusations by arguing that the high-security prison was like a five-star hotel (Aladam 2023). Given the regime's record on human rights abuses, the comparison came across as tragi-comic to many observers. Further investigation would be needed to determine whether Khattab really believed that allegations of prisoner mistreatment were false (a truthful denial) or if she indeed knew that they were true but evaded responsibility by refusing to admit this publicly (an intended denial). And yet, the truthfulness of Khattab's denial was in many ways irrelevant. In a context where citizens' expectation to hold public actors accountable for their actions or words are low, no-one expected her to speak the truth. Still, her statement was not just empty talk. As a rhetorical device, her denial served to remodel the playing field. Writing an official narrative according to which the standard of the country's prisons is impeccable *per default* means that accusations of substandard conditions can be written off without further investigation. Through this circular argumentation, institutional responsibility is not only evaded: the burden of proof shifts back to those presenting the allegations – now with a "slightly" more difficult task: to prove that prisons are *not* hotels (cf. Lazarus-Black 2001).

This audacious disregard for truth is also what makes Khattab's denial eerily absurd. Put simply, the fact that the President of Egypt's National Council for Human Rights can liken prisons to hotels in conversation with the media in the first place is a cruel display of a power. While the public denial related to the bird behind bars exacerbated an already absurd situation, Khattab's denial instead ensnared the public in a twisted reality that undermined further conversation. Should journalists now provide evidence that prisons are not hotels? How do you engage in a conversation about improving society when people in power refer openly and shamelessly to a make-believe world? What becomes of people's life-worlds when there are no public institutions or mechanisms to determine what is reasonably real?

In the Land of the Absurd, Something Is Not Quite Right

In Egypt, as in other authoritarian states, reality can be unbelievable and still be part of ordinary life. It is both normal and hilarious that a bird ends up in a human prison. It is dark yet ordinary that authorities equate prisons to hotels. Albert Camus (1942) wrote that states of absurdity reveal a crack in social reality. People experiencing absurd situations of this kind can inhabit a dual position: they are both social protagonists in the event *and* spectators removed from the taken-for-granted reality. As social protagonists, people are often primarily pragmatic, constrained to navigating life within current norms, conditions and limitations. As spectators, however, social actors can also analyse a situation from an outsider's perspective, using as analytical tools the social and ethical predispositions that tell them how things ought to unfold. As the philosopher Thomas Nagel (1971, 722) pointed out, "In ordinary life … we do not judge a situation absurd unless we have in mind some standards of seriousness, significance, or harmony with which the absurd can be contrasted."

> *But as several contributions in this Thematic thread highlight, absurd events can be integral to everyday life, incorporated in "the order of things," (Bourdieu 1990) without losing their generative power to indicate that something is not "quite right."*

If feelings of absurdity emerge from a rupture in the social fabric, one might assume that such states are exceptional. But as several contributions in this Thematic thread highlight, absurd events can be integral to everyday life, incorporated in "the order of things," (Bourdieu 1990) *without* losing their generative power to indicate that something is not "quite right." Understood in this way, the presence of the absurd indicates a mismatch between "what is" and "what ought to be." This dissonance is also reflected in the ambivalent meaning attached to the concept of "normality" in Egyptian Arabic. People employ the term descriptively to refer to everyday reality ("what is"), but equally use the

term to refer to how things *should be* (Kreil and Schielke 2023).

We can now begin to understand why denial and absurdity frequently go hand in hand in Egyptian public life. Both denial and absurdity can be used as tools of oppression, but feelings of absurdity also signal sanity in skewed realities. Denials, on the other hand, offer semantic ambiguity to speakers who can thereby concomitantly indicate one thing, its opposite, or something in-between. Because of this capacity, they allow actors in power and citizens alike to navigate the opaque arbitrariness created by impunity and misrule while trying to evade trouble. If the pun 'Denial ain't just a river in Egypt' never had an ambition to say something about denial in Egypt, as a statement about the world, it aptly captures reality in the land of the Nile.

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Afterlives of revolution: Alice Wilson’s response

Alice Wilson
September, 2022

I first visited the Dhufar region of southern Oman in 2013. I was soon to learn that some residents were discussing the future of the exiled former opposition leader. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Qadi had been the secretary general of the revolutionary liberation front that gripped Dhufar from 1965 to 1976. Would al-Qadi end nearly four decades of exile, and return to Oman as a loyal subject of the Sultan? Some in Dhufar speculated that the government was intensifying its efforts to persuade al-Qadi to return. One former revolutionary suggested to me that “this story” – the story of the revolution – “is not over until he comes”. This comment seemingly

suggested that, until al-Qadi joined the ranks of coopted former militants, the government considered the revolution's defeat incomplete. By the time I returned to Dhufar in 2015, al-Qadi was back living in Oman – and many believed that the government kept him under close watch. But even then, was the story of the revolution "over"?

My five months of fieldwork in Oman in 2015 led me to question the very possibility of whether this revolution – and others that meet with overwhelming repression – can ever be "over". I learned that some former militants, and later generations of Omanis, reproduced revolutionary values of social egalitarianism, and drew on these values in transformational projects of personal and national significance. These lasting legacies of revolution struck me as a vital – yet neglected – part of the story of when revolution meets with defeat.

> *Yet what becomes of former revolutionaries, their values, social networks, and relationships, after military defeat?*

Most accounts of revolution (including Oman's) focus, understandably, on events at the time. Yet what becomes of former revolutionaries, their values, social networks, and relationships, *after* military defeat? And when revolutionary legacies survive repression, what are the wider implications? In order to address these questions, my book, *Afterlives of Revolution: Everyday Counterhistories in Southern Oman*, extends the timeline of analysis beyond events during revolution. It offers the first extended study of the postwar lives of former revolutionaries in Oman. It draws on the revolution's legacies to rethink its histories and meanings, in an "effort toward decolonizing narratives of revolution and counterinsurgency".

My aim was to highlight a continuation of the revolution and its significance, beyond the conventional timeline of its ending – its "death" – with its military defeat in 1976. With this in mind, the book explores legacies that survive repression as "afterlives" of revolution. The careful readings and insightful commentaries on the book by Nathalie Peutz, Fatemeh Sadeghi, and Nikkie Wiegink further probe the significance of afterlives: for revolution and

counterinsurgency, (post)conflict transitions, and social, political, and economic transformations in southern Arabia and beyond.

Retrieving revolution

As I interacted with aging former revolutionaries living in the Sultanate, I learned how some of them continued to reproduce distinctive revolutionary values of social egalitarianism in their daily lives. Kinship practices, everyday socialising, and social rituals repurposed as unofficial commemoration were among the interactions about which, from my positionality, I was able to learn.

Such survivals were no foregone conclusion. A bloody, British-backed, and increasingly internationalised counterinsurgency war repressed the revolution, campaigning over time to win locals' "hearts and minds". The postwar Sultanate repressed the freedoms of expression and association of all Omanis. Figures of dissent such as the exiled al-Qadi were the targets of government cooptation. Yet despite all this, revolutionary values survived into postwar times.

> *Surviving revolutionary values, however, question claims of resounding counterinsurgency success.*

The implications of these findings are significant, especially given conventional depictions of the counterinsurgency in Dhufar as an allegedly "model campaign" that won "hearts and minds". Surviving revolutionary values, however, question claims of resounding counterinsurgency success. Rather, afterlives show how revolution comprises extended times, spaces, and impacts beyond military defeat. It follows that counterinsurgency violence and even supposedly "exemplary" efforts to win "hearts and minds" fall short of erasing long-term engagement with revolutionary values.

How can we conceptualise these legacies of revolution? For ethnographers, that question is inseparable from how Omanis, including former revolutionaries who occupy heterogeneous positions in postwar Oman, conceptualise the

revolutionary past and its legacies.

Addressing these questions proved no easy task. The Sultanate surveils all Omanis. It represses perceived or actual (former) dissidents. It has expunged the revolution (and other episodes of dissent) from official historical narratives. These conditions constrained the possibilities for inquiry into, and writing about, revolutionary legacies. The fact that Britain had been the informal imperial power, the major backer and orchestrator of the counterinsurgency, and an architect and close ally of postwar authoritarian rule, also made some research participants cautious in their interactions with me, a British researcher. As such, and as Wiegink points out, one of the tasks to which *Afterlives of Revolution* can aspire is to help open up further conversations about the legacies – in Oman and beyond – of revolution after military defeat.

Fortunately, the book was able to follow the lead of Omanis who courageously engage with the revolution outside the confines of government censorship. They and their peers avidly discuss landmark works about the revolution authored outside Oman. The insistence of many Omanis on retrieving the significance of the revolution speaks to the hopes that Omani political scientist Khalid Al-Azri has voiced, and that I cautiously share: namely, that engaging with sensitive topics is "worthwhile" to the extent that "overcoming such fears [of repression]" has "huge potential for changing the current status quo" in Oman.

Offering an account of the legacies of this revolution and their diverse meanings remains a challenging task, though. Frequently, former militants warned me against probing the revolution and its legacies, telling me "there is no benefit" in such inquiry. Some were understandably reluctant to discuss the revolution and its legacies with me. Yet these warnings and truncated conversations contrasted with publicly visible daily interactions that, in their own way, spoke volumes. Some former militants, and family members, remained committed to revolutionary social values.

Afterlives under authoritarianism

I initially wrote about these ongoing legacies as a [“social afterlife of revolution”](). As Sadeghi notes, by emphasising continuing significance beyond military defeat, I questioned the familiar distinction between “successful” and “failed” revolutions. Afterlives highlight instead how both revolutions that oust incumbents (the “successful”) and those that do not (the “failed”) can go on to have lasting impacts. Sadeghi further disrupts the successful/failed distinction by arguing that ousting an incumbent, or “taking place” (e.g. Iran in 1979), can diverge from the path of “happening”, or enacting liberatory agendas (e.g. Dhufar 1965-1976 and thereafter). Her suggestion is a powerful prism for rethinking the maps and timelines of where revolutions have happened and are happening still.

In placing emphasis on a *social* afterlife, I was mindful of risks for research participants. Those I met were living not in exile or in a postwar multi-party transition, but under the kind of authoritarian rule that they had once contested, and that continued to police actual or perceived dissent. Such repressive conditions may foreclose veteran militants from pursuing or speaking at length, at least with me, about revolutionary legacies, especially in areas of political, religious, and economic life that attract close government scrutiny. An analysis that explored such legacies might pose risks of increased surveillance for research participants. Indeed, I make no argument that everyday practices of former revolutionaries posed resistance of concern to the Omani state.

> *This pluralisation foregrounds the diversity of forms that legacies took, as well as the heterogeneity of former militants’ positionality, willingness, and capabilities with regard to creating revolutionary afterlives.*

Over the course of writing the book, early concerns about the implications of my argument for the safety of Omani research participants only grew, in line with ongoing [political repression]() in the Sultanate. But what changed was, as Wiegink notes, my shift to write of “after*lives*” of revolution (p. 10). This pluralisation foregrounds the diversity of forms that legacies took, as well as the heterogeneity of former militants’ positionality, willingness, and capabilities with regard to

creating revolutionary afterlives. Anthropologist Jessica Winegar notes a “privilege of revolution”, spanning class, gender, and other intersectional identities, that underpins participation in iconic revolutionary spaces. Dhufaris’ experiences suggest a relative “privilege of revolutionary afterlives” (p. 198), in which intersectional positioning can again favour or foreclose the very possibility of reproducing revolutionary values.

Material and social landscapes

Peutz’s and Wiegink’s commentaries draw attention to alternative, parallel afterlives of revolution. These range from the built environment to the postwar lives of other groups of former participants in the conflict. The transforming wartime and postwar spaces of Dhufar have indeed engendered material and infrastructural afterlives of revolution, as Wiegink contemplates. For instance, the changing landscapes reflect the efforts of the counterinsurgency and the postwar government to relocate populations from the mountain hinterland, that was the heartland of revolutionary support, to more easily controllable coastal areas (p. 98-136).

Dhufaris nevertheless infused these spaces with meanings that diverged from counterinsurgency agendas and discourses. Some Dhufaris opted for resistance, such as when they rejected accommodation that the government had allocated to them (p. 126). Others cultivated homeliness in their new abodes, personalising neighbourhoods through everyday reciprocity (p. 133). Some speculated as to whether the counterinsurgency agenda had constrained, rather than accelerated, Dhufar’s economic development; had the government delayed building a container port in the southern capital Salalah until 1998 out of reluctance to provide Dhufaris with an economic base for potential independence (p. 130)? In other words, might some afterlives take the spectral form of absent yet longed-for infrastructure?

Meanwhile, all-male evening gatherings in Dhufar that take place outside cafés and on street corners include groups of former pro-government paramilitaries,

such as the Socotran veterans whom Peutz met. The brigades of southern Arabians who took up arms for the government (who include former revolutionaries who changed sides) were organised along tribal lines. This fragmentation prefigured the postwar socialising along lines of a specific ethnic identity that Peutz witnessed.

These alternative postconflict afterlives among former pro-government paramilitaries, who gather in ethnically-specific groups, reiterate the distinctive inclusiveness of the everyday socialising among former revolutionaries whom I met (p. 183). The afterlives of pro-government paramilitaries is an area of further research that promises fascinating insights into postconflict dynamics. In future writing, I seek to contribute to these discussions through an analysis of the role of pro-government paramilitaries in the Sultanate's repression of demonstrators who occupied Salalah's streets from February to May 2011.

Moving concepts

Wiegink identifies rich potential for an expanded analysis of afterlives that explores notions of haunting, trauma, transcendence, and religion. She contemplates that, given the sensitivities that I encountered in Dhufar, *Afterlives of Revolution* can lay grounds for such future conceptual work. Her query brings my thoughts back to questions of how Omanis themselves conceptualise the legacies of their revolutionary past – and the inspiration those understandings provide for further analysis.

In their own words – in admittedly strained circumstances – research participants spoke with me of values such as egalitarianism (*al-musawah*), the common good (*al-maslahah al-'ammah*), and an interest in challenging social stratification and segregation. A notion of afterlives was a metaphor that, subsequently, I brought to the analysis. I have since reflected that I was perhaps inspired by a postwar publication of 1979 that campaigned for international solidarity with Oman's exiled revolutionaries in South Yemen, and that took the title "The revolution is alive". My fieldwork in 2015 seemed to speak, rather, of a different quality of

ongoing presence that I sought to capture with “afterlives”.

Wiegink’s insightful commentary invites me to revisit the significance of the themes she identifies for Omanis. For many of them, the revolution and counterinsurgency were laden with experiences of haunting and trauma. When some Dhufaris surveyed postwar landscapes of the city and the mountains, they remembered wartime confinement and concealment (p. 120, 221). One elderly woman was still disturbed by memories of the British military personnel who had raided her home looking for a relative in the liberation movement (p. 26). Several people warned me not to ask about the front’s internal executions (p. 85). As Omani novelist Bushra Khalfan has aptly evoked, the revolutionary past, state violence to repress it, and the government’s refusal to acknowledge that past, are like a “wound” that, whilst it remains “covered”, will be “always present and deep” (p. 243).

The feelings that the revolutionary past provoked were not exclusively painful, though. One person assured me that former militants felt “no remorse” that their participation in the revolution had led them to sacrifice for the greater good (p. 134). Meanwhile, former militant Zahran al-Sarimi writes of revolutionary ideas continuing “like wildfire” (p. 236). Do not convictions of sacrifice endured, and the unstoppable force of wildfire, evoke transcendence, specifically of the silencing and condemnation of the revolution?

The question of religion is especially fraught with regard to this conflict and its aftermath. Government propaganda positioned the revolutionaries as “godless communists”, against a counterinsurgency that claimed to defend Islam. As such, one legacy from Dhufar is the instrumentalisation of militarised Islam in counterinsurgency and proxy wars – a policy that has gone on to have truly global afterlives.

The role of religion in the lives of former revolutionaries is a similarly charged topic. Might postwar religiosity imply distance from former militantism, and submission to the state authorities that (like so many in the region) claim an

authority derived from their defence of the "right" Islam? Or, to what extent might drawing attention to any absence of religiosity among former militants expose them not only to social stigma, but also to more intense suspicion on the part of the state?

During my fieldwork, the stakes were high; they made questions of religion especially sensitive – and, accordingly, made me particularly interested in the analysis of Dhufari researcher Mona Jabob regarding the postwar religiosity of former female revolutionaries (p. 189). Their postwar conservativism contrasts starkly with earlier images of "liberated" revolutionary women. In hindsight, Jabob notes, female former militants problematise how the revolution pressured them to embrace the gender emancipation that it promoted.

But might the postwar social conservativism of some former revolutionaries also reflect experiences of living under governmental repression? A relative of one veteran female revolutionary recalled to me that when the woman in question eventually returned to Oman, she first adopted modest clothing in the context of her encounter with the authoritarian state. Security officers laid out a long black outer garment (*'abayah*) while telling this woman: "this is what you will wear" (p. 129). How might the religious afterlives of female former revolutionaries signal the historical and ongoing impact of a coercive, authoritarian state in their lives?

> *The religious practices of female former revolutionaries are especially complex afterlives that seemingly transcend not just revolutionary pressures, but also postwar authoritarianism and patriarchal norms.*

This possibility does not, however, prevent female former militants from continuing to subvert conservative gender norms. Postwar religiosity, by signalling conformity with religious conservatism, provides these women with a form of social legitimacy. That respectability extends protection to those who continue to disrupt patriarchal restrictions on women's circulation in public – notably in ways that reverberate with earlier revolutionary emancipatory agendas (p. 189). The religious practices of female former revolutionaries are especially

complex afterlives that seemingly transcend not just revolutionary pressures, but also postwar authoritarianism and patriarchal norms.

When is a revolution “over”?

Afterlives – perhaps by their very open-ended nature – necessarily invite further inquiry and conceptual elaboration. In beginning a discussion on afterlives of revolution, my book engages with questions that Omanis have faced: was the revolution “alive” after its military defeat? When would the story of the revolution be “over”? Revolution’s afterlives prompt us to keep asking many questions.

Afterlives of Revolution: Nathalie Peutz’s comments

Nathalie Peutz
September, 2022

In the mid-2000s, while conducting ethnographic fieldwork on the impact of environmental conservation and development projects on the Yemeni island of Socotra, I took a short break from village life to visit Socotrans living in Oman and the United Arab Emirates. It was August and the monsoon winds and rains that had swept across Dhufar, Oman’s southernmost governorate, had transformed its mountainous hinterlands into a misty, verdant pasture. I felt as if I had been transported to the Scottish Highlands—so distinct was this area from its surrounding deserts. My Socotran hosts relished the monsoon greenery and cool climate, too. Like many other residents of Salalah, Dhufar’s coastal capital, they had erected a tent in the plain stretching between the coastal towns and the rising escarpment. There, in what appeared like a makeshift tent city situated across the highway from a bustling fairground, they spent much of the monsoon season socialising with friends in their respective tents.

Many of my hosts’ friends were fellow Socotrans: middle-aged men and women

who had fled the island in the late 1960s and early 1970s to escape the socialist revolution that gave birth to the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY or "South Yemen"). The male Socotrans had not just fled together; they had also waged war together. As I would learn attending gatherings of Socotrans exiled in Oman and the UAE, these men had been members of the pro-government paramilitary battalions (*firqah/firaq*) deployed by Oman's British-backed Sultan to quell the socialist revolution in Dhufar (1965-1976). Between 1971 and 1974, a "unity" *firqah* of some 100 Socotrans and 50 Mahris fought against the PDRY-supported revolutionaries—and so, against their own state—with the belief that Sultan Qaboos would help them liberate Socotra in return. When the war ended, the *firqah* members remained in Oman and or moved to the UAE and were rewarded with citizenship, homes, reservist salaries, and government jobs. But it was only after the fall of the PDRY government in 1990, and the decisive victory over the Socialist Party during Yemen Civil war in 1994, that these self-exiled Socotrans felt it was safe enough to visit their island home. In the meantime, and in the decade that followed, the Socotrans' everyday socialising with their former fellow combatants was one of the many legacies, or afterlives, of Dhufar's "revolution-in-progress."

Afterlives of Revolution invites us to consider how former revolutionaries reproduce lasting "values, networks, ideas, and legacies" that persist long after military defeat, despite their own revolutionary shortcomings, and in the face of authoritarian repression. Focusing on the men and women who had fought on behalf of Dhufar's anti-colonial liberation movement ("the Front"), Alice Wilson's meticulously researched ethnography demonstrates how revolutionary pasts continue to haunt and inspire. It does so by attending closely to the ways in which the Dhufari revolutionary values of social egalitarianism and emancipation were and continue to be reproduced through everyday interactions, such as daily social gatherings, post-war kinship ties, and unofficial commemorations, in addition to some extraordinary acts. Indeed, it was a debate over how to commemorate the officially-silenced executions of the Socotran Sultan's family members in 1974 that drew me to Salalah a quarter century later to find Socotrans discussing this

still festering “wound.”

Such everyday interactions help forge and maintain the counterhistories that, elucidated through Wilson’s deft analysis, destabilise conventional narratives about Oman, about Gulf monarchies, and about revolutionary experience, writ large. But they also reveal the inherent contradictions, problematic outcomes, and conflicting visions that beset the Dhufar revolution from its outset. Revolutionary social change, Wilson shows us, is messy and complex. It is messy when the anti-colonial, anti-imperialist Front that espoused the abolition of slavery, the emancipation of women, and more egalitarian social relationships relied on child combatants, internal violence, and a gendered division of labor. It is messy when these initiatives toward emancipation did not begin or end with the Front and when Dhufaris claimed that they (not the Sultan) won the war. It is messy when the pro-sultanate battalion of Socotran and Mahri fighters took up arms against their own state in a battle on foreign soil. Far from being symptomatic of failure, Wilson argues, these and other contradictions signal the diversity of revolutionary experiences, the Dhufaris’ agency in producing and navigating social change, and the depth of their ongoing engagement with revolutionary values long after the war’s official end. The messiness, in other words, is an invitation to anthropologists to focus less on what sparks revolution and more on what survives it: a timely provocation in these “post” 2011-2012 revolutionary times.

Indeed, Wilson’s gripping book is a welcome, multifaceted invitation to students and scholars of the MENA region and beyond to re-evaluate both revolutionary change and authoritarian resilience through today’s increasing attentiveness to intersectionality, temporality, and space. Not only does it enrich our understanding of the officially-silenced but internationally significant Dhufar Revolution; it invites us to broaden the temporal, spatial, social, and political scales through which we comprehend revolutions and their outcomes. Not only does it offer a new perspective on the limitations of patronage in Gulf monarchies; it invites us to be more attuned to enduring social distinctions, intersectionality, and also embodied race (blackness) in the Arabian Peninsula. Not only does it interrogate Oman’s foundational myth of the Qaboos-led renaissance; it invites us

to be more perceptive of the unofficial if ambiguous commemorations that exist outside of official museum exhibits despite being silenced by hegemonic histories.

These invitations certainly inspired me to re-visit the everyday social interactions I witnessed briefly in Salalah: ordinary interactions that extend from and outlive extraordinary events. Offering a refreshing perspective on classical anthropological themes—kinship, social reproduction, the everyday, and matter(s) out of place—Alice Wilson invites her readers to experience the productive messiness (and the privilege) of anthropological fieldwork as a way of joining her interlocutors in imagining alternative horizons. In this, *Afterlives of Revolution* is also testament to the enduring value of the anthropological project.

Afterlives of revolution: Nikkie Wiegink's comments

Nikkie Wiegink
September, 2022

"The struggle continues" is a famous and frequently repeated phrase attributed to Eduardo Mondlane, the first President of FRELIMO, the Mozambican Liberation Front that fought against Portuguese colonial rule. After independence, this rally cry was used to mobilise support for building the newly independent state, evoking how revolutionary ideals and objectives "live on". But what happens to revolutions when they are silenced? What is the potency of revolutions when they have officially been declared "dead"? What remains of those who were part of such revolutionary movements?

In *Afterlives of Revolution: Everyday Counterhistories in Southern Oman*, Alice Wilson takes up these questions and prompts the reader to think of revolutions and their legacies beyond polarising narratives of failure and success. The book zooms in on counterhistories of former militants in the Dhufar region of Oman, where a liberation movement referred to as "the Front" was established in 1965. The Front was defeated in 1975 and, since then, the ruling Sultan Qaboos'

authoritarian government has prohibited any public mentioning of the revolution or the Front and its participants. This probes Wilson to ask, "how those living under authoritarianism experience and create revolutionary aftermaths?" (4). Her book delves deep into "the lasting values, networks, ideas, and legacies" (4) that constitute the afterlives of revolution in Dhufar. In doing so, it expands our understanding of the diverse ways in which revolutionary projects can continue to shape (future) emancipatory projects. Consequently, the book offers an exciting theoretical exploration of revolutions and provides new conceptual tools, fresh analytical insight, and methodological guidance for studying the aftermaths of political upheaval and the experience of those ensnared within them.

> *Not fitting the official revolutionary narrative of either success of failure and of precise beginnings and endings, messiness allows for the possibility of social change before a revolutionary program, for fleeting, everyday revolutionary vernacularisations, and for understanding people's relations to the revolutionary movement beyond an analysis of either support or rejection.*

The book's first chapters present a thoughtful re-narration of the Dhufar war and the proposal to "explore revolutionary social change as 'messiness'" (63). Not fitting the official revolutionary narrative of either success of failure and of precise beginnings and endings, messiness allows for the possibility of social change *before* a revolutionary program, for fleeting, everyday revolutionary vernacularisations, and for understanding people's relations to the revolutionary movement beyond an analysis of either support or rejection. These messy identifications reflect in the plurality of after*lives* of revolutions and are part of the intersectional diversity in which these afterlives unfold. This is a very helpful starting point for the rest of the book, but also for the broader analysis of the experiences of those who partake in revolutionary and other kinds of (armed) revolt. The messiness is also, in my reading, reflected in the Sultanate's wartime and postwar co-optation of revolutionaries through patronage and a variety of unevenly distributed "packages". These benefits, and the infrastructural transformation of Dhufar in general, reveal the political drivers of the Sultanate to

win the “hearts and minds” of Dhufaris, Wilson argues. It would be interesting to interrogate the extent to which these benefits and the transformation of space also, in their own way, constitute counterhistories or signal certain afterlives of armed conflict – including revolution and counterinsurgency – in a context of official silence.

Wilson takes the reader to street corners, taxi rides, and on a stroll through a mall, finding bits and piece of afterlives of revolution in jokes, careless references, repurposed rituals, and kinship relations that are “out of place”.

Wilson’s main focus lies with the social dimensions and personal transformations of revolutionary projects and how these may be socially reproduced. In a context of political repression that prevents public commemoration and references to the Front and the war, where to find afterlives of revolution? Wilson takes the reader to street corners, taxi rides, and on a stroll through a mall, finding bits and piece of afterlives of revolution in jokes, careless references, repurposed rituals, and kinship relations that are “out of place”. Wilson shows that we can look for afterlives of revolution in less obvious places of political mobilisation: in the intimate realm of kinship (chapter 4), in everyday forms of socialising (chapter 5), and alternative forms of commemoration (chapter 6). She evokes the deeply stratified Dhufar society to grasp the weight of how friendships and affinities of former revolutionaries transgress dominant social hierarchies of gender, social status, tribe, ethnicity, and race.

The relevance of exploring the social dimensions of afterlives of revolution becomes prominent in Wilson’s detailed and careful ethnography, exemplified in her discussion of wartime and postwar kinship relationships. During the war, one of the ways in which the Front attempted to introduce counterhegemonic values of egalitarianism and non-tribalism was by supporting marriages across different social categories. In the postwar period, Wilson shows some of the subtle ways in which revolutionary ideas and relations are reflected in marriages between former revolutionaries, in the naming of children after former revolutionaries, and

in postwar marriages between children of former revolutionaries. She pays keen attention to "kinship out of place" in almost off-hand references to family histories and other intricacies of everyday interactions. Wilson shows how these kinship practices thereby sustain counterhegemonic social values and counterhistories of revolution while not being seen as forms of resistance against the dominant order.

Importantly, Wilson refrains from romanticising such practices and is attuned to the intersectional diversity within afterlives of the revolution. She underscores the constraints and privileges inherent in social practices that make up such afterlives. To illustrate, Wilson takes the reader to nightly informal gatherings of male former revolutionaries of different social and tribal status. These everyday social interactions form a unique sight in the streets of Salalah. They perpetuate revolutionary values such as social egalitarianism and can be regarded as a form of subversion of dominant social hierarchies in Dhufar. Simultaneously, these all-male gatherings expose privilege and the incomplete realisation of revolutionary values, such as gender equality, as female former revolutionaries were not able to partake in such public socialisations. This is one of the many examples of fine-grained ethnography by which the book shows compellingly the ambiguous, "small-scale" but nonetheless significant afterlives of revolution. By turning to the vitality of revolutions in dreams, ideas, and networks, the book opens new avenues for studying aftermaths of political upheaval and their impact on those involved.

> *Her careful discussions of ethical dilemmas in fieldwork and in writing, are exemplary for those seeking to study counterhistories of revolutions or other forms of political upheaval in authoritarian states.*

Moreover, by expanding the temporal and spatial horizons of revolutionary experiences and legacies, the book demonstrates the conceptual significance of the notion "afterlives" beyond mere metaphor.[1] Yet the concept of afterlives also evokes questions of haunting, trauma, transcendence, and religion, which are not—or could not be—addressed extensively in the book. These omissions do not

diminish the power of the book's arguments, but instead highlight the potential for a broader research agenda on “afterlives of revolution” beyond the scope of this study. Moreover, Wilson is throughout the book consistently conscious and explicit about the limitations of her research and interpretations. She shows the many ways in which official silence regarding the Front shaped her ability to study its afterlives. Her careful discussions of ethical dilemmas in fieldwork and in writing, are exemplary for those seeking to study counterhistories of revolutions or other forms of political upheaval in authoritarian states. By allowing room for alternative interpretations and ambiguity, Alice Wilson's arguments result even more convincing. Revolutionary afterlives remain ongoing and open-ended. By turning our attention to the social and everyday dimensions of these ongoing legacies, Alice Wilson breaks open the analysis of revolutions, especially in places where these are silenced.

[1] Schäfers, Marlene. May. 2020. ‘Afterlives: An Introduction.’ *Allegra Lab.* https://allegralaboratory.net/afterlives-introduction/

Afterlives of Revolution: Fatemeh Sadeghi's comments

Fatemeh Sadeghi
September, 2022

The Dhufar Revolution in Oman (1965-1976) was an attempt to depose the British-backed Sultan and implement social ideals based on egalitarianism. But the revolution was suppressed by the government, its British backers, and other allies.

Ever since, dominant narratives about this event have celebrated the revolution's demise. Until recently, the most significant exception in this trend has been Abdel Razzaq Takriti's *Monsoon Revolution: Republicans, Sultans, and Empires in Oman, 1965-1976* (2013). Alice Wilson's *Afterlives of Revolution: Everyday Counterhistories in Southern Oman* is another significant publication that sheds light on different aspects of the Dhufar revolution and its legacy. Continuing the story beyond the timeframe of Takriti's study, Wilson examines the long-lasting impacts of the revolution which left an unmistakable trace on Oman and its people.

Based on ethnographic research in Oman, *Afterlives of Revolution* questions narratives of revolutionary defeat and counterinsurgency triumph. It brings to light the suppressed counterhistories of former revolutionaries' wartime and post-war experiences. The book answers the question of what happens to ideas and people when a revolution is suppressed, but revolutionary ideals are not. It explores the lasting legacy of the Dhufar Revolution and breaks the official silence in Oman regarding these events.

> *By carefully exploring the archives, narratives, and accounts of former revolutionaries, and those of new generations, Wilson familiarises us with the untold, yet significant stories of a "forgotten" revolution and its revolutionaries.*

Counterinsurgency actors and the official narratives of Oman's government cast the Dhufar revolutionaries as "godless communists", "terrorists", "destabilisers of the country", and a "threat to stability and morality" (p. 200). By carefully exploring the archives, narratives, and accounts of former revolutionaries, and those of new generations, Wilson familiarises us with the untold, yet significant stories of a "forgotten" revolution and its revolutionaries. According to the counterinsurgency, the revolutionary spirit was lost. However, Wilson traces how former revolutionaries still drew on revolutionary values. And during the Arab Uprisings in north Africa and southwest Asia, demonstrations also broke out in Oman, where protesters demanded political, economic, and social reform.

For those who follow Iranian history and politics, the Dhufar revolution is particularly fascinating because of, on the one hand, the Pahlavi monarchy's involvement in counterinsurgency and, on the other, the contribution of Iranian leftist guerrillas to the revolution. The latter include the sisters Rafat and Mahboubeh Afraz whose experiences are reflected in the memoir of Mahboubeh Afraz, who was a doctor. This memoir is particularly important because Afraz witnessed first-hand the effects of counterinsurgency forces' violence, such as depriving civilians, including children, of food in order to crush revolutionary resistance. The presence of the Afraz sisters in Dhufar, as well as other initiatives

of female revolutionaries that the book retrieves, illuminate women’s diverse ways of participating in the revolution beyond the iconic images of female guerrilla fighters.

The Dhufar revolution served as a proxy war between the Iranian government and its leftist opposition. While the Afraz sisters’ memoirs have already been published in Persian, we are not familiar with the stories and experiences of the revolutionaries. Conventional narratives typically polarise revolutionary outcomes based on success/failure. *Afterlives of Revolution* questions this reductionist account. While dominant approaches mainly focus on the roots and causes of the revolutions and question when an uprising should be called a revolution, this book raises different questions. Instead of asking “what makes a revolution?”, it asks “what survives of revolution?”.

Inadequacy of the Success/Failure Account

The book illustrates that the belief that Dhufar’s revolution was defeated or failed is incomplete at best. The concept of afterlives brings into view a broader vision of revolutionary ideals, values, and aspirations to create a different, more egalitarian future and social relations, and how these ideals outlast repression. Instead of polarising and reductionist discourses of victory versus defeat, afterlives demand a re-evaluation of the revolutionary experience.

The contribution of *Afterlives of Revolution* is to show that these transformations have had lasting effects beyond the revolution. As the book demonstrates, in post-war Oman, former participants cultivated egalitarian values in their personal lives, drew on revolutionary values when they went on to work in development projects, and transformed the gender dynamics of labour force participation.

> *The concept of afterlives broadens the spatial and temporal horizons of revolutionary experiences as well as theories on revolution.*

While the book is about the long-lasting legacies of the Dhufar Revolution, its

framework can also be applied to other contexts and other revolutions in southwest Asia and north Africa and their legacies. The concept of afterlives broadens the spatial and temporal horizons of revolutionary experiences as well as theories on revolution. Below, I open a dialogue with this book through my own study of the Iranian revolution and the existing situation in Iran.

Afterlives as Happening of Revolutions

Dissatisfaction with the dichotomous account based on success/ failure is one of the obstacles to the study of revolutions. This is well illustrated in the study of the Iranian Revolution and radical political movements in Iran today. This dichotomy reduces the experience of revolution to binary concepts. In my study of the recent massive uprisings known as the Woman, Life, Freedom movement in Iran, which I discuss in my forthcoming book *The Future's Pasts: Redemptive Aspirations in Contemporary Iran*, I propose two alternative concepts to this dichotomy: taking place and happening. While taking place refers to the occupation of a position and a place and visible aspects of the revolutionary experience, happening refers to a range of transformations, mainly invisible aspects of a revolutionary experience. This conceptualisation allows us to go beyond success/failure paradigms and look into revolutionary experience more closely.

> *In the happening, we are faced with a spectrum instead of a dichotomy. We can talk about the extent to which revolutions have come close to their aspirations and the extent to which they have not.*

Revolutions can take place, but that does not mean that they also happen. Conversely, a revolution might not take place, but it can happen. While the Dhufar revolution did not take place, it happened in many ways as Wilson demonstrates. It happened to the extent that it could change some of the socially constructed hierarchies based on gender, race, and status. In the happening, we are faced with a spectrum instead of a dichotomy. We can talk about the extent to which revolutions have come close to their aspirations and the extent to which they have not.

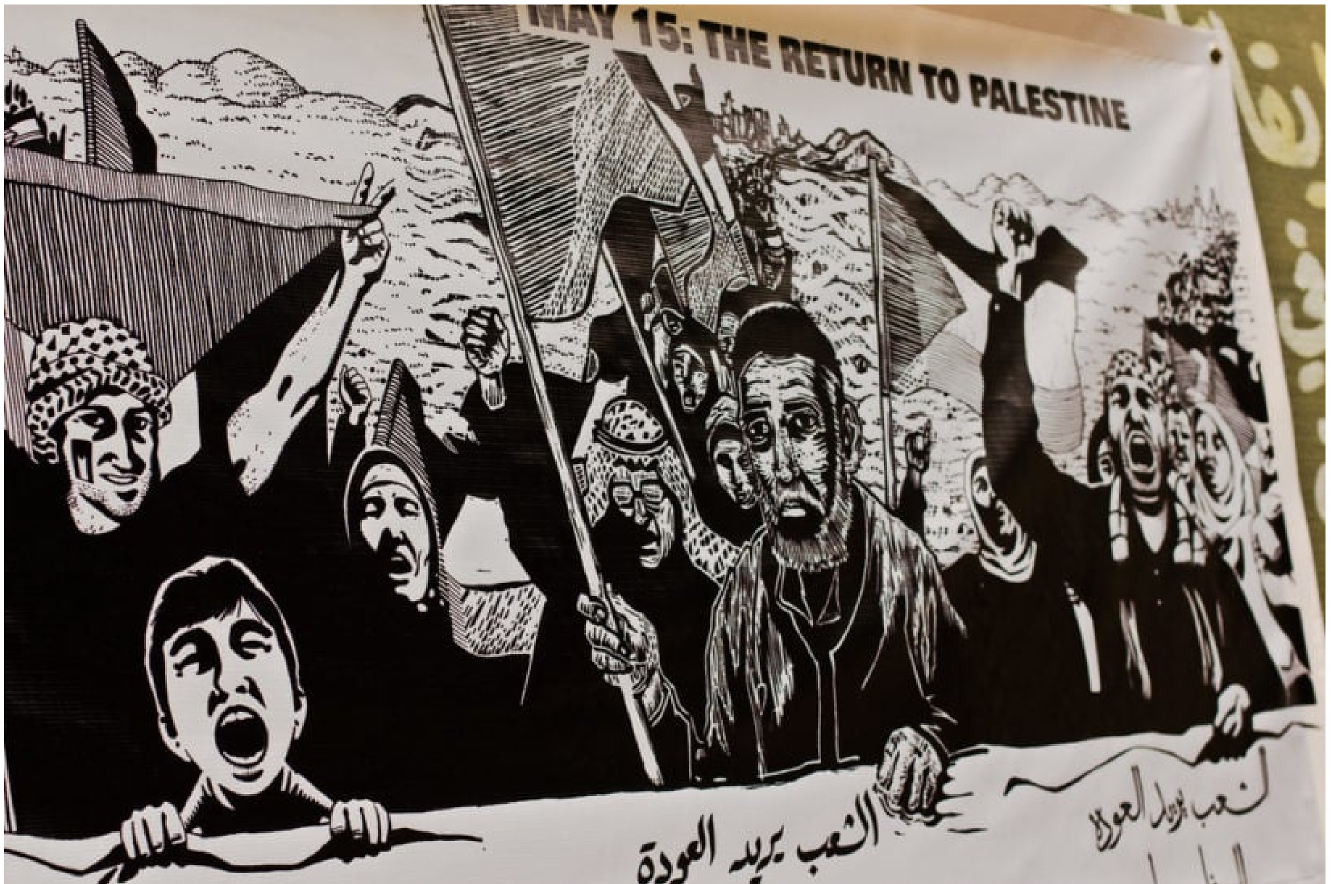
Afterlife is about the happening of a revolution while it might not have taken place, i.e., could not oust an incumbent from political power. A similar account can be applied to the Syrian Revolution. The Syrian revolutionaries were unable to overthrow the Assad regime, but as Charlotte Al-Khalili tells us in her book *Waiting for the Revolution to End* (UCL Press, 2023) it is still happening.

Paying attention to the afterlives of revolutions is important because we have entered an era in which, due to the emergence of panopticon regimes, we may no longer witness classic revolutions like the Iranian Revolution and the Arab uprisings. As a result, we need a novel conceptual framework which bring under scrutiny the dimensions of the revolutionary experience that have received less attention.

Instead of asking questions such as why the revolution took place and how it could not take place, which are the most asked questions about the classic revolutions such as the Iranian Revolution of 1979, relying on the framework that *Afterlives of Revolution: Everyday Counterhistories in Southern Oman* provides, one can raise new questions, such as what happened to the Iranian Revolution and in what ways it did not happen? What are the long-lasting legacies of the Iranian Revolution? This book provides a new window on the revolutions of southwest Asia and north Africa and their legacies beyond the failure/success paradigm.

A world upside down

Charlotte Al-Khalili
September, 2022



In the wake of October 7th, I was asked by a fellow anthropologist if my Syrian friends and interlocutors – who participated in the 2011 revolution and are strongly opposed to the Syrian regime and its allies (Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah) – supported Hamas *and* called for the annihilation of Israel. It seemed to him that there would be some kind of contradiction (if not hypocrisy) in Syrian revolutionaries supporting Hamas since it is allied with and supported by countries and armed groups that are counter-revolutionary forces in Syria. His words also revealed that he could only imagine that my interlocutors, being Sunni Arabs, were Jew haters in favour of the destruction of the state of Israel.

My Syrian interlocutors strongly condemn Israel's colonisation of Palestine and are horrified by its current genocidal war on Gaza. It is not only that it brings all too familiar images of death and destruction, but also that Palestine has long been a central political issue that brings together Syrians from various religious, ethnic, and national groups. Different, as well as (sometimes opposed) political parties, movements and ideologies thus met on the condemning of Israel as a

colonial state. For most of my interlocutors, there is therefore no contradiction in condemning the crimes of the Syrian regime, Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah while supporting Hamas in Gaza. Yet, some do also denounce Hamas's actions while supporting Palestinian resistance and the Palestinian people.

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I have felt very bothered by the assumption underlying my colleague's comment, an assumption that became increasingly widespread in public discourses and media outlets after the October 7th attacks, that not only *all* Palestinians but also *all* Arabs, *all* Muslims (and by ricochet *all* those supporting Gazans and Palestinians) are antisemites and want the destruction of Israel. This latter point is often expressed through the idea that slogans such as the iconic 'from the river to the sea' constitute a call to physically erase the state of Israel – while the same people are not bothered by Israel's map picturing a state from the river to the sea. Such assumptions are thus not only lacking nuance, they are also outright racist and Islamophobic.

But what is maybe more disturbing about such statements is that it reverses discourses and reality. Calls for the death of *all* Arabs – for the flattening of the *entire* Gaza strip and the killing of *all* Palestinians (from babies to the elderly) living there – are widely present in Israeli media, society, parliament, and the *democratically elected* (as people like to hammer) government. Since October 7th, such discourses have started to be aired on French TV, too, and have not been legally condemned, nor framed as problematic by officials. Moreover, these are not mere discourses, since a genocide is currently unfolding in Gaza that has so far resulted in the murder of over 35,000 Palestinians.

Israel has thus succeeded in demonising Palestinians and Arabs, making many believe that *they are the ones* calling for the very acts Israel is actually committing in front of the world's eyes. Such reversal of discourse and reality might explain why some people are so scared of pro-Palestinian protests, and of Palestinian flags and symbols. This might explain why peaceful protests and calls

for ceasefire are, ironically and paradoxically, framed as violent acts and discourses fuelling antisemitism. This rhetoric justifies, in turn, that they be repressed accordingly, through the use of great violence.

In the French context, such a twist, through a simplistic and essentialised binary opposition, permits the conflation of speaking out against Israel's actions and in favour of Palestinian rights, with antisemitism and terrorist apology. A first step in exiting these dangerous dead-ends, fuelled by some kind of clash-of-civilisations discourse, is to add some depth to the current discourses and show that the reality is much more multi-faceted.

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This text is a reflection on the essentialising inversion that has widely led to the perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity being turned into its victims, and vice versa. I mainly focus on the reverberations of this inversion in my home country of France, where those defending the rights of Palestinians and denouncing the colonial Israeli settler project and genocidal war are being increasingly and aggressively criminalised. The French government's (almost) unconditional support of Israel illustrates the colonial logic and the historical continuum that links the two countries – something apparent in the colonial administering of immigrants in France and of the *territoires d'Outre-Mer* – an obvious example being Kanaky. It reveals an authoritarian climate in France, where far-right ideas are normalised, thus leading to siding with the Israeli far-right government even when it perpetrates horrific crimes.

Since October 8th, the space within which to denounce Israel's violent military campaign against Gaza, to express disagreement with Israeli policies, to simply publicly claim to be anti-Zionist, and to explain and contextualise Hamas's actions has been drastically reduced, if not disappeared, in the French media and in public discourse. If such silencing and erasing is not new, it is exacerbated in the current context. In a maybe not-so-surprising twist, in the wake of October 7th, the Rassemblement National (RN) – a far-right French party which is the rebranding

of the infamous Front National (FN), a party created by Holocaust deniers and Nazi collaborators – demonstrated alongside other political parties. Together they not only denounced the 'Hamas terrorist attacks' but also, ironically given its own history, declared themselves to be 'fighting antisemitism'.

> *The criminalisation of Palestinians and Palestinians' sympathisers is not new in France.*

While marches in support of Israel took place in France in October, all protests in support of Palestinians and Gaza were then forbidden by the government. The double standard was later exposed when the State Council opposed the decision. The Eiffel Tower and the National Assembly were also illuminated with the colours of the Israeli flag soon after October 7th in a show of solidarity; but the Palestinian flag has yet to be seen on any governmental institution or famous landmark.

On a national and international scale, Israel is still immune from collective and systematic sanctions and continues to receive financial and military aid from the Global North. In another inversion, UNWRA, which is bringing vital humanitarian aid to Palestinians, has seen its usual funding stopped or cut drastically (although some donor states have resumed funding) following Israel's yet-to-be-proven accusations that a dozen of its 13,000 members participated in the October 7th attacks.

In light of these developments, one wonders why the French government and political elite have been so quick to recognise the October 7th attacks as a barbaric event, while they are so slow in acknowledging the current war on Gaza as genocidal. And why is solidarity with Palestine so strongly criminalised?

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In line with the logic of unconditional support to a criminal state and the

criminalisation of an entire besieged population, various French MPs and the president of the parliament quickly took trips to Israel to express their backing of the country's so-called self-defence and its ongoing offensive against Gaza. Politicians' trips to Palestine were, however, much fewer, even after the French official discourse slightly shifted given the horrors perpetrated in the strip by the IDF. How to explain the coloniser's capacity to attract so much empathy and the colonised's inability to do so? Why are those supporting the latter being criminalised?

The criminalisation of Palestinians and Palestinians' sympathisers is not new in France. It started with the attacks on the BDS (Boycott, Divest, Sanction) movement in the 2000s through a law allowing this political boycott to be treated as a hate crime. In 2022, the tentative shutdown of two pro-Palestinian civil society organisations 'Palestine Vaincra' and 'Comité action Palestine' by the minister of interior for their so-called 'calling for hatred, discrimination, violence' and 'incitement to terrorist acts', shows the French government's conflation of expressions of support for Palestine with terrorism. These decisions were, however, cancelled by the State Council as a violation of freedom of expression. In the post-October 7th context, these accusations have turned into legal pursuits and accusations of apology of terrorism.

In the same vein, the peaceful calls and protests in support of Gaza and against the Israeli war on the strip are systematically presented as signs of heinous antisemitism, which is equated with anti-Zionism. The latest manifestation of this tragic but powerful deployment of the label 'antisemite' is the violent shutdown of student protests in the country, which were preceded by the ban on public and academic lectures and conferences.

The criminalisation of defenders of peace and legality and of critics of Israeli policies and war has thus taken a dangerous turn. On October 10th, the ministry of justice recommended that any discourse 'in support of Hamas' and any declaration 'presenting the attacks against Israel as acts of resistance' be

strongly condemned and treated as terrorism apology by courts. This has criminalised some forms of political discourse: Trade-unionists, journalists, and politicians – among them the head of the parliamentary opposition – have been summoned to the police station to look into accusations of terrorism apology, resulting in a trade-unionist being sentenced to a one-year suspended prison sentence for distributing a leaflet denouncing the current war on Gaza.

These grotesque accusations and now legal pursuits are not only dangerous attacks on pro-Palestinian voices; they also constitute worrying attacks on freedom of speech and democracy in France and elsewhere. They alert us, whether we agree or not with the opposition and their positions, to the poor state of our democracy and the authoritarian turn of the French government. One of the latest examples of such fascist trends in French politics is the authorised protest of Neo-Nazis who freely marched in the heart of Paris on the 11th of May. This is yet another example of an inversion of values, as pro-Palestinian protests were forbidden and are violently repressed by police forces.

This political trend has become clearer in recent years following the repression of social and ecological movements. Last year, mass demonstrations against the pension reform were violently crushed by over-equipped police forces. In another show of disproportionate use of police force against peaceful protesters, the government brutally repressed ecological activists who had assembled to fight against an ecocidal project in Sainte-Soline.

> *A blatant islamophobia is now being freely unleashed on televisions through discourses echoing Israeli ones*

Police-unleashed brutality has also led to the murders of young racialised men which have become increasingly frequent. The growing racism and islamophobia this illustrates and the colonial continuum it carries, leads to the further dehumanisation and criminalisation of Muslims, Arabs, and Palestinians (widely perceived as Muslims). If this is not strictly a French issue, it has a specific resonance in France especially since the murder of teenager Nahel Merzouk last

June by a police officer. The latter became a millionaire as a result of this killing through an online fundraising campaign whose aim was to help with the officer's legal fees. On the other hand, Nahel, a 17-year-old of Arabic descent, was presumed guilty and criminalised despite videos quickly appearing online and showing how he was shot in the head.

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A blatant islamophobia is now being freely unleashed on televisions through discourses echoing Israeli ones, and legitimising the indiscriminate killing of all Palestinians in Gaza. In such discourses, all Gazans are presented as guilty of Hamas's actions and, in the most extreme speeches, all Gazans are defined as terrorists, even children. If one thinks back to the ways in which Russia's war on Ukraine led to widespread outrage and forms of solidarity at local and governmental levels, one clearly sees that subjects of violence are receiving different kinds and degrees of empathy according to their religion and skin colour. This is linked to engrained racism and Islamophobia as well colonial logics still very vivid in France.

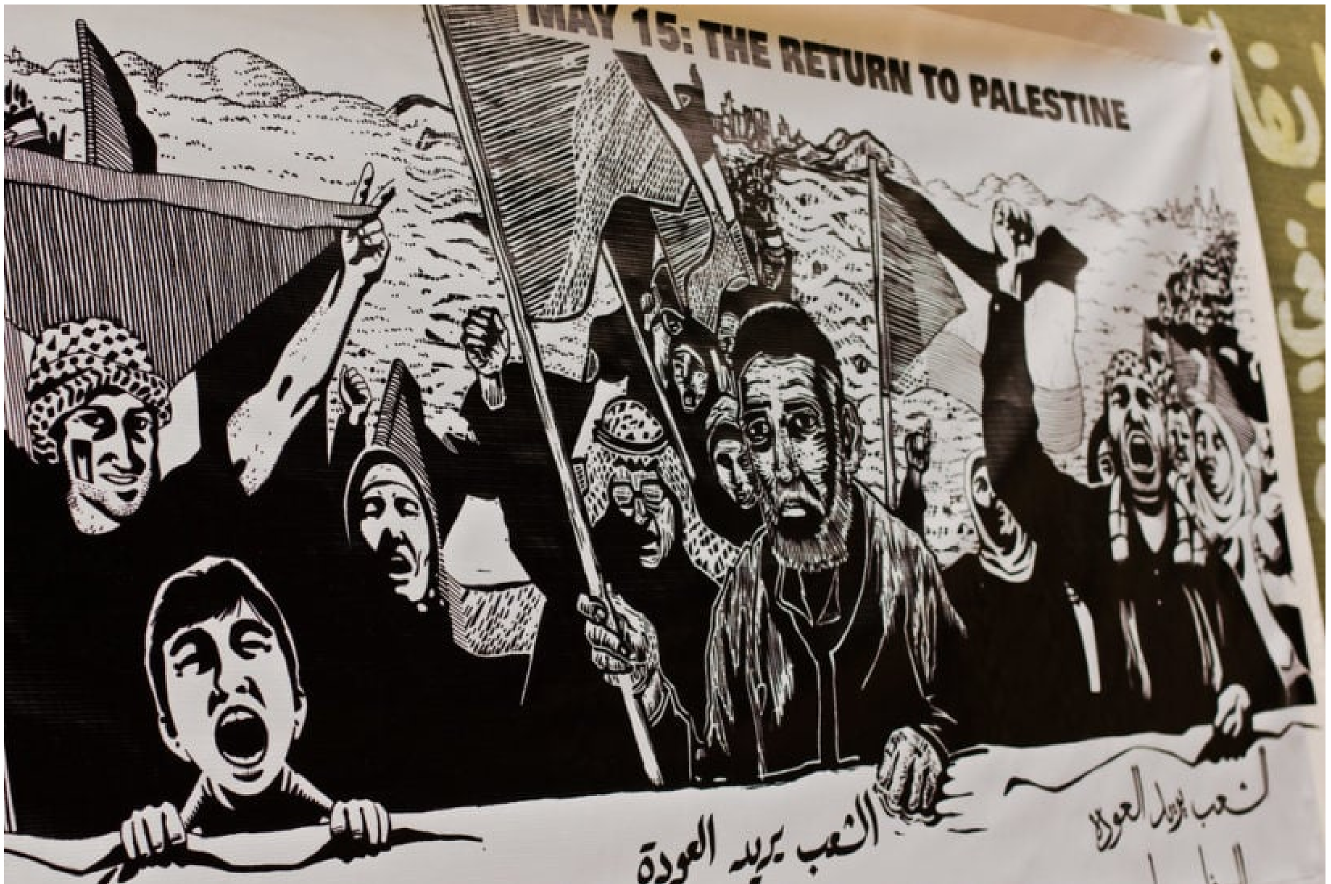
Such colonial and racist logics have led to a dehumanisation of Palestinians that renders them indefensible: not only do they have no right to defend themselves, but their very massacre is justified. This is especially the case with the rhetoric of the war on terror that is being re-activated. The use of terrorism is a powerful tool to justify any exaction against an entire civilian population. An entire people is being criminalised while being starved, tortured, murdered, while its dead's organs are being stolen; a people who is witnessing a systematic attack on all its vital and essential infrastructures. This people is presented as terrorist, whose life is ungrievable, while Israel is presented as a democratic state acting in self-defence.

This reversal also shows how antisemitism is being used as a tool to criminalise anti-Zionism. Given France's antisemitic history, it is all the more dangerous to use antisemitism (reframed as anti-Zionism) to criminalise those standing against

a genocidal war. This forgetting of ‘historical antisemitism’ leads to a normalisation of political parties that were built on such ideas. This is one of the worrying inversions of discourses and realities that point to, along with the violent repression of political opposition, a growing authoritarianism in French politics. Failing to acknowledge the ongoing genocide of Palestinians in Gaza and failing to condemn Israel for the crimes it has been committing for the last 75 years in Gaza and the West Bank is a political and moral failure, and a complaisance and complicity towards a fascisation of our world.

Temporalities of revolt

Faisal Al-Asaad
September, 2022



Not long after Tufan Al-Aqsa in October, political ecologist Andreas Malm observed in an interview the peculiar temporality of popular revolt in the Arab world. Remarking on the so-called Arab Spring, during which Palestine seemed to experience ‘relative calm’, Malm contrasted it to the current glaciation of popular movements in neighbouring countries as the Palestinian struggle enters perhaps its most decisive moment in recent history. This ‘lack of synchronicity’, says Malm, ‘is one of the biggest tragedies of the Palestine question.’

The non-synchronic and untimely nature of popular revolt has ever vexed the Left in general, and the Western Left in particular. For Lenin, no less, seizing ‘the right moment’ was the decisive, perhaps definitive, act of revolutionary strategy. But workers and peasants have so often moved out of step with history’s forward march; rebels and radicals have either acted too soon, or too late. Time, for better or worse, seems to be ever out of joint.

Time seems also to ever be against us, but never so like now. Amidst total and

irreversible ecological collapse on a planetary scale, the abyssal carnage in Gaza portends a future too bleak to fathom, but all too present to ignore. In its impunity and brazen disregard for every principle of legal and human conduct, Israel has enthusiastically plumbed the depths of depravity and barbarism, and in doing so has set new precedents for a global elite anxious to maintain business-as-usual in a dying world. Ever the exemplar for despots and fascists everywhere, the Occupation has, at the very least, demonstrated the Left's relative powerlessness in the face of highly televised and widely opposed ethnic cleansing and forced displacement. As vast swathes of the planet stand on the precipice of desertification or inundation, and others prepare for extensive and systematic militarisation, the erasure of Gaza threatens to become an object lesson in 'capitalist catastrophism'.

> *A new generation of activists has been born, and not just in Egypt.*

This perhaps explains the urgency, as well as frustration, with which Left intellectuals issue their reproval of poor timing. Nor is it only the Arab masses who appear to be guilty of the latter. In a more recent essay, for instance, Anton Jäger takes issue with what he calls the 'hyperpolitics' of the global Palestine solidarity movement, alongside other recent waves of popular mobilisation, including Black Lives Matter, the *gilets jaunes*, and, curiously, MAGA republicans. What thematises this unruly selection, according to Jäger, is 'a form of politicization without clear political consequences.' If Occupy and the Arab revolts exploded the 'post-political' moment at the turn of the century, they seem to have inaugurated a hyperpolitical moment wherein mobilisation is short-term and characterised by 'low-cost, low-entry, low-duration, and all too often, low value.' In this way, it is also distinct from the 'superpolitics' of formalised, mass membership organisations of a century ago, which are of course the normative standard against which the former are judged here.

This provocation, and the peculiar comparisons it makes possible, is perhaps justified by its concern with temporality. Accordingly, and no more or less than

the pairing of BLM and MAGA, its equation between Nazis, Soviets, and Maoists makes sense when we consider their shared temporal imaginaries. Political projects measured in centuries and even millenia sit in stark contrast to a political horizon which appears to mimic the 'business cycle' of the market or the lifespan of a viral tweet. The problem is that this is not so much a distinction between different forms of politics as it is between protest movements and their ideological basis. Virtually any wave of revolt can appear ephemeral – 'as fleeting as market transactions' – when its historical conditions and antecedents are obscured. The important point is that the market is not a temporal metaphor in this scenario, but rather the main cause of time's disappearance. The reality of BLM, and Palestine solidarity for that matter, would look a lot less ephemeral were it not primarily consumed through market dominated mediums, social media being the most obvious of these.

Adjusted appropriately, the timescale of Arab revolts would reveal a striking pattern, and one which is instructive for the Left elsewhere. Malm himself, being a student of historical 'long wave' theories, might have noted this had he waited a month or two. In Jordan, Yemen, Egypt, and even Syria, revolutionaries have once again taken to the streets in numbers and strength which haven't been seen in a decade. Since the heady days of the Spring, when ruling autocrats were overthrown within weeks, a brutal counter-revolution has entirely swept away the old movements and coalitions – or so it seemed. It now appears as though a resurgence is at hand, all too 'synchronous' with a beleaguered West Bank and a besieged Gaza.

> *The question of timing and duration assumes a different character when its object is the wider terrain of struggle as a dialectical whole.*

How long and to what extent this resurgence will last (or, namely, withstand state repression) is anyone's guess, but that's besides the point here. The question of timing and duration assumes a different character when its object is the wider terrain of struggle as a dialectical whole. From this perspective, the local and

regional dimensions of popular revolt are not incidental but rather co-constituted: the former are not just distinct parts of the latter, but in fact bring them into existence. Egypt is certainly exemplary in this regard, though by no means exceptional. The 2011 revolution was helmed by organisations whose main cadres were drawn primarily from earlier movements formed during the Second Intifada and bolstered during the invasion of Iraq. In turn, these coalitions were successors to the last wave of Egyptian communism, itself a beneficiary of anti-Zionism in the wake of the Naksa – or, the Arab world's 1968. During these successive waves, Palestine was never a mere ideological veneer for the movements, but a condition of their possibility. As Hossam El-Hamalawy recently put it, every new generation of activists in Egypt owes its birth to Palestine.

In this light one may very well ask, as Palestinian scholar Bichara Khader has, whether the Arab Spring itself was actually Palestinian through and through, originating as it arguably did in the First Intifada. Taken seriously, what does this question entail? For starters, and beyond a historicism of origins, it reiterates a basic axiom of radical Arab thought: a liberated Palestine is a precondition of a liberated Mashriq. More specifically though, it also demands that we commit to this struggle on terms adequate and appropriate to its own historical telos. The failure of the Intifada and the Spring to meet in time was a constitutive one, seeing one revolt embrace and carry the promises of the other in a context where victories are short-lived, defeats are long-lasting, and state terror is swift and lethal. That the wider struggle continues to exist at all, and despite all odds, is perhaps a consequence of its supposed 'non-synchronicity'.

A rendezvous may nevertheless be on the horizon, but in any case, one thing is certain. A new generation of activists has been born, and not just in Egypt. It is everywhere, and while its presence on the streets may seem ephemeral; may ebb and flow, its emergence marks a high point in a historical long wave which will likely transform the terrain of political struggle for decades to come. As in the Arab world, this generation, too, owes its birth to Palestine.

Encyclopedia of maladies in academic anthropology: counter-diagnosis for a sick working environment

My Madsen
September, 2022

What you are about to read is not fiction, but neither is it fact. It is a catalogue of illnesses that do not exist, at least not in the evidence-based sense of the word. Yet, all descriptions are agglomerations of observations based in real-life encounters with ill or borderline-ill persons.

My motivation for beginning this encyclopedia of maladies in academic anthropology came after recovering from years of stress and anxiety related to a severely damaging working environment at a university. Though I have been

thankful of the diagnosis and subsequent treatments I have received on my way to recovery, there has always been a profoundly problematic bias to it: it diagnosed me as ill and treated me to become healthy. In other words, *I* got singled out and treated while the anxiety-inducing environment was only rhetorically cautioned.

> *This piece is a counter-diagnosis. It uses the positive traits of diagnosis […] to point at and describe some of the toxic traits anthropologists may develop in academia […].*

This piece is a counter-diagnosis. It uses the positive traits of diagnosis, namely identification and verbalisation, to point at and describe some of the toxic traits anthropologists may develop in academia and which in sum constitute a sick working environment. As I have heard in therapy: the first step to recovery is diagnosis. Thus, I endeavour to embark upon a reciprocal quest by offering this encyclopedia to academia, my 'giving back', in the hope that it will be poignant enough to hurt but also humorous enough to initiate a language for healing.

Maladies in academic anthropology

The following sections describe the primary maladies – major groups of illnesses – that I have recorded. Cautious reading is advised as there may be significant local variations in symptoms as well as cross-infection cases involving overlaps between several maladies or symptoms.

Hyperideal heroism

The specification of this condition is a firm though often subconscious belief in an extreme version of a professional hero-ideal, regarding 'true' anthropologists as the lone hero venturing 'out there' in the wild to bring back knowledge. The delusion gains strength from the history of classic anthropology where fieldwork

was done by men, alone, far away and in rough conditions. Though such work conditions are no longer the preconditions of fieldwork or indeed anthropology, persons with *hyperideal heroism* suffer from the delusion that other kinds of fieldwork are inferior or indications of a lazy/soft/loose character of the fieldworker.

As the condition is solipsistic and polemic in nature people suffering from this condition typically have very little insight into their own problem but instead consider any steps towards self-awareness or treatment as an attack that needs to be overcome, defeated or conquered. Therefore, treatment is difficult as it may further the condition. If several persons suffer from *hyperideal heroism* at the same workplace they may develop a *schismogenetic mass-psychosis* where their self-righteous, confrontational criticism spirals out of control.

Despite the gendered background of the malady, both men and women may contract *hyperideal heroism* (though the percentage of men suffering from this condition might well be higher – more research is needed).

Typical symptoms:

People with *hyperideal heroism* often express an obsessive emphasis on overcoming challenges, e.g., by turning dangerous, hard or traumatic experiences into boisterous stories of either heroic or humorous genres. The condition may also cause a further *pathological righteousness syndrome* resulting in hostile outbursts of statements such as "don't be surprised if you get divorced after fieldwork" or "interview-fieldwork"[1] (the latter must be pronounced in a sarcastic sneer). Another known characteristic is that both positivity and negativity is expressed through fierce polemic behaviour.

Empathetic masochism

Empathetic masochism is a self-defeating disorder defined by recurrent and

intense feelings of emotional pain, guilt, insufficiency, and shamefulness along with delightful moral arousal from this self-suffering. Symptomatic of this disorder is that it revolves around strong and painful empathetic emotions towards an ‘empathetic object of study’, typically suffering human subjects or subject positions. The disorder is based in a simultaneous affective emotional experience of the pain of the empathetic object and shame of feeling this pain as it is rationally understood by the empathetic masochist as ‘secondhand’ and not one’s own pain.

The condition is nourished by distorted implicit ideas of science professionalism as detached, objective and separable from both body and emotions. As such, it is a dissociative disorder that causes a continuous *delirious double guilt* for subsuming others’ pain while insisting that rationally the sensation of pain is not one’s one – not ‘real’ – and therefore one should be able to separate or manage it. At the same time, this stage of continuous guilty suffering becomes to the ill person the only morally justifiable way of being and therefore the only way to feel moral arousal and (painful) comfort.

Typical symptoms:

A strong orientation towards utopian goals of giving justice, voice or rectification to the empathetic object resulting in a *chronic moral insufficiency condition*. The condition may develop into a regular *algomoralis*[2] *syndrome* where the person dives into ever more painful conditions of the empathetic object to engage in utopian rectifying of suffering (e.g., inequality) but also to let oneself suffer even more for not suffering (and for vicarious suffering and for not being able to not suffer and for letting emotional pain cloud the objective and professional detachment, and for feeling moral arousal from self-suffering).

Compulsive opportunistic tunnel-vision disorder (COTD)

COTDers suffer from the strong delusion that the end goal they are pursuing

justifies the means (any means) of getting there. The condition is primarily defined by a lack of restraint known as *compulsive professional hyperphagia* which is extreme goal-oriented opportunistic strategising, where anything and anyone may be consumed and utilised to reach the professional goal. Additionally, they attain a profound tunnel-vision that only allows them to see and engage with things and people as long as they speak to the goal.

If left untreated the condition may easily leap into the full-blown behavioural disinhibition of *ruthless phantasmatic egotism* manifested in increased disregard of social conventions, accelerating levels of opportunistic strategising without consideration for present consequences and a highly selective assessment of past learnings (e.g., critique from colleagues). In later stages people with this condition develop a reduced responsiveness to the distress they cause others (e.g., junior colleagues) along with the uncritical and very resilient delusion that they in fact help others in the process of reaching their own goals. This combination serves them to justify and accelerate their own disorder – this is also known as *the greater good hyperbolism*.

Typical symptoms:

COTDers develop a dopamine-infused limitlessness towards work. COTDers are energetic, charismatic, often visionary and not intentionally harmful, however they often show reduced inhibitory control regarding the demands they put on other people – some of whom are professionally dependent on them. Oblivious as COTDers are of their own mal-condition, they may say things like; “it’s no problem, I have done it lots of times before” when confronted with critique or restrictions questioning their behaviour.

Known infectious sequelae:

Though COTDers often reach impressive professional goals – that might indeed also benefit others – colleagues to COTDers must exercise minute attention to defending their personal limits towards work (e.g. working hours, tasks, demands, weekends/holidays, etc.). This effort may still cause colleagues to COTDers stress,

frustration and fatigue.

Hermeneutic disillusion

Hermeneutic disillusion begins abruptly with a severe *double-doxic breakdown* during which the ill person loses faith in anthropology as profession after realising that anthropologists interpret and theorise the world but also theorise and interpret the conditions under which such interpretations are possible – which includes anthropology itself. Persons suffering from *Hermeneutic disillusion* may experience profound *Iconoclastic grief* – showing anger and blame towards their profession which they feel has left them with a painful epistemic non-belief.[3]

The most prominent effect of the illness is, however, that it causes severe *professional-superiority-inferiority-complex.* Here the ill person finds anthropology to be a super-relativistic science that really can't be used for much but simultaneously holds the firm belief that anthropologists are the only professionals capable of seeing through the falsum of truth that other sciences are mindless slaves to (this may be connected to patients self-treatment of their *iconoclastic grief* by viciously lashing out at other sciences for being unaware of their own doxic nature. However this has not been fully established yet – more research needed on this aspect). If not treated, the ill person may enter a state of *professional fugue*[4] where one loses any sense of professionalism or indeed develops a strong psychotic delusion that there can be no such things as science or knowledge.

Typical symptoms:

Even in its early stages the illness can be identified by fits of *acute relativism* where the infected person becomes momentarily incapable of having any professionally informed stance or opinion. The condition is especially known to

attack students and people who didn't recover from reading the 1980s debates on representation.

Mysophobia Academicai / Academic Mysophobia[5]

Academic Mysophobia is a paranoiac obsession with scientific purity. Ill persons show strong anal-retentive fixations with critical research of core theoretical issues within anthropology itself, along with denialism towards any prosperous cross-fertilisation outside of academia. The illness causes a *critique–cutting-core superiority complex* where the ill perceive themselves as highly experimental and cutting edge, even though their dogmatic attitude towards scientific purity forces them to reside within narrow theoretical landscapes of a few white men that cross-quote each other.

Academic Mysophobics are strongly attracted to each other and often gather in clannish intellectual circles to elate in fetishising barely accessible theory as a means of controlling the impureness outside their circle. Such groups often develop a collective *applied-taboo* where any mentions or contact with applied anthropological endeavours, professionals, or labour is perceived as highly polluting. Confrontation with the taboo may drive the ill into severe c*ompulsive french-philosophy seizures* characterized by repetitive cleaning of the besoiled science by showering it in ever more highly abstracted and cryptically written theories.

Typical symptoms:

Even in its early stages Academic Mysophobics may be identified by their inability to ask questions or give responses outside of their own work and theoretical topics, regardless of the content of the meeting, presentation, symposium, workshop, etc.

Known infectious sequelae:

If not cautious, colleagues of Academic Mysophobics may come to suffer from *academic impostor syndrome* – an inferiority disorder where capable professionals start referring to themselves as not ‘proper’ or ‘real’ anthropologists.

Afterword: Do your medical check-ups

Now that you have read about the main illnesses you will be able to recognize symptoms and outbreaks within your working environment. For limiting the spread of contamination please alert any person showing symptoms by referring them to this encyclopedia. As the maladies described here often grow unnoticed for long periods of time it is recommended to do regular self-examinations by taking a long hard look in the mirror approximately once a month.

I encourage readers to contribute to the encyclopedia by writing up maladies they have experienced or come across working in, with, or around academic anthropology. Please post them here in the commentary or email them to *mette.my.madsen@gmail.com.*

Abstract

Though important work has been done in recent years bringing forth the implicit, biassed attitudes and comportment within academic anthropology, particular unfortunate patterns of academic culture persistently resists change. By introducing an encyclopedia of maladies, this piece identifies, diagnoses and catalogues some of the toxic traits anthropologists may contract working in academic environments. By doing so I hope to deliver a poignant critique of a sick working environment, but also a humorous language for initiating healing and change.

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[1] A derogatory expression for describing fieldwork based primarily on interviewing as opposed to 'living with' the field.

[2] *Algos* means pain. *Moralis* means manners of moral.

[3] The only truth is, there is no truth.

[4] *Fugue* is a rare psychiatric phenomenon characterized by reversible amnesia for one's identity.

[5] *Mysophobia* is the fear of contamination. *Myso* from ancient Greek μύσος (músos) meaning uncleanness.

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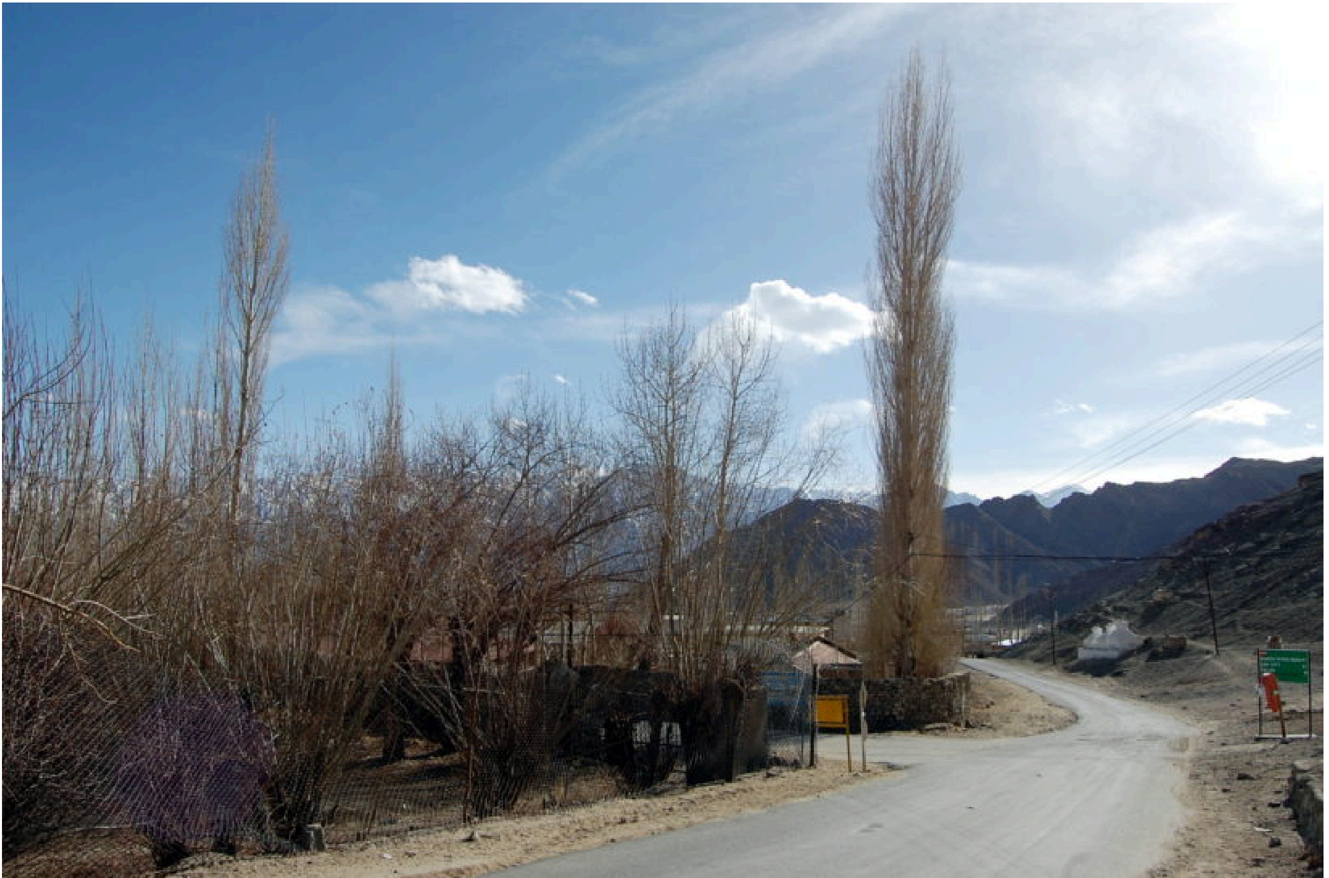
Waiting for ghosts

Callum Pearce
September, 2022



I am walking along a road on the outskirts of Leh town, in the Himalayan region of Ladakh. It is October, just past the turn from summer to winter, and after dark. Ahead of me is a *lamsum*, a junction where three roads meet. The road to the left leads into town, while the one ahead goes to the nearby army camp. To my right, I can just make out the oblong shapes of mud-brick *romkhang* ('corpse houses') scattered across the hillside rising up from the road: hollow cremation platforms used in funerals, which mark out this spot as the local cremation ground. It is the precisely the kind of place where, people say, you might meet a ghost.

'Ghost' is the English word Ladakhis use, like the Hindi *bhūt*, to gloss the catch-all term *lhande*: 'god/demon,' a phantom, spirit, monster, any strange and unwelcome thing that has not yet been identified. 'Ghost' is used to refer both to the more specific *shinde* (a spirit of a dead person), and to the various named classes of demon and spirit known to Ladakhi ritual specialists. These beings are never deliberately invoked through ritual possession, but they are routinely implicated in accidents, cases of inexplicable illness and misfortune. When things

go wrong, the response from Buddhist Ladakhis usually involves targeting the spirits involved: when livestock fall ill, or people suffer from anxiety or low spirits, or someone has a sudden stroke, or a bus full of pilgrims veers off the road and crashes, or a village is struck by a rash of suicides.

> *The process of healing starts with the identification of the entities responsible, whether by diagnosing an attack by a broad category of demon or by locating and naming the shinde of a specific person.*

These experiences of misfortune often begin in strange encounters. Illnesses and accidents are traced back to glimpses of odd things in the dark, inexplicable sightings or sounds that could be meetings with *lhande*. Certain places appear again and again in these accounts: isolated groups of *chorten* (Buddhist monuments, *stūpa*), cremation grounds, crossroads and *lamsum*. Not all encounters at such places lead to disaster, but strange experiences at night are marked out if they are followed by sudden accidents or illness. Nor is everyone equally susceptible to sightings of ghosts: those who are nervous or fearful, who suffer from lower *sparkha* (vitality, life-force), are more likely to see or sense such things. Ladakhis talk of *namstok*, a kind of doubt or suspicion that has material effects: eating from a dish that you fear to be dirty or polluted can make you ill, even if there is nothing wrong with the food itself. Fearing harm causes harm; fear produces monsters.

A few nights before, I was sitting in the kitchen with the family I had been staying with in Leh when they told me how their cousin had fallen victim to ghosts—or to his fear of ghosts—while driving at night outside the town. He had been on the road leading southeast through the Leh valley, passing the nearby village of Shey, when he turned a corner and came by a cremation ground off the side of the road. His car had stalled suddenly, to his horror, briefly stranding him at a place known as a haunt for *shinde*. When he had finally managed to drive back home he collapsed, waking the next day with a debilitating fever that left him bedridden for a week.

There was general consensus that *something* had happened, beyond mere coincidence, but no-one seemed sure whether he had actually encountered *lhande* or *shinde* or whether his fear had somehow affected the operation of the car and brought on the fever. The distinction seemed almost irrelevant: there is little to distinguish a real ghost from the apprehension of a ghost. This attitude may reflect Buddhist understandings of the illusory, phenomenal reality of spirits, which are characterised as little more than fleeting sense-impressions with no fundamental existence. What you fear may not be there, but it can still harm you if you sense it.

The man himself walked in halfway through the explanation of this story, and looked thoroughly embarrassed as his cousins gleefully described how his fear had made him ill. But I was left wondering:

> *if the existence of ghosts is bound up with the feeling of fear, and with the feeling of being in a place that might be haunted, how can you understand the role spirits play in Ladakhi society without experiencing those feelings?*

Anthropologists working on similar topics have often tried to approach visionary and shamanic experiences from the inside through active participation in ritual, by becoming apprentices to healers or by inducing states of possession aided by music and hallucinogens (see Peters 1981, Pierini, Groisman and Espírito Santo (eds) 2023, Stoller and Olkes 1987, Taussig 1987). These auto-ethnographic projects have tended to privilege extraordinary experiences: trying to inhabit the perspectives of specialists who leave their bodies to bring back lost souls, or commune with spirits, or gain access to insights from another world. But what about the very ordinary experience of living with spirits? Ladakhis encounter ghosts in mundane places, while walking along the road at night. This requires no special training, no ritual or trance-state. In principle, the experience should be as accessible as any other.

So: I am walking past a cremation ground at night, not exactly trying to meet a ghost but trying to feel what it might be like to fear meeting one. I walk the way I

have been told I should walk: I keep my eyes fixed on the road ahead, watching for anyone coming in the other direction and averting my gaze from the *romkhang* to my right. I stay on the path, keep to the left of *chorten* when I pass them, and avoid looking too closely into the shadows.

But it isn't working. The night feels empty. I cannot convince myself that there might be anything there. I feel nothing following me, no sense of hidden presence. I am less worried about spirits than I am about Leh's unchecked packs of stray dogs—which take over the streets every night, barking and fighting through the early hours of the morning—and I am preoccupied by thoughts of how far I should walk before turning back. The exercise feels contrived. In Ladakhi accounts, people run across *lhande*—or things that might, later, be interpreted as *lhande*—unexpectedly, when they are rushing home in the dark or taking an unfamiliar short cut. But I am not really going anywhere. My purpose in being on the road at night is entirely unlike that of a local person:

> *I am seeking out something that Ladakhis try to avoid, directing attention towards a topic that is normally only relevant when things go wrong.*

Others have commented on the apparent absurdity of exercises like this. Desjarlais, pursuing his own apprenticeship with a Yolmo *bombo* (a shamanic practitioner) in the Helambu region of Himalayan Nepal, describes his frustration with his attempts to understand experiences of shamanic trance from the inside. After recording his own 'trance visions,' he turned to his mentor— Meme Bombo, 'grandfather shaman'—to ask for guidance:

"Meme," I asked him one day as we basked in mountain sunshine outside his home, "these visions I have, of caves, tigers, and elfin creatures, what do they mean?"

"Nothing," came the reply, "you only see lightning flashes in the dark, as when a man is knocked on the head" (Desjarlais 1992: 16).

Desjarlais suggests that his visions are nothing but a ‘loose hodgepodge of unsystematized sensations,’ a meaningless ‘montage’ of images with no ritual relevance (*ibid.*: 15-16). He concludes that his own cultural background has shaped his experiences of trance to such an extent that meaningful Yolmo vision states are inaccessible to him; ‘one cannot adopt cultures as readily as one puts on clothes.’ The exercise may not be totally pointless—it may enable a kind of ‘conversation between cultures’ in which the ethnographer learns to confront unfamiliar patterns of embodied behaviour—but it cannot grant direct understanding of what a Yolmo *bombo* experiences (*ibid.*: 17-18). The ethnographic project is driven by the impulse to render the unfamiliar familiar, to rationalise what may initially appear irrational. This rests on an implicit faith that all topics are, in principle, amenable to translation and explanation; but grappling with spirits and visions can lead the ethnographer into confrontations with a fundamental, irresolvable absurdity.

In a sense, though, my failure to feel anything was already accounted for by Ladakhi understandings of *lhande*. Unlike encounters with the deities invoked in ritualised performances of spirit possession, a meeting with a ghost is fundamentally an unexpected event: it is a rupture in normality, not an ordinary part of everyday life. No-one normally expects to come across a ghost on the road, even if they feel a chill of fear when passing a cremation ground. People exchange stories of encounters precisely because such things are out of the ordinary, and because they only happen to certain people. From a Ladakhi perspective, I was not likely to be one of those kinds of people: the lack of fear I felt towards ghosts was taken as a sign of high *sparkha* that would protect me against harmful sensation. ‘You don’t have to worry about *lhande*,’ my hosts would tell me, ‘but we do.’

> *Yet even when describing their own fear of ghosts, Ladakhis treat the topic as ridiculous, even absurd: the existence of lhande is widely regarded with doubt, while those who are overtaken by their own fear—like the cousin whose car stalled outside Shey—become objects for jokes and teasing.*

Ghost stories are a popular form of entertainment on winter nights in Ladakh, as in other Tibetan and Himalayan areas, but the accounts exchanged are often laden with irony: exaggerated descriptions of meetings with bizarre things (a dog the size of a horse! A man with three heads!) offered up for enthusiastically sceptical audiences. Stories are picked apart and explained away, though the possibility remains. These ghosts are essentially ambiguous: treated as both unreal and threatening, ridiculous and fearful. Their tenuous existence is grounded entirely in personal experiences, and in accounts of such experiences: in stories of things one's neighbours and relatives might have met at night, and in one's own vague apprehension of presence. But for most people, they are only known at second hand.

In a sense, then, as I walk down the road at night, there is nothing to experience. Unlike the vision states accessed by Yolmo *bombo*, the presence of *lhande* has no positive reality: ghosts are always elusive, impossible to pin down, met as things only felt or glimpsed out of the corner of one's eye. As a topic, they are laughable; it is only when they become implicated in illness or disaster that they become a serious concern. Accounts of meetings with *lhande* are always questionable, always open to contradiction. They are encountered through sightings, sounds or feelings that can invariably be explained away by others: just a dog on the road, or the wind in the trees, or the effect of an excessive fear of the dark. And for most people, they are not even that. Spirits are 'fundamentally vague entities' (Schlemmer 2009: 105). As you focus on them, they fade into nothing. They are not concepts, not graspable by thought.

To walk along the road at night trying to feel the presence of spirits—or just the possibility of presence—is, then, an absurd exercise. It is an attempt to inhabit something that barely exists for Ladakhis: a sense of suspicion, a feeling of something that disappears as soon as you focus on it. This is not, I think, simply the problem of cultural baggage identified by Desjarlais—though my background and assumptions no doubt play a major role in shaping my response to the situation—but a testament to the nature of the topic itself. Ghosts thrive on suspicion and on doubt, emerging on the edges of vision and dwelling in zones of

uncertainty. They appear only when they are unexpected, only where they are unwanted. Their presence is dispelled by attention; to seek them out is to guarantee you will find nothing at all.

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Against making sense: Appreciating absurd roundabouts in Malaysian Borneo

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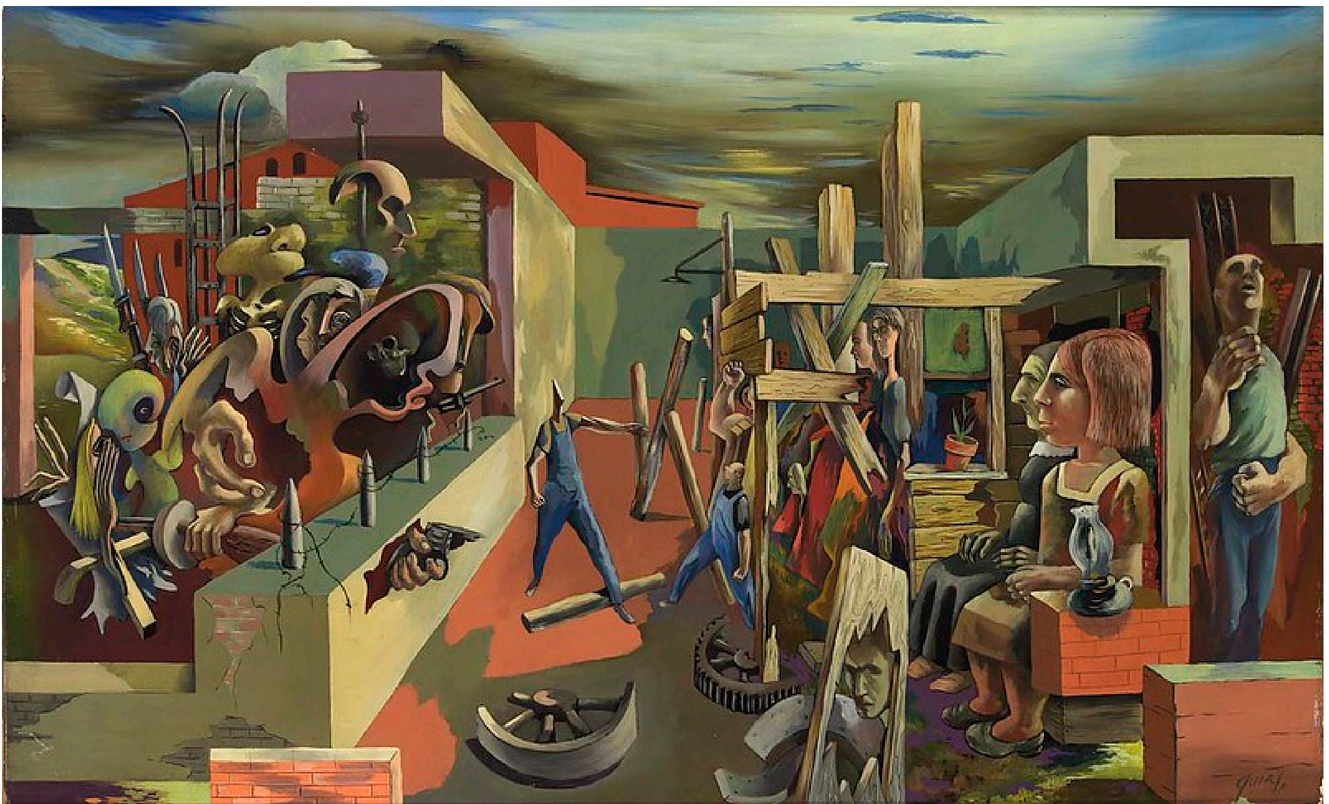

In Kuching, the capital of the Malaysian state of Sarawak, I found a musical roundabout. Large loudspeakers turn this otherwise innocuous infrastructure into an absurdist mashup of techno beats and car noises. Someone found a way to get a stereo system running in tropical rain, allocated budgeting for purchasing equipment, contracted builders and scheduled musical programming for these enigmatic loudspeakers. Surely this someone had a reason.

> *Writing about this roundabout, my reflex is to reach for a well-worn trope about encountering what one does not understand.*

Writing about this roundabout, my reflex is to reach for a well-worn trope about encountering what one does not understand. At the outset, the reader is presented with something strikingly foreign – both strange and confusing. Gradually, this encounter with strangeness will be contextualized, disassembled, and interpreted. In the third act, readers meet what was strange once again, but now made meaningful, understandable, and tame. Meaning is forcibly conscripted to pacify what was once strange and unsettling. So what else can I do? Making interpretive sense of idiosyncratic actions is what anthropologists do, right? (Geertz 1973).

To Kuchingites this baffling roundabout seems more of an aggravating reminder of wasted development dollars than a mystery in need of explanation.

I have asked friends from Kuching about this beat blasted roundabout. Inevitably, they would shrug in glib exasperation and say, "nang bodoh ah" (it's so stupid). For them, this unlikely roadside discotheque joins other pieces of engineering prowess in Kuching that scoff at straightforward explanations. Most prominent of these is the cat museum by the north Kuching city hall, identifiable by its entrance in the likeness of a distended paper mâché maw of a Cheshire cat whose mocking grin has been replaced by a rusty turnstile admitting visitors one at a time. A second less feline example is the enormous national pétanque center (the only pétanque courts I have ever seen in Malaysia) which dominates a village of less than 1000 people half an hour's drive from Kuching. To Kuchingites this baffling roundabout seems more of an aggravating reminder of wasted development dollars than a mystery in need of explanation.

Yet, as a survivor of doctoral training my impulse is still to brandish my scholarly bolt cutters and start forcibly breaking apart the barriers to understanding. Maybe, the techno music of this confounding roundabout is one of those things where some bit of cultural logic, so obvious and imponderable to my friends that it does not even need mention, would explain the seeming absurdity? If I had to guess along those lines, the music could be there to scare off ghosts and

witchcraft. Noise often does (Skeat 1965). Apparently, ghosts in the Malay world tend to prefer eating the livers of cheating husbands over raves in roundabouts. Or perhaps I would do better to adjust my theoretical lens? I suppose an interesting play of the ecstatic and the mundane inhabits this unintuitive roundabout. The music of raves and parties transposed onto roadside banalities could be read as a moment of questioning what is gained by distinguishing between the raucous and the routine. Do roads need to be mundane? Do raves need to be extraordinary? Perhaps this post-colonial hybridity of pathway and partying invites reconsideration not so much of why the music is there, but why we are surprised by its presence? Have cartesian dualisms and protestant ethics taught us to not only draw a sharp divide between carnival and conveyance but to wrinkle our collective noses at their inappropriate mixture? I guess I can't decisively say no. But are we really any better off for divining some poignant insight about western intellectualism through the artful application of 'Theory'?

Whatever insights are embedded within this displaced dance music, no one is actually dancing. There are no raves, no parties, nor casual enjoyers standing about, not even any aunties keeping the pounds at bay with collective jazzercise. Over iced coffees, roti canai and bawdy jokes, my friends and I just sit in the interminable techno trying to ignore the insensible and insignificant intonations of some DJ whose stylings are neither credited nor appreciated. No one even mentions it. The most acknowledgement this music gets is a slight shrug or a shaken head as we return to the car, crossing the roundabout with fingers in our ears.

Even so, would this whole thing be less strange if people were dancing to the music? The locals do not seem inclined to boogie down in this intersection. Dancing in Kuching is usually either the carefully rehearsed performance of ethnic heritage or deliberately silly gesturing in one of the restaurant backrooms that, come nighttime, transform into semi-legal dance clubs. The music DJ Roundabout puts on is too modern and the location too public to suit either purpose. It would be too hot to dance in the sun anyway. That particular cosmic disco ball is a bit too bright for the many Kuchingites who wish to avoid

heatstroke. Alas, no shadeful awnings shield prospective dancers from ultraviolet radiation amid the music. Roofs or no, the rain does nothing to halt the music either. Kuching's tropical downpour often disrupts traffic and occasionally sends river crocodiles into flooded homes, but it cannot stop the music.

The thing I cannot get past is why the system plays Christmas music in December. The seasonal playlist does not even switch to celebrated Christmas classics like the dulcet intonations of Mariah Carey reading aloud her single item Christmas wishlist. Instead, this roundabout's music programming sticks to the same techno-concerto as usual, except remixing Christmas music instead of Asian pop. This modulation of musical style does not correspond to a neighborhood wide celebration of Jesus Christ's birthday either. Kuching itself is a Muslim dominated city in a Muslim dominated Malaysia. So, who chooses to make this and only this minor seasonal modulation to the roundabout's music? Why does the music only shift for Christmas, not Easter, not Ramadan, not Chinese New Year? Perhaps there is some pious hacker out there who decided to update the music for Christmas, never bothering to justify themselves to anyone. Either way there is no Christmas tree to rock around.

Over Christmas I went on a road trip with Sarawakian friends. Starting early in the morning, we drove, in Sarawakian fashion, between houses sprinkled throughout Kuching and its periphery to shake hands, show face, and eat our way through the festive period. There was a clear pattern: handshakes – food – beers – jokes – watch half of an Adam Sandler movie on a stranger's couch – drive on – Repeat. It's fun. You eat too much, you meet people, you compliment the hosts' little Christmas altar in the corner and gradually get drunker. A couple of hours past midnight, you sit in the back of a pickup truck on a country road somewhere in the Bornean jungle trying to finally get someone to explain that noise polluting roundabout. But they just shrug, laugh and start calling you Kampung boy. Or maybe that's just me. Either way, I had to wake up the next morning with a hangover and find a different frame of mind.

But honestly, whose anxiety am I mitigating by tying myself in knots to

> *speculate about the rhyme and reason of this sonorous traffic circle?*

Incongruous music played non-stop for an unappreciative roundabout does not make a lot of sense. In principle, I could have spent my days trying to figure it out, finding out whose decisions led to this and puzzling out the work involved and costs of running it round the clock. But honestly, whose anxiety am I mitigating by tying myself in knots to speculate about the rhyme and reason of this sonorous traffic circle?

I will blame a bit of it on hardwired anthropological training – A professional drive to demonstrate publicly to every doubter in the world that my second home makes just as much sense as anywhere else. I admit there is also an impulse to prove myself and show that I actually understand the place and people I purport to study. I feel the professional need to demonstrate that I can conjure the high-level mysteries of anthropological mysticism and explicate the sublime purposes of the absurd. But I will not for this particular roundabout. Even if its noisy infrastructural mundanity makes sense to an anonymous someone out there, its social life is its absurdity.

> *Disenchanting the strangeness that colors people's lives does not always serve an anthropology guided by empathy and sharing life.*

Nietzsche observed that what he called the will to truth is often a project of pacification. Nietzsche asks why we seek to pin down the world in orderly recognizability. He then informs us that we are principally concerned with assuaging our own sense of discomfort at the inexplicable and the not yet known (Nietzsche 1999). Instead, he encourages us to rejoice when knowledge fails us because it permits us to continue to grow in our struggle. As anthropologists we sometimes find ourselves in situations where the impulse to understand and render something meaningful is misguided. At these moments we must reckon with what scholarship is when understanding itself is misleading. Susan Sontag went down a similar road in her essay 'Against interpretation' (2001). She argues

that as the critic interprets art they destroy what is important about art – its pleasures, its aesthetics and its emotionality. For Sontag, "The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means" (Sontag 2001, 10). Disenchanting the strangeness that colors people's lives does not always serve an anthropology guided by empathy and sharing life.

However, anthropology is not art critique, and sometimes we do need to understand and to see the meaning in things. To resist interpretation only to otherize and problematize would impoverish the discipline. The real conundrum is not whether I need to understand, but how to discern when deeper insights require gaps of understanding. When do I need to stop myself before I spend time investigating and disenchanting issues that inflect life with ineffable particularity?

> *When absurdity informs, flavors or shapes life we should learn from it, savor it and dare to cut ourselves on its sharp edges.*

Asking friends and interlocutors is probably the first and best move. If those who drive around musically absurd roundabouts think I am wasting my time in trying to understand the infinite infrastructural dj session then I probably am. Yet, even though I suspect this rule of thumb is a valuable bit of ethnographic pragmatism it is not wholly satisfying. In practice, asking locals or interlocutors is often intellectually indeterminate. What if locals disagree? What if disinterest in understanding reflects local ethnic differences or political faultlines? While my interlocutors' insights are crucial, it abdicates my own intellectual responsibility to leave them the work of distinguishing between anthropologically instructive absurdity and uninformed dismissal. The crucial question is whether there is something valuable to learn by grappling with how something might not make sense? When absurdity informs, flavors or shapes life we should learn from it, savor it and dare to cut ourselves on its sharp edges.

There is a palpable peculiarity to the ever-new incongruities of Kuching and Sarawak. I would misunderstand Kuching if I tried to understand every puzzling

thing there. Life there can be weird and confusing as much as it can be joyous, challenging, painful, restful or rewarding. Knowledge, anthropological or otherwise, often requires making sense of things, but not always. We should be brave enough to be baffled.

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