Dust, desert and storytelling: Thinking with the grain of geography

Posted on December 12, 2024 by Aya Nassar [vc_row][vc_column][vc_column_text css=””]Architect Samia Henni’s edited book *Deserts are not Empty* is part of a major research and exhibition project on colonial toxicities that uncovers the not-very-well-known story of France detonating atomic bombs in Algeria. I build on Henni’s exhibition and work around the entanglement of coloniality, postcoloniality with the geographies of North Africa. With Henni and Menna Agha, who wrote a chapter in the same volume, my intention is to think with dust, residue, sand and water and the possibility of storytelling violent geographies. I have been thinking of dust as an ecological element, a poetic, a metaphor and an embodied entanglement. Dust might enable me (us) to interrogate the stories of violence, fragmentation and interruption of space.

The Algerian Revolution (or the Algerian War for Independence) is the paradoxical background of Henni’s exhibition *Performing Colonial Toxicity*. The revolution (or the War for independence) lasted from 1954 to 1962, culminating with Algerian Independence. However, between 1960 and

1966, the French government secretly detonated a series of atomic bombs. Four atmospheric bombs (with code names Jerboa) were detonated in the Algerian Sahara as well as 13 underground ones detonated in a granite mountain. Other subsidiary atmospheric experiments codenamed ‘Pollen’ were carried out (between 64 and 66), just after Algeria celebrated its independence.

Henni’s *Performing Colonial Toxicity* is an exhibition centred on displaying and translating archival material that had been declassified in 2013. The archival material is, as she states, incomplete, or perhaps insufficient to write out a complete story of France’s harm. Yet, the exhibition does not allow shortcuts. To be in it, is to plug through archival material, testimonies, oral histories, documentaries, one after the other: To enter and read the archive of toxicity, no matter how incomplete. Interspersing the archival material are multiple forms of visualisations of the afterness of these detonations. France’s atomic bombs spread a radioactive fallout across west and north Africa and the mediterranean. Secret, silenced, redacted and obscure traces, yes, but the exhibition tries to catch these traces that inhabit the elements: The soil, the air, and the dust.

Ironically, the code names of the experiments also referred to ecological and elemental harm: ‘Pollen’ signalled the atmospheric experiments, and the names of precious stones linked with the detonations inside the mountain.

In the testimonies featured in the exhibition, one of the eyewitnesses recounts how in their village, they were gathered and told to wait and see where the smoke will blow after detonation…

> ‘We were sitting there, they told us when the bomb would explode, and we waited. And when it exploded the whole earth shook. The mountains shook and everything shook. The earth danced. There you have it. That’s all. Once it exploded, what could we have been thinking? Since we didn’t know anything, we were far from knowing that this was something that would have consequences, that would make us sick or something else, huh!’

In 2015, NASA released breathtaking visualisations of just how much of the Saharan dust travels the world to feed plants found in the Amazon,

> ‘For the first time, a NASA satellite has quantified in three dimensions how much dust makes this trans-Atlantic journey. Scientists have not only measured the volume of dust, they have also calculated how much phosphorus – remnant in Saharan sands from part of the desert’s past as a lake bed – gets carried across the ocean from one of the planet’s most desolate places to one of its most fertile…this dust carries nutrients that the Amazonian soil needs but does not have.’

In a moment of climate catastrophe, it is a wonderful ecological story of interdependence.

Dust storms from north Africa to the northern mediterranean coast, are received with increasingly racialised metaphors. As Nerea Calvillo shows in Aeropolis, Saharan dust storms evoke ambivalent affects referred to as dust episodes when arriving in Spain. In southern Europe, Saharan dust storms are construed as a foreign other, and invasive matter, that even fortress Europe cannot keep at bay.

Henni notes elsewhere that the toxicity France inflicted came back to haunt Europe. In 2021, ‘social media and European newspapers published photographs of the ‘soft milky-yellow light’ and ‘the beautiful yellow ochre skies of Europe.’ This ‘beautiful’ colour of parts of southern and central Europe was caused by sand particles and dust from the Sahara. According to weather services, the wind conditions in the Saharan regions of Algeria, Mali and Mauritania forced sand two to five kilometres up into the sky before it was blown towards Europe via southerly winds.

The Euronews article Irony as Saharan Dust Returns Radiation from French Nuclear Tests in 1960s asserts that,

> ‘Dust from the Sahara Desert blown north by strong winds to France did not only bring stunning light and sunsets. It also carried abnormal levels of radiation. The spectres of France’s

> colonial toxification of the desert are now haunting Europe, while colonial pipelines and other extractive infrastructures continue to supply consumers in Europe and elsewhere.'

Henni argues that inflicting harm on the Algerian desert is possible because of a colonial imagination of the desert as an empty place. As I encountered the meticulous display of archival material in her exhibition it became evident that Henni wanted the desert to speak.

Menna Agha's chapter also attempts to allow for the desert to tell its story, though through a different register. Agha's story is next to the High Dam in Egypt, built as an anti-colonial project of post-independence Egypt. The dam, and the lake forming behind it, submerged Nubian homeland and displaced many Nubians. Many scholars have tried to reconcile the contradictions of that moment: The ambivalence of Egyptian Nubians who participated in the post-independence state project and also lamented its loss, or the waves of reparative demands that seek to redress connection to Nubian ancestral lands. For most, their calls have been through verse, song and storytelling. But this is storytelling through land submerged under water. It is also as Alia Mosallam notes, very much a story about neighbouring the Nile, and the spectres that disappear once Nubians were displaced from it.

Agha shows how the sacrifice of Nubian land rested on its colonial construction as desert and deserted. Yet, the repertoire of songs she enlists as storytelling warns of the steel bridges of the city and documents a consistent refusal of being silenced. Sand dunes are not empty or vacant, the sand has jinn, and the river has the people of the Nile, spectacular and spectral kin.

I take both of Agha and Henni's work as an occasion to work through the relationship of space, built environment, the elements and politics of the Middle East and the possibilities of multiple stories in storytelling. One of the long standing questions when engaging with colonial history is the question of time and temporality of violence, but time and temporality intertwine with the politics of knowledge and/or ignorance. What is it that we are allowed to know of colonial violence and ecological harm that seem to happen somewhere 'unknowable'?

These harms haunt, in all the meanings of haunting: They haunt as a spectre, as a story that demands to be told. Their hauntings can be found in the specks of dust of our deserts and rolling ecologies.[/vc_column_text][vc_toggle title=”Reading group event details” open=”true” css=””]Date: 7th August 2024
Title: Thinking with the grain of geography: Dust, desert and storytelling with Aya Nassar
Speaker: Aya Nassar
Chair: Teodora Todorova
Minutes by: Teodora Todorova[/vc_toggle][vc_toggle title=”Selected minutes” css=””]

Aya begins with a reflection on Islamophobic far-right racial violence in the UK which is taking place in August 2024.

Aya:

> It is a particularly difficult time to be a racialised person in the UK so thank you for being here today. Also, thank you for being here on an August day when you could choose to be on holiday instead. I’m not comfortable presenting my own work and instead decided to link the two chosen readings to my work-in-progress on cities that will be published soon. The two chapters we’ve read are written by architects and I’m not an architect, but I am interested in storytelling in relation to the Middle East – a geography that is replete with violence or labeled as violent which is a form of epistemic violence.

Aya begins her presentation with a quote by a film maker.

Aya:

> He is interested in how we can think about landscapes as representing violence: How to think about violence and representations of violence in creative works such as films and exhibitions, and as tools for storytelling. How elemental poetics can help us think through Arab geographies as revolutionary

> subjects and not simply as cities where revolutions happen. I'm interested in literary approaches that help us think through questions around revolution and catastrophe – such as environmental catastrophe – which we all share. The works I study think of the inheritance of Arab geographies in terms of time, space, and revolutionary ideas as what I call elemental poetics. Thinking about the phenomenology of air, water, fire, earth – chemicals, pollutants, metals, etc. I use four art works to think through the legacies of toxicity.
>
> Samia Henni's chapter is based on an exhibition about the Algerian Revolution of the 1950s/1960s. Shortly before Algeria's independence in 1962 the French detonated a series of atomic bombs in the Sahara. Samia's exhibition uses previously classified archival material from France to tell the story of this event. Working with archives means accepting that the material is incomplete, but it is also heavy to deal with the subject. The radioactivity of the detonated atomic bombs spread to North Africa and the South of Europe creating a lifetime of toxicity.

Aya reads an eyewitness testimony of the detonation of the atomic bombs.

Aya:

> And the residents of the Sahara were left without any preparation or care in the aftermath of these experiments.

Aya shows a clip about a scientific study of dust measurements and the level of toxicity in the dust of the Sahara.

Aya:

> When the dust storms reach Europe, it becomes a foreign event – Nerea Calvillo has written about this – and the lack of knowledge that the toxicity is a legacy of France's atomic experiments in the 1960s. The radioactivity of the desert dust is

toxic coloniality which haunts Europe.

The second artwork is the film Cement the plot of which is based in Lebanon. Cement is about numerous layers of coloniality – Syrian refugees working in Lebanon. Cement is an essential element in the building of modern structures – water, air, toxicity but also a vital element for the construction of structures to live in.

The film Mud is the third artwork. It is about bricklayers in Sudan. Mud is earth and water. The film is set on the bank of the River Nile. The symbolism of Mud is that it is neither land nor water but a metaphor for the Nile delta. The flow of the Nile dictates seasonal labour. The film is set during the height of the Sudanese Revolution – myth, speculation, and fantasy are interwoven in the narrative of the film. The main character stories the complexity of the landscape as a metaphor for the Sudanese revolution.

The fourth is an experiment in storytelling by Menna Agha. In Menna's chapter, the submerged land, of the flooding of the Nubian lands, is a story of loss and dispossession but not just that. The story of the land is a story of ancestral heritage that has been lost – a land that no longer exists – but that lives on in intergenerational inheritance. This is the theme of the second chapter we read.

I want to conclude by offering three notes. The first is about entangled granular geographies – Algeria, Lebanon, Egypt, Sudan. The second note concerns the affordance of thinking with elements – the afterlives of the revolutions are being storied in the landscapes and the political geographies of these lands – and thinking about the geographies of the Middle East beyond environmental catastrophe. Thirdly, a note on storytelling as a poetic act against all odds. Thank you for reading with me and listening to this presentation.

Reader:

Thank you very much for your inspiring presentation. The readings and your presentation made me think about the erasure of knowledge and the erasure of historical records concerning atrocities and about historical and political silence and how they serve to foster and create ignorance which is embodied and enacted as lack of care and lack of protection for colonised people.

Aya:

Erasure is really key. Samia's exhibition tries to capture the eyewitness accounts of the detonation of the atomic bombs by the French shortly before Algeria's independence. And about how people are not told about the experiments but also how the experiments were allowed to happen because of a mindset that thinks of the desert as wasteland, as outside the colony, even as outside Algeria, as no-man's land, as an empty and desolate desert. But the desert is not empty. Erasure is key – lack of awareness about toxicity is also lack of care and lack of accountability, and lack of agency in terms of denial about not being able to reverse the harm that has been done… The second film I spoke about came out at the height of the refugee crisis in Europe and I wonder how much has changed since then.

Reader:

These colonial harms also create a clear image of the intergenerational legacies. These toxic particles are in the sand and in the air and once a year the toxic Sahara Desert returns to harm the former coloniser.

Aya:

There is a shock that things would come to haunt us again.

Reader:

I'm really interested in the question of temporality and how toxicity transcends beyond imaginative time. Thinking with the elements brings us in conversation with time and thinking about time in a way that other concepts don't fully allow us to.

Aya:

We need to think of toxicity as non-spectacular violence and in reverse how activists are mobilising against depletion and harm. The French detonated atomic bombs in Algeria in the early 1960s and we don't get to know even partial details until 2013 when some of the archives are declassified. We also need to think about the effects of the revolutionary horizons which have not made these post and anti-colonial acts. Revolution could involve acts which do not have consequences in your lifetime. There is an Islamic prophetic saying that runs like 'Even if the world is about to end, and you had a sapling that you were about to plant, you still plant it.'

Reader:

The obsession with nuclear war and nuclear catastrophe in Europe in contrast to the lack of knowledge and care in relation to radioactive harm perpetrated elsewhere speaks to the coloniality of danger and harm.

Aya:

One could say the end of the world has already happened repeatedly all over the world at some point in time. So maybe we need to think about the poetics of survival. Survival

challenges the notion of mastery and its reverse which is giving up.

Reader:

Can you recommend other films and poetry you're working on that we can consume for inspiration?

Aya:

Films: Foragers (2022), by Joumana Manaa (documentary), The Dam (2023), by Ali Cherri, Taste of Cement (2016) by Ziyad Kalthoum.

Poetry: *M Archive: After the End of the World* by Alexis Pauline Gumbs and *Threshold* by Iman Mersal.

My general sense is that there are a lot of these works which are being released now that are challenging the fetishisation of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence. Because of the ongoing horrors in Palestine there are many films that are also being offered for free on different platforms. One just needs to look out for them.

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Photo credit: Saharan Dust Storm: Natural Hazards, Defense Visual Information Distribution Service

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Editor: ASANDA NGOASHENG
Second editor: CLAIRE FRENCH
[/vc_column][/vc_row]