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Sara Salem

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More information about the author can be found at the end of this document.

The City in Creative (Anticolonial) Imagination

Sara Salem London School of Economics and Political Science

> To speak of colonial ruination is to trace the fragile and durable substance of signs, the visible and visceral senses in which the effects of empire are reactivated and remain. We take it as a starting premise that what is most significantly left may not be blatantly evident, easy to document, or to see.
> —Ann Laura Stoler, *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination*

The past seeps into the present in a range of unexpected ways. From street names we memorize and then forget to layers of geological sediments that accumulate over time, our everyday spaces not only belong to the present but are always connected to multiple pasts. This essay reflects on what it would mean to trace the numerous ways anticolonialism lives within, around, and through us, thinking of space and time as key elements of such an exploration. Much work on anticolonialism across the Middle East and North Africa posits it as a moment or a set of events, beginning with revolutionary movements against European colonial rule and ending in the founding and formation of postcolonial states in the 1950s and 1960s. Although this is certainly part of a genealogy of anticolonialism, it seems to suggest that at a certain point in time, the anticolonial moment came to an end.

I think through the possibility that anticolonialism cannot be held within temporal bounds that limit its influence to the momentous decades of the mid-twentieth century, but that it lives on in various ways, seeping into the present and in some ways inflecting the future. The anticolonial moment,[1] as important as it was, was met with a solid counterrevolution, culminating in a global neoliberal project. The Washington Consensus was not just an attempt at creating a new global project; it was a response to the powerful possibilities cultivated by and opened up through anticolonialism. This essay frames anticolonialism as a moment that continues to haunt us—not simply through failure or defeat but in more complex and contradictory ways. What might it mean to

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[1] I use "anticolonial moment" to reference the mid-twentieth century, during which many countries across the Global South became formally independent, while cognizant of the fact that decolonization is a process and was incomplete and that countries across the world remain colonized.

think of this moment as one that makes its presence felt through space, rather than remember it as existing firmly in the past?

From the vantage point of Egypt, I explore how the anticolonial moment is both absent and present in everyday life, and I argue that this absence and presence is often mediated through fragments of ideas, emotions, attachments, or images of what the past promised. I touch on connections between Egypt and the rest of Africa, looking at material traces from the past that are still present today and that speak to a shared imagination of the future. I focus particularly on anticolonial figures, especially Gamal Abdel Nasser, and the feelings they provoke when they appear in the city space around us in the present. Nasser was Egypt's first postcolonial leader and oversaw a political project of decolonization often referred to as Nasserism, focused on industrialization, nonalignment, and Third Worldism. By sketching a series of questions about anticolonialism, temporality, and space, I hope to address broader debates around archiving, memory, affect, and materiality, as well as to contribute to debates around the place of Egypt within the pan-African project.

Egyptian African Anticolonialism and Nasser's Ghost

In a review of an exhibition about Nasser and the 2011 revolution, an Egyptian critic posed the following questions:

> If Nasser should be the symbol of dreams of justice, freedom, and equality among people both rich and poor, then why on earth are we still suffering from injustice and lack of freedom in Egyptian society? And if the principles of the 1952 Revolution have failed to survive, then why are *we still celebrating the dream?* The dream, in other words, that turned out to be a nightmare.[2]

Following David Scott, who writes about how "anticolonial utopias have gradually withered into postcolonial nightmares,"[3] we might ask how and why these anticolonial utopias continue to haunt the present, even as we recognize that they belong to a different "problem space,"[4] or more precisely, how these

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[2] Omar Khalifah, *Nasser in the Egyptian Imaginary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 215 (italics in the original).

[3] David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

[4] Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 2. For an interesting conversation on these themes, see "David Scott with Stuart Hall," interview, *BOMB Magazine*, January 1, 2005, https://bombmagazine.org/articles/david-scott/.

anticolonial utopian impulses appear in the postcolonial present. The anticolonial moment in Egypt was dominated by the political project of Nasser and the Free Officers, or Nasserism. This project, built around state control of the economy, social welfare, industrialization, and nonalignment, marked Egypt's transition to a postcolonial state.

Instead of the political project of Nasserism, I am interested in representations of Nasser himself across time and space, from photographs and posters to street names and statues, and the uncanny feelings these representations provoke. In Egypt, Nasser appears in photographs pasted onto the back of taxis, on the walls of small shops, and occasionally in street protests above a sea of chanting faces; he also appears when streets, squares, or neighborhoods are named after him. We often see only fragments. Some photographs are black-and-white; some are in color. Some show a young, smiling general; some show an older statesman. Street signs or statues are often fading or dusty. In other parts of the Middle East and Africa, we also see photographs of Nasser and streets named after him.

Street names are of particular interest, given that they are central markers of the contemporary city. Pierre Nora writes about the realm of memory that is topographical, noting that memory is always subject to forgetting and remembering and can sometimes be dormant for long periods before suddenly coming alive again.[5] Street names are one example of topographical memory, and when we think of street names that came into being during the anticolonial moment, we might see them as attempts to fix in place the dramatic changes that were happening. What do these names do in the present? What do they invoke, and can they come awake at any time?

I argue that these street names, which mark a shift to postcolonial nation building, tell us about shifts taking place in nations and about broader geopolitical shifts that reflected pan-Africanism and Third Worldism. Focusing on Algeria, Zeynep Çelik writes about how the colonial structure lives in the everyday vernacular of the city, decades after independence, but that names of places that came into existence during the independence era also shape

> Street names are one example of topographical memory. . . . What do street names do in the present? What do they invoke, and can they come awake at any time?

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5 Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, vol. 1, *Conflicts and Divisions*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 18.

Algiers in important ways.[6] For her, place names define the city symbolically and produce and reproduce collective memory, becoming a key site of contestation during anticolonial struggle. "In the aftermath of Algerian independence, [the text inscribed on Algiers by the French] was rewritten by Algerians in order to claim the city back, rebuild it metaphorically." The process capitalized on the "ideological and pedagogical potential of urban semantics"[7] and, as Leonard Kojo writes, reflect ideas that people hold about their own history.[8]

On one hand, we have the radical move in Egypt to define the city symbolically during decolonization, with streets named after the revolution, the date of the revolution, various Free Officers, revolutionary heroes, and so on. History in the making is built into the city with new street names that create a different genealogy of Egyptian politics. On the other hand, street names across the Global South referencing each other's struggles gestures toward a form of connection and relationality that was also built into the city. These street names now form the traces that hint at what took place in those decades. In Egypt, the presence of streets or buildings named after Nasser in Lusaka (Zambia), Mombasa (Kenya), Kampala (Uganda), and beyond hint at traces of pan-Africanism that saw Egypt as part of an African futurity beyond colonialism.

These streets named after Nasser outside of Egypt lead us to explore connections and relations between Egypt and other spaces during the anticolonial moment, especially places across the African continent that are not often thought of as being in relation with Egypt. Across Africa, Nasser appears inscribed in the cityscape. In Lusaka, you might find yourself on Cairo Road or Nasser Road, as you might in Mwanza or Luanda. In Mombasa, you might be driving down Abdel Nasser Road, and in Kampala you might find yourself at Nasser Road University. In Tunis, you might end up on Gamal Abdel Nasser Street, too. That this phenomenon crosses Egypt's borders into the rest of the African continent is especially striking, as it foregrounds historical connections that have eroded, shifted, or disappeared. Indeed, my first memory of Egyptian anticolonialism being inscribed into my material surroundings comes from growing up in Lusaka, where Cairo Road and Nasser Street formed part of the landscape.

What happens when we place Egypt and Nasser in the framework of African anticolonialism, something that might seem more out of place today than it did in 1970? As noted by Jihan El-Tahri, placing Egypt in the history of Middle

6   Zenep Çelik, "Colonial/Postcolonial Intersections: Lieux de mémoire in Algiers," *Third Text* 13, no. 49 (1999): 63–72.
7   Çelik, "Colonial/Postcolonial Intersections," 69.
8   Cited in Çelik, "Colonial/Postcolonial Intersections," 70.

Eastern anticolonial projects such as pan-Arabism—a placing that is also dominant in popular memory inside Egypt—suggests fissures in how we position North Africa in the continent,[9] whereby North Africa is created as separate from the rest of Africa.[10] Thinking through the forms of connectivity that existed in the mid-twentieth century linking Egypt to Zambia and beyond is a possible way of exploring this geographical history that pays attention to formations of race and nation in constructions of African belonging.

Returning to Egypt, we might think about the two streets named after Congolese independence leader Patrice Lumumba, one in Cairo and one in Alexandria. In an Instagram post about Lumumba Street in Cairo, Amira El Wakil notes that this street was initially named after Jean-Baptiste Kléber, a French general active in the colonization of Egypt.[11] These names invoke a faded history of Egyptian African anticolonialism that focused on Congo and Lumumba's assassination. As part of this faded history, we might remember how after the assassination, massive demonstrations broke out in Cairo, during which the coat of arms at the Belgian embassy was replaced with portraits of Lumumba. We might remember that Lumumba's children were able to escape from Congo and were taken to Egypt after Lumumba asked Nasser to take care of them; they were brought up there.

Recent work has aimed to recover some of the connections between anticolonial Egypt and other anticolonial struggles across Africa. In Reem Abou El Fadl's translation of *An Egyptian African Story* by Helmi Sharawy, whose role was to organize state support for African liberation movements during Nasser's presidency, we see a different history of Egyptian anticolonialism. Sharawy writes of the necessity of "entering the world of Bandung," which included an Egyptian focus on solidarity with other African countries:

> I wanted to note first my delight at meeting figures who were renowned leaders in their own countries. My modest knowledge of English allowed me to talk to them, even those who spoke French, and who also used a modest English for communication, such as Félix Moumié, champion of the armed struggle in Cameroon, and leader of the Union of the Peoples of Cameroon Party, or Ignatius

9   Jihan El-Tahri and Jamal Mahjoub, "How Are Larger Histories of Non-alignment, Anticolonial Revolt and Pan-Africanism Inscribed into the Landscape?," episode 5, *Conversations with Neighbors* podcast, 2021, https://archiveofforgetfulness.com/Podcast-series.

10 Helmy Sharawy, "From *An Egyptian African Story*," trans. Reem Abou-El-Fadl, *Asymptote*, n.d., https://www.asymptotejournal.com/nonfiction/an-egyptian-african-story-helmi-sharawy/.

11 Archiving Heliopolis (Amira El Wakil), Instagram, February 17, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CLY-rEuns0W/.

Musaazi, leader of the Uganda National Congress Party, or Joshua Nkomo, leader in Southern Rhodesia and of the Zimbabwe African People's Union, as well as leaders from Kenya and South Africa. At the same time, popular delegations began to come to Cairo, some of whom were Muslims from countries such as Nigeria; even the leaders of the Ashanti Muslims in Ghana came to the city.[12]

In a similar vein, Jihan El-Tahri's filmmaking focuses on solidarity and anticolonialism in the Global South and represents an oeuvre that speaks to lost connections. In relation to Egypt, she asks, "Who are we? Who are we as a collective, and are we a collective? I'm more interested in the questions nobody is asking: who is an Egyptian? We talk about Egyptians as though they're this one thing. The nation-state is a problematic."[13] She recalls projects such as Radio Cairo, that broadcast in eighteen languages: "You find that archive, but no history to put it in context."[14] The archive she refers to is the archive of Egyptian African anticolonialism, which is significantly less present than archives of Egyptian pan-Arabism. Often it is only through fragmentary family histories, memories of connections stretching out from Egypt southward rather than to the north or east, or traces of periodicals, magazines, pamphlets, speeches, or images that engage anticolonialism across Africa. Street names are also a part of this archive, a part that is explicitly engaged with the city.

The presence of streets named after anticolonial figures in spaces such as Congo, Egypt, Lebanon, and beyond signals the impossibility of erasing these traces from the landscape and from public memory; they remain fixed in place, part of everyday life, reminding those in the present that there was the possibility of an alternative present. Gyanendra Pandey's description of fragments as disruptive or even disturbing is productive. Changing these street names would undoubtedly be more attention-grabbing than letting them be; but letting them be means they remain as traces of a past that can never be quite forgotten. They are disruptive because they recall the tensions of anticolonial solidarity and of Egypt's relation with the rest of the continent. Egypt's African story is full of contradictions and tension, one that speaks to the politics of racism in North Africa, to histories of the Arab slave trade across the continent and stretching into the Middle East.

These traces haunt the present, through the ghost of figures such as Nasser. One possibility is that Nasser's appearance in the present is gesturing toward alternative pasts or perhaps alternative futures that are still imaginable. While

[12] Sharawy, "From *An Egyptian African Story*."

[13] Jihan El-Tahri and John Akomfrah, "Reframing Africa 2020," Photoform Africa, October 24, 2020, video, 3:54:19–5:11:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3RqGXyPKa0.

[14] El-Tahri and Akomfrah, "Reframing Africa 2020."

military power or economic policies might be one path to understanding the ghosts of the past, maybe these representations—posters, street names, people's names—are another. There is something powerful and disruptive—as well as deeply nostalgic and troubling—when these specters appear in the present. They rarely ever dominate the landscape. The street names are memorized, with few considering why a street in Luanda or Kampala came to be named after an Egyptian leader. Yet because these traces are barely visible, they are so haunting.

The mundane familiarity of these street names comes up against the lack of familiarity with the history they represent: the history of Egyptian African anticolonialism. If ghosts represent unresolved tensions, as Avery Gordon reminds us, then these ghosts are not just the ghosts of Nasserism as a political project that transformed Egypt's future, and whose consequences we are still living with today.[15] They are also the ghosts of a moment during which Egypt understood itself in relation with the rest of the African continent, a part of the pan-African project and African futurity.

Conclusion

The story of Egyptian African anticolonialism emerges when we trace the material and emotional effects of Nasser's appearance across African cities. This is not a necessarily romantic story, nor one built solely around solidarity. It is a story full of contradictions that speaks to the politics of racism in North Africa and to the histories of how cities like Cairo became central spaces of anticolonial imaginaries, eclipsing the many other spaces that played a role in fighting for freedom. An Egyptian African story is a story that might recenter histories of anticolonialism as well as histories of connections and disconnections between spaces such as Egypt and Congo.

As Sophia Azeb notes in a piece on the place of North Africa within pan-Africanism, we can understand this history through the idea of an "uneven commitment to pan-Africanism."[16] She focuses in this instance on Algeria, noting that at that time and place, pan-Africanism was inclusive of North Africa because the signifier of *Arab* became less prominent and instead a global pan-African identity was mobilized. Azeb notes that these moments were fleeting but suggests that we may benefit from thinking more about what such

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[15] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

[16] Sophia Azeb, "Pan-African Performance and Possibility in North Africa: Lessons from Algiers 1969," *The Funambulist*, no. 32 (2020), https://thefunambulist.net/magazine/pan-africanism/pan-african-performance-and-possibility-in-north-africa-lessons-from-algiers-1969.

traces might mean for the future. These traces have much to tell us about how anticolonialism lives in the present, suggesting an exciting way of thinking about the contemporary city and its entanglements with decolonization.

Sara Salem is an associate professor of sociology at the London School of Economics. Her research interests include postcolonial studies, Marxist theory, and global histories of anticolonialism. She is the author of *Anticolonial Afterlives in Egypt: The Politics of Hegemony* (2020), as well as journal articles on Angela Davis in Egypt in the journal *Signs* (2018); on Frantz Fanon and Egypt's postcolonial state in *Interventions: A Journal of Postcolonial Studies* (2018); on Antonio Gramsci and anticolonialism in the postcolony in *Theory, Culture and Society* (2021); and on Nasserism in Egypt through the lens of haunting in *Middle East Critique* (2019). She is currently thinking and writing about ghosts and anticolonial archives.