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The Affects of Change: An Ethnography of the Affective Experiences of the 2013 Military Intervention in Egypt

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Nuur was the first person who told me, in the fall of 2016, that she continued to experience the past in the present. She said that during this time the streets were telling her a story that was different to what I saw and experienced in Greater Cairo. As soon as she went out of her apartment and downtown she could sense and see dead bodies from the tumultuous revolts from the past. “The streets are talking to me,” she said, and she tried to explain: “We see other things in the street. So many layers...”

The overall subject of this book is how to study change. While other contributions use narratives, objects, institutions, or particular events to

¹The selected ethnographical vignettes and some sections on my mode of analysis in this chapter are discussed further in Malmström (2019).

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make sense of change, I want to take a different approach and explore the role of emotions, feelings, and ambience in the way change is experienced, embodied, and materialized—just like how Nuur felt how the streets of Cairo had changed in the aftermath of the revolution in 2011.¹ This approach is particularly relevant when analyzing change in the making in the midst of violent uprisings when conventional research is not possible. With the inquiry into the events of 2011 and beyond in Egypt this chapter discusses and reflects on the affective consequences that resonate with the various phases of political crisis and transform everyday engagement with the material world.

This focus on affect is part of a broader epistemological turn away from language and its critique of post-structuralism's inability to recognize the pre-discursive forces that also shape the body and the way we experience and understand the world. The framework of affect theory allows us to assess societies in flux by rethinking the relation between body and mind. The question that I consider is: how we can ground such an analysis in empirical research? Like Navaro-Yashin (2009) and other anthropologists, I suggest doing so by exploring the materiality of affect. By that I mean questioning both how material surroundings provoke emotional responses and how affect is materialized in the body. Such a multi-paradigmatic theoretical approach takes into account both affect and materiality that enables me to formulate new questions and thoughts as well as to develop a methodology of research in an extraordinary, constrained political environment.

The precarious security situation in Egypt during the years of crisis prevented researchers from conducting a structured kind of inquiry. As a result, knowledge produced during this volatile time is mostly fragmentary. This chapter seeks to bind fragments together by drawing on the emotions, observations and sensory experiences of my interlocutors and myself. It asks, how do emotions (or effects of affect) move between bodies, objects, places, and spaces in relation to time? I will argue that by looking into the intimate connections between bodies, things, and the cityscape of Cairo we can throw new light on the temporality, frequency, and rhythm of change.

Although the events I describe in this chapter took place in January and February 2011, July and August 2013 and the fall of 2016, my analysis draws on fieldwork carried out during a number of stays of several months' duration between 2013 and 2018 as well as on my continued interactions with my interlocutors through phone calls and conversations via social media and e-mail when I was outside Egypt. The afterlife of the failed January 25 Revolution is key to situating the temporal layer in which this research took place, since every afterlife of a critical event (Das 1995) "influences present-day social practices and creates new affective worlds" (Škrbić Alempijević and Potkonjak 2016, 108). The story of Nuur indeed shows the importance of bringing temporality and duration into the analysis of how people experienced that aftermath of a revolution, and how after rapid transformations and trauma, they may live in two times at the same time.

I have known many of my research subjects since the early 2000s; they are Cairene women and men of different generations and social strata, mostly well-educated, and with different, and often changing, orientations in relation to Islam. Some have no religion, some are Sunni, some combine Sufism and communism—at the moment (cf. Schielke 2015). Most identify as Muslims but choose a bohemian lifestyle and a private relationship with God, actively negotiating social and religious contexts. They frequent local coffee shops and alternative bars in downtown Cairo. The women and men are, in their own view, critical, Left-oriented, and politically aware, sometimes referring to themselves as intellectuals (*muthaqqafin* for men and *muthaqqafat* for women) or the new bourgeoisie. They include poets, writers, film-makers, actors, musicians, and dancers with varying and generally uncertain incomes, often also working outside their vocation to survive. Others are journalists, lawyers, scholars, and human rights activists. In light of the politically sensitive nature of the subject matter here I have decided not to provide any further information about them to ensure their safety.

The Rhythms of a Revolution and Its Aftermath

To begin this exploration of materiality, affects, and rhythms, I would like to introduce a love story that was significantly shaped by the revolutionary events of 2011² and their aftermath:

Early February, 2011: Downtown Cairo

On February 2, 2011, the day of the Battle of the Camels, when pro-Mubarak thugs on horses and camels attacked protesters in Tahrir Square (BBC 2012), Fatma was standing in front of the Egyptian Museum with Hani, whom she had met just before the failed revolution of January 25, when a young man standing beside her was shot in the head.

Maria, he got shot in the brain, nobody knows who did it... after the 28th there were no police, they didn't exist... Who sent the snipers?... nobody knows ... some guys who belong to the police or criminals paid by Mubarak...

Someone asked her to hold the back of his head, and she remembered that it had felt strangely soft. She could touch his brain. It was all over her clothes. The young man died in her arms. At that moment she sensed a strong sexual arousal. As she recalled this experience she also told me that this was the one time in her life she had ever expressed in words that she wanted to have sex (see Malmström 2019). She had whispered to Hani. "I want you, NOW."

Later in February, 2011: Downtown Cairo

Fatma had difficulties talking about when Hani left her for the first time. But once, she did: she told me that after the eighteen days they had "lived on the streets" and had been shot at at least four times (the snipers missed),

²The so-called Arab Spring was a series of anti-government uprisings that spread across the Middle East and North Africa from late 2010 onwards.

Hani had left her. She did not understand. Fatma began her story with the following words:

I felt as if my head was being squeezed by a stone, and something heavy was lying on my chest. I had a high pulse, but low blood pressure.

Fatma did not leave her bed or eat for ten days. She lost a lot of weight. Hani called one of her daughters and begged her not to let Fatma slip out of his hands, saying that he would never let her go.

January, 2015: Downtown Cairo

In January 2015, after four years of ups and downs following the dynamics and rhythms of oppositional politics in Egypt, the relationship between Fatma and Hani was over. She finally left him. His last words were, "You will come back to me." Fatma told me that that would never happen and said with sorrow in her voice, "I will never forget him, even though he's mortally injured me."

A striking aspect of Fatma's narrative is the parallel between her arousal at the start of her relationship with Hani triggered by holding a man with a mortal head injury and the ways she physically experiences her separation as her head "being squeezed." Above and beyond, her narrative shows the various intensities of love that follows the political rhythm as well as the constant uncertainty of the floating days and nights that encompass revolutions and the intense embodied lived memories of the insecure political bodies that may return unexpectedly in new contexts.

Many of my friends spoke about passion of varying intensity: intense love during the intense moments of the uprisings, the "death" of that same love during "slow" periods, and the rebirth of passion (with the same person or another) during new politically intense periods. Both women and men recounted certain urban spots, often with dreamy eyes and a touch of nostalgia in their voices. Something similar happened when they talked about the clothes they wore (they were "sacred"), the taste and the scent of the food they ate, or the energy and euphoria

they sensed from the crowd in the iconic Square or elsewhere during, for example, the first eighteen days of the 2011 uprisings.

These accounts show that bodies, objects, and places play a crucial role in how events and changes are experienced. They also show how different rhythms are involved. By combining a focus on the materiality of affect (Besnier 1990; Coole and Frost 2010; Grosz 2010; Harman 2010; Massumi 1995, 2002) with what Lefebvre called *rhythmanalysis* (Lefebvre 2004; Lefebvre and Régulier 2004), we can reach new insights about transformations that unfold during fierce uprisings in relation to both individuals and collectives. As Lefebvre (2004) points out:

The body consists of a bundle of rhythms, different but in tune. It is not only in music that one produces **perfect** harmonies. The body produces a **garland** of rhythms, one could say a bouquet, though these words suggest an aesthetic arrangement, as if the artist nature had foreseen beauty—the harmony of the body (of bodies)—that results from all its history. (Lefebvre 2004, 20)

Lefebvre understands rhythm as a way of reading a space and as the repetition of a measure at a certain frequency. Strongly relevant to the analysis of social change in relation to revolution and war, which the above and below ethnographic brief accounts make explicit, Lefebvre and Régulier (2004, 77) point out that “We are only conscious of most of our rhythms when we begin to suffer from some irregularity.” This theoretical take offers a novel approach to societies in potential change at “an exceptional time” (Scott 2014, 34), and insights into public affect and its transmission during periods of low intensity and moments of forced stability (Fig. 10.1).

Fig. 10.1 Devices of resistance, May 2013 (Photo by author)

The Massacre and the Trauma

Exploring the changes related to individuals and collectives in their relation to rhythm, as we can see with the examples of Nuur and Fatma, has political consequences (cf. Mahmood 2005; Navaro-Yashin 2002). The body acts, talks, and influences but with other means than common language. The body is also evidence, and can be de/re-formed by events, as other scholars have stated (Scheper-Huges and Bourgois 2004). Bodies

set into collectives as in demonstrations may also make political struggles tangible, sometimes reaffirming and sometimes contesting forms of domination.

As an example, let us turn to summer 2013. On August 14, 2013, the sit-ins in Cairo at Rabaa al-Adawiya and al-Nahda were dispersed by the Egyptian military, in what Human Rights Watch (2014) identifies as one of the world's largest killings of demonstrators in a single day in recent history. The Rabaa al-Adawiya and al-Nahda sites were occupied by thousands of supporters of ex-President Mohamed Morsi, who had been ousted on July 3, as well as by others protesting the military's political intervention. The dispersal of the sit-ins turned out to be both the beginning and the continuation of the state's fight against what it perceives as (global) terrorism. Afterwards, General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the current President of Egypt, was appointed First Deputy Prime Minister, also retaining his post as Minister of Defense. He immediately addressed the nation on national television about the need to fight terrorism, continuing the strategy used by former Egyptian state leaders to weaken political opposition, and not least the Mubarak regime, which "had staked its international legitimacy on its claim to be acting as a bulwark against Islamic fundamentalists, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood" (Hirschkind 2012, 50).

Grand narratives about massacres always involve a conflict between different interpretations of different ideologies—in this case, two institutions with two different narratives about Egypt's history and future: the modern nationalist movement and the revivalist Islamist current—and the manipulation of consciousness. Who has the right to speak on behalf of history? Who has the right to exist?

What I call a collective body of trauma developed quickly during these first days of horror among the politically active Egyptians I know, both in continuation and in disruption with their affective experiences since the January 25 Revolution. A clear majority of my interlocutors who were politically active during the uprisings and lived through both joy and despair talk explicitly about their own and others' tangible affective responses to politics as depression, denial, anger, fatigue, and a sense of hopelessness that developed following the summer of 2013. They also note how psychiatric medication became commonly prescribed

thereafter, not only among themselves, to help people to cope with the everyday.

Here is an example: Kamal, a young male protester, who, among many others, was shot in the eye by Central Security Forces snipers who targeted protesters' heads from November 2011 onwards. He was still deeply depressed when I talked with him many years after the incident. He was convinced that his eye had been unable to be part of his body any longer and had been forced to leave it because of the protesters' massive political failure from 2011 onwards. He underscored the indivisibility of his individual body and the failure of the revolts. He resisted to use "the fake eye" for a long time during the novel "slow time" in Egypt, maybe because it not only reminded him about the collective failure during previous intense time, but that he, by accepting it, let the new regime (and its victory) enter his own body. Here, we can see how Kamal is linking his personal tragedy both casually and symbolically to the political failure as a way of making sense of it while claiming a greater meaning for it.

Sensing Change: A Study of Change Grounded in Empirical Research

An open question, here, is how the trauma resulting from the 2013 massacres could affect so many persons simultaneously. It is in this regard particularly that the empirical appraisal of materialities, affects, and rhythms proves an important heuristic tool for ethnographic research. The days that followed the massacres of August 2013 were extreme embodied lived experiences because of the silence during the first days, and soon thereafter the pitch black of the curfewed nights, were total opposites of the loud sounds of war during the daytime. This sharp contrast between the sounds and the changes in rhythm during the day and the lack of sound during the night resulted in a general lack of citizens' ability to navigate, because everything had changed in relation to sound, and also, dramatically, to sight, scent, touch, and taste. Cairo nights are normally very loud with the noise of traffic, street vendors, coffee shops, and various types of people strolling around the streets.

During the summer of 2013, Cairo felt more like an unframed territory (Malmström 2014a).

If the researcher and the researcher's interlocutors experienced affective politics together through the sonic materiality of war, for example as I did during the summer of 2013 in Cairo, how can scholars grasp these affective forces and changes in rhythm, and what does my self-ethnography enable us to say about broader schemes of change? How does the empirical evidence provide researchers with conclusive data about changes at the level of my close surroundings in Egypt? Let me give another brief account from mid-August 2013 in Egypt to illustrate.

It was during the "Day of Rage"—which was also the protesters' slogan in Egypt on January 25, 2011—the day the Muslim Brotherhood asked its supporters to take part after Friday prayers in a nationwide demonstration against the security forces' violent dispersal of the sit-ins earlier in the week. I was staying, as always, in a female-led household in central Cairo: We—a couple of women of different generations—were still completely ignorant of the details of what was going on and what the next step would be. We not only heard and felt but also smelled the fear in the air, which consisted partly of the odor of our anxiety-ridden bodies. The vibrations of war terrified us all and clearly affected us. Even if we did not understand it yet, I think our fear was constantly increasing due to the totally altered rhythm of the Cairo we knew. In addition to erratic gunfire from different types of firearms, we were bombarded by voices booming through megaphones, sirens, helicopters that circled again and again overhead, and by the roar of military jets passing repeatedly over our heads.

For my research, I tried to go out as much as possible during the following days, engaging in "sense walking," a methodology by which I tried to experience the streets in an intersensory way, not focusing on my sight. An intersensorial approach mobilizes all the means we have to perceive our surroundings. It is an imperative starting point if we wish to adequately understand affect, for, as Connor explains, "the senses are multiply related; we rarely if ever apprehend the world through one sense alone" (2004, 1). However, focusing on only one sense at a time

(sound walking as methodology³) can be employed as a way of experiencing changes in the materiality of affect of vibrations, or changes in the everyday rhythm, since even though it is impossible to shut down our other senses, it is possible to consciously focus on listening to the alterations of the empirical soundscape.

As shown in the examples above, sound is of particular interest for grasping affects. Instinctively we understand the sounds of violence, aggression and fear; we run away, take cover, protect ourselves, retaliate. We also intuitively recognize the sounds of tranquility and safety. We move through these forces of affect as we move through the world (Malmström et al. 2015). In looking at resonance, vibration, energy, and sound, we are simultaneously profoundly material and intensely ethereal. Furthermore, if we are attuned to vibration, sound is all a question of motion and rhythm.

How is it possible in the context of contemporary Egypt to grasp circulating forces of affect, and why is affective politics relevant to the study of change? We may share the same affect, but the tangible emotions that follow may be similar or differ since we belong to different classes, genders, generations, etcetera, and we each have unique lived experiences.

Nevertheless, I contend that dramatic changes in rhythm enable us to see broader schemes of social and political change, in which Egypt may be seen as an example of an autocratic regime that uses materiality such as the absence or presence of sound to induce citizen dependence on the “new” state authority. The alterations in rhythm from hectic and fast (perceived by people as *normal*) to slow (perceived by them as *surreal*) with interruptions of extreme intensity (perceived by them as *abnormal*) transformed the active political Egyptians I know in a particular way during 2013 that has political consequences today. The old rhythm has never returned. In my view, that is a permanent change.

Today’s rhythm under President Sisi is “normal” on the surface, but it is unpredictable. Politically active Cairenes are trying to follow the constantly changing rhythm to be able to navigate their cityscape. (The

³The members of the World Soundscape Project under the leadership of composer R. Murray Schafer coined the concept in Vancouver in the 1970s.

state's intentional alteration of rhythm is discussed further below.) In 2011, and even in 2013 before the massacre, they had striven to create a new home, but in the summer of 2013 these Cairenes were displaced from their own city. My interlocutors in Egypt today perceive the past and the present as clear and interconnected, but the future is often reimagined as lost (Scott 2014).

As a result, the military did not heal the collective body of trauma. Quite the opposite: it created a deep national gash in the same collective body, an ugly wound that is still bleeding. I contend that employing the lens of the materiality of affect and rhythmanalysis, in relation to empirical data from the summer of 2013 in Egypt, can provide us with conclusive data on dramatic rifts in the social and political landscape.

I do not think the new military state authority sought to reinstate the pre-revolutionary rhythm or to return the sonic rhythm to “normal”; instead the autocratic regime suppressed all expressions of discontent, in stark contrast with the 2011–2013 period when the sound of shouted slogans were ubiquitous for instance, even in the games of children. As a result, the military created, via sound and material surveillance, its own “static” rhythm which left no space for any breath of opposition or free speech. The extreme disruption of the sonic rhythm during 2013 brought a change in Egypt and was the first step in the current military's social transformation—however, this was not the social change that the revolutionaries of Egypt had fought for in 2011, but its absolute opposite.

Through brutal interventions and the sonic alteration of everyday rhythms, the military regime destroyed the potential for harmony and created confusion among Cairo's citizens. On the basis of my experience of the events of 2011 and of their afterlife, I contend that it is vital to identify and attend to the vibrational politics of disruption and the affective mobilization of bodies in rhythm as a phenomenon that can be exploited by contesting forces as a form of political violence (cf. Malmström 2014a). As one of my interlocutors said, Sisi does not give the people space, as Mubarak did; instead he “strangles” every Egyptian; any unwelcome sound of opposition is destroyed by force. The state knew how to utilize rhythm and manipulate time: it cut up the rhythm and broke up time in ways unfamiliar to Cairo.

Further, with the escalating nationalism and polarization of the post-Mubarak era, suspicions ingrained in the economic, political, and social dispossession characteristic of the neoliberal policies of the later Mubarak era (Elyachar 2005) have, according to the Egyptians I know, been further embedded in people's experiences and expectations of their environment today. There are countless examples of materialized experiences of suspicion devised by the military regime in today's Egypt, such as sophisticated new surveillance and control technologies (Amar 2013), spatial governmentality including blocked streets, watchdogs, and checkpoints at night (cf. Ghannam 2013; Ismail 2006), and, on politically sensitive anniversaries of the revolutions, futuristic face-obscuring masks, new uniforms for security personnel and new armored vehicles, especially in downtown Cairo but elsewhere in the country as well. The uncertain security situation in today's Egypt, interventions by the security police and national paranoia have all mutated into a world of suspicion. Highly contagious, this suspicion continues to escalate in urgency. People have become hypervigilant. What has developed is a local culture of old-new paranoia (habitual during my 2002–2003 fieldwork) that is materializing in the cityscape. During the autumn of 2017, for example, I experienced something novel, because this time, many Egyptians explicitly warned me not to speak about politics in public or to be extra careful while using my phone. They even gave me the advice to change my smartphone to a simpler version because it is safer in relation to monitoring. Even more important was not to bring any phone at all if I planned sensitive interviews. I have been warned many times during previous fieldworks, but this time I was told to take extra care, because “we all are monitored,” not just our telephones, but also in coffee shops and other public places. Hence, I realized how this world of suspicion became reflected in the things we use and the places we visit.

Assets and Limits of the Methodology

My axis of analysis offers an alternative interpretation to those provided by more logocentric narratives of the 2013 events in Cairo, but the framework of affective politics may further be used to elaborate new

thoughts, reflections, and inquiries about Egypt's collective body of trauma among politically active people. In my opinion, it provides important insights into non-discursive dimensions of change. It grasps change at the very moment that it happens, as well as alterations in bodies' and cities' rhythm via the transmission of affect between relational bodies, scholars' bodies included.

Shifting or combining theoretical approaches, however, entails new methodologies, challenges, and inquiries. For example, it is impossible for the researcher to conduct interviews during uncertain and violent rapid events, but it is possible to listen to her or his own and others' bodies and surroundings and to use subjective and collective affective experiences in field, since forces of affect flow from the individual to the collective, and vice versa.

Thinking and writing about sensory knowledge and emotive elements is not easy: the blurred binaries of the knowledge of being and feeling have their limitations. Of course, the researcher must take notice of her or his own body's lived experience of affect, but how does she or he read the transmissions of affect between bodies, collective bodies, and the material surrounding? Furthermore, how can the lived experiences of bodies be interpreted if the researcher does not also use narratives and interviews? If we are not self-contained in terms of our energies, and if the transmission of affect comes via interaction with other people and our environment and has a physiological impact, how will we understand these processes and their consequences?

Employing rhythmanalysis in combination to more usual methods of ethnographic inquiry means that the researcher must listen to and think with her or his own body in lived temporality—lived experience being key—including hearing, smelling, touching, seeing, and tasting the traces that mark out the (changing) rhythms. In this specific context, regarding touch in relation to motion, the late Merleau-Ponty (1968) talks about both tactility and touch, both of which are related to vibration and rhythm, as mentioned. This is the first step to grasp change in the making.

Emotions resonate with the material and the sociographical environment. My approach is combined with other methods of inquiry, as the ethnographic examples I gave show. I combine the study of

affective experiences and rhythmanalysis with other research tools, such as interviews and narratives to explore, for example, how memories are preserved and communicated through affective relations to specific objects (Povrzanović Frykman 2016).

My argument here is that employing my mode of analysis in relation to extraordinary uncertain events is reproducible in anthropology, as I have discussed in this chapter. My point of departure has allowed me to investigate the meaning of the abrupt changes of rhythm that the revolution and its aftermath produced in Cairo's landscape. It raises questions about change, repetition, identity, difference, contrast, and continuity (Stuart Elden, in Lefebvre 2004). My selected methodology allowed me to listen to the houses, the streets, and the city of Cairo, and not least to individual and collective bodies. If we start by inquiring into affective experiences and explore in dialogue with my interlocutors the changing rhythms of relational resonant bodies, things and societies, the analysis will add to our knowledge about change.

Concluding Remarks

... this human body is the site and place of interaction between the biological, the physiological (nature) and the social (often called the cultural), where each of these levels, each of these dimensions, has its own specificity, therefore its space-time: its rhythm. Whence the inevitable shocks (stresses), disruptions and disturbances in this ensemble whose stability never guaranteed. (Lefebvre and Régulier 2004, 81)

This chapter has reflected on how bodies, matter, urban place, and space are intimately linked to each other, and how changes to the familiar rhythm of the every day create disorientation and anxiety. It has explored how bodies, things, and the cityscape influence one another, and how the materialization of certain clusters of affect is linked to notions of an imagined new nation or the loss of the same. The body is acted upon by other subjects, by (non)living materialities, places, spaces, and the

un/conscious self. Thus, the body is constantly formed in relation to different assemblages through its lived experiences.

However, as scholars we will never be able to grasp affect in the making; we can only grasp its concrete sensorial outcomes, that is to say the effects of affect (or emotions). Examining the material consequences of uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa region, today as well as in the remembered past, may allow us to address key methodological issues in qualitative research in innovative and creative ways. As Lefebvre (2004) notes, there is always a rhythm where there is interaction between a place, a time, and an expenditure.

Recognizing the variations in the rhythms of different categories of people and embracing their embodied political experience is a significant field for examination, given that political actions are expressed and acted out through the body (see also Malmström 2014b). Even objects such as wooden tables, pencils, or mirrors move with the movements of the Earth and in response to intense vibrations close by. Hence experience is embedded in materialities which contain movements and energies: materialities which alter rhythms (cf. Lefebvre and Régulier 2004) and which therefore it is crucial to encompass in our understanding of the world.

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