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Citation
Naeff, J. A. (2023). Remembering defeat in counter-revolutionary Egypt. *Middle East Critique*, *32*(1), 53-69. doi:10.1080/19436149.2023.2168380

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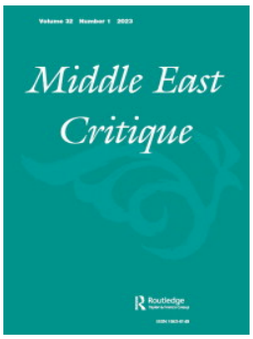

Middle East Critique

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccri20

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To cite this article: Judith A Naeff (2023) Remembering Defeat in Counter-Revolutionary Egypt, Middle East Critique, 32:1, 53-69, DOI: 10.1080/19436149.2023.2168380

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2023.2168380

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Middle East Critique, 2023
Vol. 32, No. 1, 53–69, https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2023.2168380

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Remembering Defeat in Counter-Revolutionary Egypt

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ABSTRACT: *This article analyses how a creative writing workshop in 2017 Cairo dynamically engaged with cultural memories of the 1967 defeat of the Arab armies. The article first situates 1967 as a crucial reference point in discursive attempts to tie personal life stories to national history and in making sense of a widespread feeling of postcolonial disenchantment. It is in the ruinous aftermath of the 2011 uprisings, when a view on a political horizon beyond the stifling present temporarily was reopened, that the workshop critically examined the relations between cultural memory, family history, and everyday life with, at its center, the notion of defeat in all its shapes and intensities. The article argues that the workshop can be seen as 'an intimate public,' carving out a space for survival lying largely outside of the sphere of politics. Nevertheless, in its affective plurality that stimulated modes of irreverence, the workshop tentatively opened up new political dispositions under the strenuous conditions of post-2013 Egypt.*

KEY WORDS: *After-affect; cultural memory; defeat; Egypt; intimate public; naksa; 1967 War*

> *In the Egypt of Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi, every day is 1967.*[1]
>
> *I think it took us time actually to swallow everything. To try to get [that] it is not that bad to talk about defeat. It is actually fun. It could ignite something. It could initiate conversations about things we need to talk about.*[2]

In early Summer 2017, the Contemporary Image Collective in Cairo organized a six-week intensive creative writing workshop called 'A Geography for Beaten Heroes,' led by performance artist and English literature graduate Zainab Magdy. Participants in the workshop collectively read selected texts, including multiple literary memoirs dealing with Egypt's 1967 defeat by Israel. They received writing prompts and shared their own writings with each other. A small group of mostly young people thus voluntarily

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[1] Hesham *Sallam (2018)* An Ongoing Naksa: When Every Day Is 1967, Roundtable: 1967, MESPI, 5 June. Available at: https://mespi.org/2018/06/05/hesham-sallam-an-ongoing-naksa-when-every-day-is-1967/, accessed November 14, 2022.

[2] Author Interview with Zainab Magdy, 18 October 2018. Citations from interviews have been edited for clarity.

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sat down to dwell on defeat, tying together their personal stories, cultural memories of '67 and the contemporary political climate in Egypt. This article takes this extraordinary workshop as a cue to investigate how the cultural memory of the 1967 defeat is negotiated in the ruinous aftermath of 2011–2013.

Arabic literature is full of aftermaths and melancolic reflections on defeat. Nouri Gana contends that this melancholic mode in Arabic literature is an underappreciated form of 'dissent from normative structures of mourning.'[3] Melancholia's refusal to work through the loss suffered from colonial and postcolonial brutality, the psychological refusal to 'get over it,' Gana argues, constitutes a political refusal to acquiescence. Yet, while melancholia *can* take the form of stubborn bitterness, its loftier mode has elevated incarceration, suicide and exile to abstract sacrifices for an emancipation to come. It is this grand teleological gesture, which easily slides into sentimentalism, that sits uneasily with a generation that came of age under a neoliberal world order and in the era of poststructuralist critique. Zeina Halabi writes about the post-Soviet, post-Oslo 1990s in the Levant that, 'lacking resolution,' the aftermath generated a literary moment that stagnated 'at the intersection of cynicism, irony and melancholic affect, mistakenly read as a testament to the end of the political.'[4] Like Halabi, this article argues that seemingly depoliticized modes of the intimate and the vulgar in fact form political gestures. The discussions and narratives generated by the workshop, while inheriting the past's narratives and afteraffects, chose to act upon them differently by challenging lofty narratives of sacrifice and sentimental melancholia.

My close reading of the creative writing workshop is grounded in affect studies.[5] Rather than analyzing the construction of narratives about the past, I am interested in the ways in which past events generate affective intensities and how these circulate and forge collectives in the face of a hostile public sphere. After a brief sketch on the nature and impact of the 1967 defeat, this article makes two interrelated arguments. First, the workshop is conceptualized as an intimate public focusing on personal experience and carving out a space for survival. The article challenges the idea that intimate publics are depoliticized, especially in a context where the political public sphere poses an acute threat. Secondly, the article draws on studies of negative affects as counterhegemonic modes of refusal, arguing that in 'Geography for Beaten Heroes,' the playful engagement with *afteraffects* of defeat leads to new political dispositions.[6] More broadly, I seek to show that a new generation dynamically interacts with the cultural memory of the *naksa* in navigating the oppressive reality of post-2013 Egypt even if the room for doing so increasingly has been marginalized.

The *Naksa*

On June 11, 1967, Gamal Abdel Nasser signed a ceasefire that sealed the resounding defeat of the Arab coalition. In a mere six days, Israel had killed over 20,000 troops

[3] Nouri *Gana (2018)* Afteraffects: Arabic Literature and Affective Politics, Representations, 143(1), p. 123.

[4] Zeina *Halabi (2017)* The Unmaking of the Arab Intellectual: Prophecy, Exile and the Nation, p. 24 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).

[5] Melissa *Gregg* and Gregory *Seigworth* (2004) The Affect Theory Reader (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); and Sara *Ahmed*, Affective Economies, Social Text, 22(2), pp. 117–139.

[6] Sianne *Ngai (2005)* Ugly Feelings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press); and Jack (Judith) *Halberstam (2011)* The Queer Art of Failure (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

and nearly obliterated the Egyptian and Syrian air forces with relatively few losses of its own. Israel had seized the Sinai in Egypt, the West Bank in Jordan and the Golan Heights in Syria. The military defeat exposed the inadequacy of Arab political and military leadership and gave a fatal blow to the exhilaration and optimism that had marked the 1950s in Egypt, a decade in which revolutionary aspirations finally had seemed to materialize in concrete political and economic decolonization. Within a context of anticolonial ferment, the free officers' coup had been applauded as a bold act of national self-determination. The nationalization of the Suez Canal and the building of the Aswan High Dam provided the economic independence necessary for a radical rearticulation of the international, for which a political vision had been outlined at the Bandung conference.[7]

Pan-Arab nationalism and Third World solidarity were palpable realities. The establishment of Israel and the expulsion of Palestinians from their lands in 1948, known as the *nakba*, or catastrophe, was seen as an absolute affront to the anticolonial struggle of the region and beyond. It was clear that the liberation of Palestine was a precondition for any aspirational vision of sovereignty and social justice in the Arab world. In May 1967, Abdel Nasser announced that the Strait of Tiran would be closed to Israeli vessels, thus asserting Egypt's self-confidence as a major player in the global economy and mobilizing its troops to ward off an expected Israeli assault. The abysmal failure of such self-defense after a bold act of Arab liberation was a shock to the people. Euphemistically known as the *naksa*, setback, it compromised the credibility of political leadership and shook the foundations of a hegemonic Egyptian nationalism.[8]

It also undermined the morale and collective self-esteem of militants and intellectuals. Even though many dissidents had been repressed and often imprisoned by Nasser's regime, Egyptians generally felt a high level of ownership and engagement with Gamal Abdel Nasser's 'new Egypt' as an anticolonial project.[9] 1967 demonstrated the limits of that project. Not only was Israel there to stay, it now had occupied territories far beyond its 1948 borders and across multiple Arab countries. The *naksa* therefore was experienced as the end of the horizon of Arab liberation that had led the anticolonial moment. Moreover, it gradually became clear that the Arab armies and political leadership not only had underestimated the enemy's strength and coordination, but also were themselves riven by petty animosities and producing a steady stream of blatant misinformation. A deep sense of failure and betrayal therefore shattered the dream of Arab unity.

The blow of '67 heralded a long period of despair. Authoritarian rule was reinforced, and when Sadat introduced his *infitah*, or open-door policy, economic dependence on foreign aid and loans was aggravated, while living standards failed to improve and access to education and employment dwindled. Islamic fundamentalism profited from the failure of what now was seen as a 'Western' project of building a modern nation. 'The finality of the defeat was such that it foreclosed the possibility of a second round.'[10] Intellectuals theorized 'the Arab predicament'[11] as 'a state of

[7] Sara *Salem (2020)* Anticolonial Afterlives in Egypt: The Politics of Hegemony (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press).

[8] Ibid.

[9] Alia *Mosallam (2012)* Hikāyāt Sha'b'– Stories of Peoplehood: Nasserism, Popular Politics and Songs in Egypt 1956-1973, PhD dissertation, London School of Economics; and Salem, Anticolonial Afterlives, p. 134.

[10] Gana, Afteraffects, p. 121.

[11] Fouad *Ajami (1992)* The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice Since 1967 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

permanent powerlessness that renders any chance of revival unthinkable'[12] and declared 'the exit of the Arabs from history.'[13] The left withdrew into intense soul-searching if not acute depression, and many militants withdrew from party politics to express their disenchantment and alienation in critical essays, poetry and literature.[14]

Scholars recently attempted to de-center the *naksa*, so as to understand it as part of a larger historical continuum in which post-colonial and socialist promises of justice and freedom failed to materialize.[15] Indeed, the Arab progressive struggle for liberation and justice faced a long string of setbacks. Already under Nasser's reign, the secession of Syria from the United Arab Republic heralded the failure of pan-Arabism, and the 1959 crackdown on communists gave a serious blow to the progressive left. In 1968, one year after the *naksa* and along with worldwide uprisings of students and laborers, those who came to be known as 'the seventies generation' reinvigorated a revolutionary spirit, though they operated in a much gloomier context than those who had been fighting for national independence before them.[16] Sadat's *infitah*, the violent repression of the bread riots, Camp David, and the siege of Beirut formed important moments of defeat throughout the 1970s and 1980s. While in the early 1990s the Oslo accords, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the first Gulf war seemed to spell an end to anti-imperialist struggles in the region, by the end of that decade, Egypt witnessed a clear increase in pro-democracy organizations as well as labor mobilization.[17] If the twenty-first century was 'born as a time shaped by a general eclipse of utopias,'[18] it was because a multiplicity of asynchronous histories coalesced into a world-historical moment lived as 'a prolonged ending, experienced as a kind of living on in postrevolutionary aftermaths, among the confusing ruins of socialist futures past.'[19] 1967 could be seen as an early instance of a broader world-historical defeat of the socialist horizon and its 'structure of feeling' of aftermath spreading in the 1980s and 1990s, especially in post-colonial, post-socialist nations.

Despite this continuity of dissent and the recurrence of defeats, 1967 stands out as a momentous occasion that has continued to serve as a reference point for different generations in multiple countries in their attempts to construct a meaningful narrative linking the nation, the people and the self. Memories of the event were dealt with in

[12] Samir *Kassir (2006)* Being Arab, trans. Will Hobson, p. 4 (London: Verso).

[13] Faisal *Darraj (2012)* Introduction, in Self-Criticism after the Defeat, p. 24 (London: Saqi), citing Fawzy Mansour.

[14] Marie *Duboc (2013)* Egyptian Leftist Intellectuals' Activism from the Margins: Overcoming the Mobilization/Demobilization Dichotomy, in Joel *Beinin* and Frederic *Vairel* (eds) Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa, pp. 49–67 (Stanford: Stanford University Press).

[15] Sune *Haugbølle*, The New Arab Left and 1967, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 44(4), pp. 497–512; and Fadi *Bardawil (2020)* Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Brink of Emancipation, p. 82 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

[16] Salma *Khadra Jayyusi (1995)* Freedom and Compulsion: Poetry of the Seventies, Journal of Arabic Literature, 26 (1–2), p. 109; and Betty *Anderson (2011)* The Student Movement in 1968, Jadaliyya, March 9. Available at: https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/23777, accessed November 14, 2022.

[17] For example Maha *Abdelrahman (2015)* Egypt's Long Revolution: Protest Movements and Uprisings (London: Routledge); and Joel *Beinin* and Marie *Duboc (2013)* A Worker's Social Movement on the Margin of the Global Neoliberal Order, Egypt 2004-2012, in Beinin and Vairel (eds) Social Movements, Mobilization, pp. 205–227.

[18] Enzo *Traverso (2016)* Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory, p. 5 (New York: Columbia University Press).

[19] David *Scott (2014)* Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice, p. 174 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

various ways. Official political discourse can be said to have opted for denial, by consistently using the euphemism *naksa* [setback], by sealing the national and military archives until this day[20] and by addressing '67 belatedly and only in juxtaposition to the so-called victory of 1973.[21] In contrast, the rise and fall of Nasser have formed a charged, but lively narrative in popular culture. Though state media avoided the topic during the Sadat years, Gamal Abdel Nasser has been eulogized in songs, poems, film and television, and lately on social media sites galvanizing a strong melancholic attachment.[22] In memoirs, social and literary critique, the *naksa* was seen as an historical landmark marking the starting point for a period of self-criticism, nihilism and alienation.[23]

The lack of a hegemonic narrative of closure has allowed for significant ambiguity of memory cultures across popular and avant-garde culture and for what Sara Salem calls the split haunting of Nasserism in contemporary Egypt.[24] Nasser haunts the present, she argues, 'on the one hand, as a reminder of the social violence,' particularly the violent repression of leftists, and 'on the other hand, as a reminder of a promise that was extremely powerful but which ultimately failed.'[25] Likewise, the defeat in '67 is remembered not only as a defeat and betrayal of the struggle against (neo-) imperialism, but also, in the words of Arwa Salih, a leader of the 1970s student movement, as 'a time when to speak of the dreams of the nation elicited serious and impassioned discussions in every home, rather than the contempt and ridicule it does today.'[26] Generations born in the 1970s and later therefore inherited a 'dual legacy' of 'revolutionary exhilaration and political despair' and cultivated a melancholic attachment to the 1960s and 70s as a time when history still could have been made.[27] The 2011 uprisings significantly redressed this melancholic attachment. While the Egyptian revolution eventually failed to materialize the dreams of Tahrir, it did succeed at least

[20] Khaled *Fahmy (2017)* The Arabs' Groundhog Day, interview by Sonja Zekri, June 23. Available at: https://khaledfahmy.org/en/2017/06/23/the-arabs%E2%80%B2-groundhog-day/. Accessed November 14, 2022.

[21] On *Barak (2019)* Archives and/as Battlefields: Political Aspects of Historiographic Revision, Memory Studies, 12(3), pp. 266–278; Yoav *Di-Capua (2009)* Gatekeepers of the Arab Past: Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt, pp. 324–327 (Berkeley: University of California Press); and Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski (2004) Commemorating the Nation: Collective Memory, Public Commemoration, and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Egypt (Chicago: Middle East Documentation Center), pp. 291–293.

[22] Lila *Abu-Lughod (2005)* Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt, p. 208 (Chicago: Chicago University Press); Joel *Gordon (2000)* Nasser 56/Cairo 96: Reimaging Egypt's Lost Community, in Walter Armbrust (ed) Mass Mediations: New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond, pp. 161–181 (Berkeley: University of California Press); and Lucie *Ryzova (2015)* Unstable Icons, Contested Histories: Vintage Photographs and Neoliberal Memory in Contemporary Egypt, Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication, 8, pp. 37–68.

[23] Sadik *Al-Azm (2012)* Self-Criticism After the Defeat, trans. George Stergios (London: Saqi); and Frederike *Pannewick*, Yvonne *Albers*, and Georges *Khalil* (2015) 'Introduction: Tracks and Traces of Literary Commitment – On Iltizām as an Ongoing Intellectual Project, in Frederike Pannewick and Georges Khalil (eds) Commitment and Beyond Reflections on/of the Political in Arabic Literature since the 1940s, pp. 13–14 (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag).

[24] Sara *Salem*, 'Haunted Histories: Nasserism and the Promises of the Past, Middle East Critique, 28(3), pp. 261–77.

[25] Ibid, p. 265.

[26] Arwa *Salih (2018)* The Stillborn: Notebooks of a Woman from the Student-Movement Generation in Egypt, trans. Samah Selim, p. 17 (London: Seagull Books) as cited in Salem, Haunted Histories, p. 270.

[27] Bardawil, Revolution and Disenchantment, p. 7.

for a moment to cast away radically the 'widespread and deeply seated feeling that Arabs have no future.'[28] The defeat of that dream after 2013 strongly resonated with, but also, as we shall see, renegotiated the weight of '67.

Giving meaning to the structure of feeling of futures past calls for a turning point or transition, the construction of a narrative in which the present serves as 'aftermath.' In the Arab world, the *naksa* became one such reference point, not only because of its significance to shifting international relations—as there were other significant moments—but more so because of its 'utter unexpectedness' and 'humiliating decisiveness.'[29]

> *What is traumatic is not so much the defeat in itself, but the afteraffect in which it was and continues to be experienced and relived as an irreversible destiny—as a continually retraumatizing re-memory and reenactment of the foreclosure of a possible future, or worse, the foreclosure of the very possibility of a future.*[30]

While in pursuit of historical accuracy the weight of 1967 can be contested, the fact remains that 1967 has become a metonym—at once a part of and a symbol for—the eclipse of a political horizon of self-determination, social justice and Third World solidarity. As such, 1967 was experienced as a concrete turning point in the personal lives of ordinary people who had invested in the dream of a new Egypt, as soldiers, laborers, citizens, peasants or intellectuals.[31]

In short, the defeat of 1967 formed an early manifestation of the broader world historical end of anti-colonial liberation movements and functioned as a concrete turning point signifying a widely shared sense of post-colonial disenchantment for Arab intellectuals and ordinary Egyptians alike. It is in the double sense, as a reference point in personal life stories and as a metonym for a world-historical defeat, that this article seeks to address the *afteraffects* of 1967 in post-2013 Egypt. Defeat, both in the specificity of 1967 and in the global sense of aftermath around the turn of the 21st century, implies not simply the end of emancipatory struggles but stirs the double affect of political despair and lingering futures past. My close reading of an extraordinary creative writing workshop shows how these affects and temporalities play out in non-straightforward ways in the context of post-revolutionary Cairo.

A Geography for Beaten Heroes

The creative writing workshop, 'A Geography for Beaten Heroes,' was organized around the concept of defeat in its broadest sense. Since it was organized for six weeks in May and June 2017, it coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the *naksa*. The participants came together twice a week to read and discuss novellas and memoirs

[28] Kassir, Being Arab, p. 2; Nael *Eltoukhy (2017)* Tadwīna 'ān al-naksa wa al-thawra wa al-jirāḥ al-mumtadda: ma"nā al-ghamr bi al-mā" [Op-ed on the Naksa, the Revolution and the Extended Wound: The Meaning of Being Overwhelmed], Mada Masr, June 5. Available at: https://www.madamasr.com/ar/2017/06/05/opinion/u/تدويينة-عن-النكسة-والثورة-والجراح-الم/, accessed November 14.

[29] Gana, 'Afteraffects, p. 120.

[30] Ibid, p. 121.

[31] See also Reem *Saad (2000)* War in the Social Memory of Egyptian Peasants, in Steven Heydemann (ed) War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East, pp. 246–249 (Berkeley: University of California Press).

about the disenchantment of the 1960s generation, the defeat of the 1970s student movement as well as other texts engaging with defeat. The workshop used the *naksa* as a starting point for broader discussions and writing exercises, but the central theme of defeat also formed a direct response to its contemporary political climate. 'In the context of the workshop, '67—as an obvious and very much tangible defeat—held the symbolism of the "fucked up dream," and so we were able to lay the weight of all those past years on that one image.'[32] Magdy comments:

> *It was tough at times, because it reminded us constantly that we do feel defeated. We feel defeated because we feel that something that we really hoped would change the society we live in had failed. It looked like it failed. And then we would be like, is actually our sense that the revolution has failed defeat or not? Is defeat an overly used notion in relation to politics? Or is it not addressed enough? I really don't know the answers to these questions.*[33]

In the following, I argue that the workshop, both in its form and in its content, was aimed at opening up such questions rather than answering them and that this openness yielded the indirect yet significant result of renegotiating the weight of '67 and opening up the potential for multiple dispositions to survive counterrevolutionary times. It shows that while defeat may signal closure in the hegemonic public, its traces linger and develop in marginal and private spaces in uncontrolled and unexpected ways.

The call for the workshop was issued in the context of the fourth and last 'chapter' of the long-term project, *If Not for That Wall,* organized between 2015 and 2017 by the Contemporary Image Collective in Cairo and which included debates, exhibitions, lectures and screenings. During the two years of the program, spaces and media for critical expression in Egypt severely were curtailed. Townhouse Gallery was raided in 2016 and the offices of *Al Jazeera* and *Mada Masr* were closed in 2017. In this context, CIC became an increasingly precious margin where politics still could be discussed at that historical moment, albeit in increasingly implicit ways. The survival of this space may have had to do with its marginality, both as a less established, that is young and small, institution and in its conceptual approach.

The first chapter of *If Not for That Wall* had engaged with detention, prison and abolition, the second had dealt with mental health and the asylum and the third had tackled migration and the right to move or stay. The final chapter, entitled *Imagined Life in a Museum Vitrine*[34] 'traced notions of desire and defeat inherent to the histories of national liberation movements in Egypt and the region, and the recession of collective forms of organization and ideas of the collective in the face of accelerated processes of segregation, individualization, and consumption.'[35] The title of the overall project, *If Not for that Wall,* is borrowed from a poem by Amal Dunqul, who was a revolutionary poet of the 1960s and whose work was cited during and after the 2011

[32] Zainab *Magdy (2018a)* Al-Jawāb byibān min 'inwānihi/You Can Tell What's in a Letter by the Look of It, in Nawara Belal, Ahmed Refaat, and Andrea Thal (eds) If Not for That Wall, p. 277 (Cairo: Contemporary Image Collective).

[33] Ibid, p. 218.

[34] The title, 'Imagined Life in a Museum Vitrine' is taken from Iman Mersal's poem 'Alternative Geography' [jughrāfiyya badīla].

[35] Nawara *Belal*, Ahmed *Refaat*, and Andrea *Tahl* (eds.) (2018) If Not for That Wall, p. 219 (Cairo: Contemporary Image Collective).

uprisings in graffiti and song.[36] The sense that a revolutionary past—Amal Dunqul—and repressive past—the prison wall—was haunting Egypt's present was thus now implicitly, then explicitly, part of the whole four-year project.

Memory studies for the MENA region have focused on the construction of hegemonic narratives—mostly in the form of nation building, or, conversely, on the challenge of such narratives and its silences by counterhegemonic memories, such as those of personal suffering from state sanctioned violence.[37] In contrast, to study memories as *afteraffects* is to attend to more diffuse ways in which past events resonate with present experience. Woven through, while also escaping, the construction of more or less coherent state sanctioned or counterhegemonic narratives, *afteraffects* should be seen as affective intensities, often expressed in decontextualized references, collage and juxtaposition. Affect studies has emphasized the *social* capacity of feeling beyond a more internalized or psychological understanding of emotion, conceptualizing their 'stickiness' that 'glues' or 'magnetizes' people and objects.[38] Rather than analyzing discursive representation, an affective approach focuses on how such representations circulate among people forging ecologies or collectives through emotional attachment and detachment.

The preposition 'after' in Gana's 'afteraffect' points to how a particular event generates affective intensities across time. *Afteraffects* can be be seen as 'post-memory' in its basic definition as 'distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection,'[39] but an affective approach moves away from the transmission of narratives toward varying intensities of attachment and aversion, belonging and alienation. Such an approach acknowledges engagements with the past that refuse memorialization's 'tendency to tidy up disorderly histories.'[40] Moreover, most studies on post-memory have focused on the continuity of memory across generations. This article instead follows David Scott in focusing on 'the *transformation* of the "affective force" of a traumatic event, […] the sense in which a founding experience can be inherited in ways that allow a succeeding generation to act upon it—or with it—*differently* than their predecessors did.'[41] The way in which the two-year project at the Contemporary Image Collective poetically incorporated the dual legacy of revolution and repression allowed for conceptual and affective ecologies to emerge, tying together different times and places in relation to the direct context of its instalment in 2015–2017.

[36] Atef *Botros (2015)* Rewriting Resistance: The Revival of Poetry of Dissent in Egypt after January 2011 (Surūr, Najm and Dunqul), in Pannewick and Khalil (eds) Commitment and Beyond, pp. 45–62; and Samuli *Schielke (2016)* Can Poetry Change the World? Reading Amal Dunqul in 2011, in Karin van Nieuwkerk, Mark Levine, and Martin Stokes (eds) Islam and Popular Culture, pp. 122–148 (Austin: University of Texas Press).

[37] Sune *Haugbølle* and Anders *Hastrup* (2008) Introduction: Outlines of a New Politics of Memory in the Middle East, Mediterranean Politics, 13(2), pp. 133–149; and Sonja *Hegasy* and Norman *Saadi Nikro* (2019), Editorial for the Special Issue: Memories of Violence, Social Life and Political Culture in the Maghreb and Mashreq, Memory Studies, 12(3), pp. 239–242.

[38] Ahmed, Affective Economies; and Ngai, Ugly Feelings.

[39] Marianne *Hirsch (1992)* Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory, Discourse, 15(2), p. 8.

[40] Halberstam, The Queer Art of Failure, p. 15.

[41] Scott, Omens of Adversity, p. 121.

Figure 1. 'A Geography for Beaten Heroes'—Contemporary Image Collective, Cairo, 2017

An Intimate Public

Formally, the workshop had two components: the workshop itself and its translation to an audience in the form of a public reading and the publication of a selection of letters in the book that came out: *If Not For that Wall.* The workshop included assigned readings, conversations and writing exercises. The setting was intimate, the pace intense (Figure 1). Writing prompts invited free associations beyond the texts discussed, often relating to private lives and memories. The conversational mode and intimate space of the workshop were translated to the broader audience in the form of a public reading. Zainab Magdy, who was trained in theatre, curated the event, selecting the texts and ordering them in such a way that there was a narrative line. Three participants were reading from their own texts as well as other texts that had been read or written during the workshop. One of the participants, Menna Ekram, reflects:

> *For me it felt like women telling bedtime stories that are very dark to an audience. It felt very intimate in that sense. The setting, the simplicity of it, the idea of not performing.*[42]

Workshop participants had created maps, with collages and timelines, which they exhibited for the audience to view before or after the performance. Intimacy thus was used as a mode to cross boundaries between the private and the public, between authors and audience, between the safe space of the reading group and the publicity of the theater stage, and between intimate emotions grounded in personal relations and History with a capital H. The audience responded overwhelmingly positively.[43]

A selection of texts written during the workshop was published as part of the publication *If Not for that Wall*.[44] Magdy selected texts generated by one writing prompt

[42] Author Interview with Menna Ekram, October 13, 2020.
[43] Magdy, interview; Ekram, interview.
[44] Belal, Refaat, and Tahl, If Not for That Wall.

that was not directly related to the literature the participants had read. The idea was to write a letter, any letter, that would never be sent. The texts 'were written primarily to answer questions which we faced and came up with amidst the world we suddenly found ourselves in during the workshop.'[45] Five out of seven letters deal with family members, perhaps because this writing exercise was preceded by one where participants were asked to bring a family photo. In general, family histories were important to the discussions in the workshop. Some letters deal with the experience of the *naksa* by parents, others with experiences of emigration or illness that were felt as a concession or defeat, one with a break-up. Magdy writes a fictional letter to her father about everyday life under strenuous conditions, and one participant writes about Doria Shafik, an Egyptian feminist who ended up leading a secluded life until she died from a fall off the balcony.

In the intense group experience of the workshop, in the public reading and in the publication, there was thus a clear tendency to engage with defeat in the form of personal experience and family histories. In *The Female Complaint*, Lauren Berlant coins the term 'intimate public' for the ways in which non-dominant groups circulate texts and things, foregrounding 'affective and emotional attachments located in fantasies of the common, the everyday, and a sense of ordinariness.'[46] In contrast to the counter-public, which suggests forms of public activity 'saturated with the taxonomies of the political sphere,' the intimate public operates in juxtaposition or in proximity to the political, aiming not at political transformation, but at 'insider recognition and cultural self-development.'[47] There are vast differences between the sentimental women's culture Berlant studies in the US and the workshop in the cutting-edge not-for-profit art space in Cairo under study here. Perhaps most importantly, the first is situated firmly within the capitalist circulation of commodities, while the latter lies largely aside to it, to which I will come back in a moment. But there are also similarities. Both publics focus on the personal. They share the investment in a space of affective attachment where participants hope to become 'somebody to each other' in contradistinction to the attrition of life in the public sphere and its profound sense of disappointment.[48]

But the context of the writing workshop also poses a number of qualifying questions to Berlant's intimate public. The sphere of politics in contemporary Egypt is not only *seen* more 'as a field of threat, chaos, degradation, or retraumatization than a condition of possibility' but actually constitutes an acute physical threat where nearly all possibilities for transformation have been violently cut off.[49] As Asef Bayat has pointed out, in a context where politics are experienced as violent repression at a visceral level, strategies for day-to-day survival become acts of sheer resistance.[50] Personal and intimate stories therefore can't be disentangled from politics. Not (only) because the personal is political—in the broader sense—but rather because the sphere of politics—in the narrow sense of party politics, policies and enforcement—obstructs daily life, stamps family histories, and generates a deeply personal feeling of (un)belonging.

[45] Magdy, Al-Jawāb, p. 277.
[46] Lauren *Berlant (2008)* The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture, p. 10 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).
[47] Ibid., pp. xi, 3 and 8.
[48] Ibid, p. 24.
[49] Ibid, p. 11.
[50] Asef *Bayat (2013)* Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East (Stanford: Stanford University Press).

Though Berlant in her analysis of women's culture recurrently observes attempts to scramble evidence of 'not being defeated,' what remains underemphasized in her account is what being or not being defeated might mean for her larger argument. If defeat implies a near total removal from the hegemonic public sphere, the turn to the personal and intimate should perhaps not be read as an indication of disavowal, but may simply mean that this forms the site where defeat is lived, cast outside of the sphere of politics and the general public.

What the intimate public in both cases shows is that defeat cannot solely be defined negatively as the absence of victory or fulfillment, because defeated people live on, developing tactics for survival and gathering around the affirmation of self and other in intimate publics. Defeat moreover, while indicating an ending, also carries folded within its losses unrealized potentialities, futures past that hold the promise that things could have been otherwise, and therefore still can be otherwise someday, even if not now. Berlant's intimate public commodifies the re-experience of such potentialities, seeking 'satisfaction in minor pleasures and major fantasies.'[51] More marginal non-commercial intimate publics such as the workshop discussed here, may offer more room for non-sentimental modes of engagement.

To read the creative workshop as an intimate public means to appreciate it as a space of survival in an otherwise hostile public sphere. The seemingly apolitical focus on personal experience in fact can constitute a political gesture, not only because the personal is political and vice versa, but also because the defeated are cast outside the political sphere and banned from forming a counter-public. The intimate and personal thus emerge as the remaining site where defeat is not marked as an end or an absence; a site where defeat instead lives on as a rich reservoir of memories, affective attachments and unrealized potential. Therefore, the context of post-revolutionary Egypt, as well as the non-commercial nature of the initiative, allows us to reassess or expand Berlant's concept of the intimate public to appreciate the political potential of its cultivation of affective attachment and strategies for day-to-day survival. The following section discusses how the workshop generated a plurality of affective responses beyond sentimentalism renegotiating the weight of 1967.

Beyond Sentimentalism

Due to the stifling political climate, the intensity of the course load, and the intimacy of the writings that were shared, the reflections and conversations during the sessions of 'A Geography for Beaten Heroes' offered ample room for emotional responses. '*Sometimes I thought like, is it the rhythm of the workshop, is there something wrong? And then I realized it is just agitating, reading about defeat is agitating.*'[52] This agitation proved multifaceted. While political despair and frustration formed an important part of the exercise, there was also space for anger, boredom and joy. For example, in response to a novella by Alaa al-Deeb, the participants concluded that the defeated protagonist was such a boring character that they plainly refused to write a reflection on the text as they had been assigned. 'To me, there was nothing funny or interesting or exciting, but also

[51] Berlant, Female Complaint, p. 273, 27.
[52] Magdy, interview.

that *is* part of defeat. There is nothing glamourous about it.'[53] The writings of Latifa al-Zayyat provoked feelings of exasperation and anger, because of their romantic approach to the defeat. In response to Khaled Fahmy's articles on 1967, there was a certain sense of embarrassment, because 'it makes the defeat looks really stupid.'[54] When participants asked each other in the morning how they were doing, they would respond in jest 'I'm feeling a bit defeated today.'[55] These moments of boredom, laughter, self-mockery, and even irreverent cheering on the anniversary of the *naksa*, renegotiated the weight of the event. 'I think [they] helped us stop taking defeat so seriously.'[56]

Given the magnitude of the social trauma of the *naksa* and the burden felt by the generation growing up in its shadow, the renegotiation of a melancholic attachment to the sixties through creative modes of irreverence and intimacy, is an achievement worth dwelling upon. It is partly Zainab Magdy who should be credited for it. She steered the readings more and more toward Waguih Ghali, the subject of her PhD project, and personal obsession.[57] Ghali's novel and diaries (covering 1964–1968) combine scathing social critique and ridicule of the bourgeois milieu in which he circulated, to an uncompromising plunge into love affairs and endless nights of drinking, gambling and smoking. His mockery and hedonism are riven by a deep sense of despair, self-loathing and depression. Major historical events such as the Suez crisis, the ghosts of fascism in post-WWII Germany, and his reporting from Israel in the aftermath of the 1967 defeat seem to function merely as an ominous background to the petty dramas of private life. He does not ascribe his alienation to his role as intellectual in society, nor does he present his irony as a vehicle toward emancipation. His focus on the private and the banal therefore implicitly questions the role of the intellectual as the engine of modernity. In this sense, Ghali's writings precipitated the deconstruction of 'the figure of the intellectual-prophet that had governed Arabic literature in the modern era,' which Zeina Halabi situates in the 1990s.[58] With Ghali's texts, Magdy encouraged the workshop participants to investigate the personal and the everyday, the silly and the banal, against the heavy background of post-2013 Egypt. They discussed how it felt to lose a football match yesterday.

Sianne Ngai argues that what she calls 'ugly feelings,' such as irritation and boredom, have a more durable temporality than more ennobling and potentially cathartic emotions such as melancholia or rage.[59] Rather than development, climax and release, these unspectacular emotions have a tendency to drag on. If tidy historical narratives present defeat as an end point, lived defeat drags on as a persistent aftermath. Irritation, Ngai argues, is moreover understood as an 'insistently inadequate reaction, one occurring only in conspicuous surplus or deficit in proportion to its occasion.'[60] Too much in response to a football match, too little in response to the defeat of a nationalist war or emancipatory revolution, the ambiguous affective registers of

[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] See Sara *Elkamel (2019)* "Trying Hard to Get out of My Skin": A Conversation on Waguih Ghali's Multiple Selves, Mada Masr, February 25. Available at: https://www.madamasr.com/en/2019/02/25/feature/culture/trying-hard-to-get-out-of-my-skin-a-conversation-on-waguih-ghalis-multiple-selves/. Accessed November 14, 2022.
[58] Halabi, Unmaking of the Arab Intellectual, p. 1.
[59] Ngai, Ugly Feelings, p. 6.
[60] Ibid., p. 182.

agitation and cynicism break the boundaries between grand history and the banal. They thus operate quite similar to the ways in which the intimate public allows subjects to engage with defeat as a personal history. While melancholic stories of suffering were not absent in the project, the plurality of affect beyond a sentimental worldview shows a more liberatory potential than Berlant's intimate public.

A good example is a letter to an ex-lover taken up in the workshop's publication, which opens with 'Mr. Shit.'[61] The author initially planned to write a letter to her dead father, in relation to the 1970s student movement, much in line with the spirit of the workshop, but it felt too intellectually contrived and she started anew in a more intuitive way.

> *In Arabic it starts with 'sī kharā.' It's a degrading word, very colloquial and a very non-literary word [laughs]. And this is a part of me that I was always struggling with. I have a very sharp tongue and I use very profane vocabulary and everybody was always judging that. And I thought, we are not a polite community and this is not a polite life.*[62]

So while the text deals with a personal relationship, it is expressed in a language that makes a political stance, insisting on the right to be angry, loud and vulgar in a society of violent repression. This is not entirely unrelated to the theme of the workshop. Ekram explains that the letter printed in *If Not for that Wall* was in a way a response to Arwa Salih's letters to her ex that are included at the end of *The Stillborn* -her bitter memoir of the 1970s student movement, published shortly after she took her own life in 1997. *The Stillborn* had been very important to Ekram even before the workshop. It functioned like a manifesto, helping her to deal with the political climate post-2013.[63] In her own letter, she is equally angry and bitter, but much less polite and forgiving.

> *I understand her pain so much and I feel it is very relevant. But […] I don't want to be Arwa Salih. You understand her; you reflect her pain; you feel it. But you promise yourself you don't want to go there.*[64]

Like the space for agitation, boredom and jest created in the reading group, the letter thus opens up avenues for relating to a heavy past and present in new ways; reflecting and building upon the 'beaten heroes' of the past, but also clearing new paths and shaping new dispositions that are aimed at the immediate political present.

It can be concluded that the cultivation of personal stories and affective attachments in intimate publics does not necessarily lead to a sentimental worldview. Drawing on queer affect studies, this article appreciates the subversive potential of negative affect, even if expressed in modes of the personal and mundane. In particular, the workshop managed to open up both narrative and affect in unexpected directions turning away from a public narrative and dominant atmosphere characterized by stifling closure and engaging modes of mockery and vulgarity as acts of refusal. It bears repeating that 'Geography for Beaten Heroes' formed a rare occasion and extraordinary space for

[61] Menna *Ekram*, Sī Kharā/Mr. Shit, in Belal, Refaat and Tahl (eds) If Not for That Wall, pp. 292–293.
[62] Ekram, interview.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.

free association and intimate exchange. Nevertheless, it demonstrates the potential value of intimate publics in a context of violent repression.

Conclusion: Remembering Defeat in Broken Times

This article has argued that 1967 has continued to haunt the struggle for decolonization and social justice and its recurrent setbacks in Egypt and the Arab region. It has come to function as an historical reference point in personal life stories and has served to make sense of deep-seated feelings of postcolonial disenchantment. The 2011 uprisings temporarily challenged the dominant melancholic attachment to the past, reintroducing a sense of dignity and ownership and opening a new 'horizon of expectation.'[65] Amidst the ruins of revolutionary hopes after 2013, however, the horizon of any future that may transcend the stifling present seems firmly located in the past. It is precisely in the context of this experience of 'aftermath,' and its collapse of a stable triangle of past/present/future that the past becomes again 'a pervasively recurrent question.'[66]

Drawing on Nouri Gana's notion of *afteraffects,* this article approaches such a resurfacing of the past in terms of affective intensities rather than narrative transmissions. The analysis of the *naksa's afteraffects* in the creative writing workshop 'A Geography for Beaten Heroes' demonstrates an openness of both narrative and affect in stark contrast to the closed narrative of defeat in the public domain. The fact that this took place in an intimate public, aimed at the exchange of personal stories and the cultivation of affective attachment does not mean it is inconsequential. For one, the emphasis on the private and the everyday refocuses attention to the immediate demand to carve out a life in a marginalized social space in which incarceration, suicide and exile are acutely and viscerally lived as a personal loss and a direct threat.[67] For another, seemingly depoliticized personal stories can constitute political gestures.[68] Drawing upon recent scholarly interest in negative affects, my approach in this article acknowledges 'the possibility that alternatives dwell in the murky waters of a counterintuitive, often impossibly dark and negative realm of critique and refusal.'[69] More specifically, to act upon political despair with mockery, is to renegotiate actively the weight of the political present. To be irritated is to refuse tidy narratives and lofty emotions. To refuse to be polite in the face of state brutality is to claim agency from a marginalized position.

Ekram's '*you understand her, but you don't want to go there*' thus gives evidence of a shared *afteraffect* across generations—the refusal to get over it—and of the insistence to act upon that differently—to challenge grand narratives of sacrifice for the higher cause. Since 'A Geography for Beaten Heroes' was organized in 2017, the margins for maneuver have been further narrowed for critical creative practices in Egypt.[70] This article has shown the value of non-commercial intimate publics, however

[65] Reinhardt *Koselleck (2004)* Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time, pp. 155–176 (New York: Columbia University Press); see also Eltoukhy, Tadwīna 'ān al-naksa.
[66] Scott, Omens of Adversity, p. 75, as cited in Halabi, Unmaking of the Arab Intellectual, p. 157.
[67] Ekram, interview.
[68] See also Halabi, Unmaking of the Arab Intellectual, pp. 155–166.
[69] Halberstam, The Queer Art of Failure, p. 2.
[70] For example, Yasmine *Zohdi (2019)* What We Talk about When We Talk about Trees: On Art, Maneuvering and Persistent Precarity, Mada Masr, December 9. Available at: https://www.madamasr.com/en/2019/12/09/opinion/culture/what-we-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-trees/, accessed November 14, 2022.

marginalized, as spaces to affirm life against the odds and to renegotiate *afteraffects* beyond sentimentalism.

Acknowledgements

I am particularly grateful to Zainab Magdy and Menna Ekram for generously giving their time and for speaking so frankly with me about their experiences. I would further like to thank the Remembering Activism (ReAct) group, led by Prof. Ann Rigney, for the shared reading and discussion of an early draft of this article, reviewer #3 for the incredibly helpful suggestions, and the Dutch Research Council for funding this project.

Funding

The research for and writing of this article were supported by the Dutch Research Council (NWO) under Grant number Vl.Veni.191C.002.

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