

The logo for the Anthropology Book Forum, featuring a stylized blue and white circular design on the left. The text "Anthropology Book Forum" is written in a bold, white, sans-serif font on a dark blue background.

Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Sounds of Counter/Revolution

Review by Jessica Winegar.

Malmström, Maria Frederika. 2019. *The Streets Are Talking to Me: Affective Fragments in Sisi's Egypt*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.

One of my most powerful memories of being in Egypt during the 2011 uprisings is of hearing street battles outside my apartment building, sticking my head out the window, and feeling and hearing what I could have sworn was a bullet fly past my head. Until reading *The Streets Are Talking to Me* by Maria Malmström, it was difficult to understand this moment, and more importantly its embodied memory, other than through the lens of fear. In its focus on affect, embodiment, and materialities, Maria Malmström's book offers a relatively unique perspective on the uprisings and their aftermath—much different than the recent spate of articles which try to take stock of the decade since the so-called Arab spring by trying to ascertain “what went wrong” in terms of formal politics. This focus allows her to show how dramatic political transformations are created and managed through a complex relationship between the senses, the body, and the material world. Her focus is Egypt, where millions of people forced the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak only to, just a couple years later, embrace the rise of a new military strongman: Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi. Malmström shows the critical role played by affect and materialities in this transition and its aftermath. Through a sensitive *methodology* of affect and keen attention to how it becomes both embodied and embedded in materialities, she is able to grasp how people are able to build intimacy during moments of political transition. But she also provides unique insight into how other cleavages get built precisely through the senses and materialities. The book excels in its aim to show “how materialities and affect have contributed to an exaggerated sense of displacement, uncertainty, and tension in Egypt, as well as to a collective and individual loss of hope for an imagined new national home” (p. 6). This is a brave and unconventional book that opens pathways for understanding political dramas that shape personal senses of belonging.

Malmström primarily engages the literatures on affect and new materialisms, along with theories of gender/sexuality and nationhood, to explore various aspects of the uprising and its aftermath. These are gathered under the theme of “fragments,” as the title of the book indicates. The author adopts this approach due to the fact that security threats in Egypt prevented researchers from doing more “structured kind[s] of inquiry” (p. 4). In a mode that we might consider as allied with the new methodological and theoretical approach of “patchwork ethnography,”¹ Malmström examines “fragments of events and attempts to understand the sensory experiences that are bound together in them” (p. 4).

In Chapter 1, she explores the fragments of events that caused injury to the bodies of protestors, revealing how the injured body produces emotional responses that track with the rhythm of political life in Egypt. She focuses on the story of an interlocutor who was one of the many Egyptians who lost an eye as a result of birdshot from state security to argue that “bodily memories of trauma” are still present and can be activated and deactivated, acting in a way like an “embodied archive” (p. 34). Future researchers could further explore what might cause such activation—for example a particular smell, sound, or sight while moving through urban space. Chapter 2 mainly focuses on violent events in the 2011 uprisings as connected to passionate love, but also shame, grief, fear, and rage. We encounter how desire (even sexual) between revolutionaries ebbs and flows with violent events, how people make sense of the violence done to bodies, and how love for each other and love for a homeland can suddenly disappear due to events and feel like the ultimate loss. Chapters 3 through 5 present a compelling account of the vibrational intensities caused by sounds and silences in the intense summer of 2013, marked as it was by mass protests to overthrow then-president Muhammad Morsy, curfews that emptied the streets, and then the state’s massacre of the opposing protestors in Rabaa and Nahda Squares. These chapters powerfully show how public intimacies are created through sensory engagement with events, and how the project of re-establishing regime power after 2011 was also an affective one that mobilized fear (e.g., through the smell of teargas and the sound of military jets) as well as love (e.g., through sensory apprehensions of Sisi as a sexy, handsome and benevolent ruler). Chapter 4 in particular is a poetic reading of the Rabaa massacre through the things forcibly left behind and images of them.

The weakest aspect of the book is not necessarily the fault of the author. That is, affect itself can be hard to ascertain, particularly for an anthropologist trying to locate it somewhere in a particular person or in a social phenomenon. Putting such non-discursive senses and energies into the discourse of a text, or the structure of analysis, is an additional challenge. Malmström’s creative writing style and clear sensitivity as an ethnographer help to address these challenges, as does her insistence on studying the “forces of affect through their effects” (p. 9), but at times one is left wondering if her interlocutors really felt the affect she attributes to them. Also, the analysis is often in separate sections from the ethnography, which can allow the ethnography to breathe on its own but also occasionally makes for a disjointed text and reproduce distinctions between analysis and ethnography that might be productive to challenge.

This book will appeal to anthropologists working on affective materiality, as well as to those seeking to bring such a lens onto dramatic political transformation. The book is written in an engaging style, rich with affect. The book contains fascinating ethnographic anecdotes, felt reflections on events and exchanges by the author, long stretches of elicited testimony from interlocutors, and compelling photographs that highlight different materialities. Thus, it might interest those seeking to explore less formal modes of ethnographic writing and presentation. Malmström also frequently reflects on the relationship between the researcher and interlocutors, and advocates “collaborative research as a tool” (p. 11). These reflections on and attempts to reshape fieldwork could be interesting to students of anthropology as well as those looking to shift their methodologies.

The main takeaway from this book is that the Egyptian revolution (and perhaps all dramatic uprisings) live on in embodied memories and sensory affects. Therefore, the book actually gives lie to its title: perhaps Egypt is not Sisi's after all.

Jessica Winegar is the author of *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (Stanford, 2006), and co-author, with Lara Deeb, of *Anthropology's Politics: Discipline and Region through the Lens of the Middle East* (Stanford, 2015).



© 2021 Jessica Winegar

" <https://www.patchworkethnography.com/>