

Letting Fieldwork Speak Back

Mariz Kelada

In the most basic sense, theory is the suspension of empirical knowledge, not merely its abstraction. Theory is often used quite plainly to make sense of happenings, to give them significance, and to read all sorts of politics into and through them. So what does one do if and when a theory does not seem to cohere or map out onto happenings? What does one do with the excess of happenings that appear eccentric, illogical and quite messy? Do we twist happenings to fit a certain explanatory theoretical framework? Do we throw a generalizable gloss over particularities, or, even worse, fixate on describing particularities as if they have unparalleled logic of operation? Certainly, these conundrums are subject to grand ongoing academic debates, such as the debate between post-colonial theory and Marxism, or political economy and cultural studies, or political science and anthropology. However, as an anthropologist with a foot in the door in film and media studies, I mostly work through critical ethnography (Madison 2011), i.e. this excess of seemingly “eccentric” messy happenings, as well as more theory than I can list here or even fully make sense of at times.

In this paper, I will share some practical reflections that can offer ways for reconsidering what one does with empirical knowledge, and how one might engage in ethnographic writing as more than just proof of theories; it also

speaks back. There are two strategies that I use to let fieldwork speak back which I will nickname here the “and then!” and the “so what?”. I have chosen these nicknames as metaphors of the necessity of continuous durational layering of empirics through the “and then!”, and the interruptive questioning of the resonance between theory and empirics through the “so what?”.

First, I will trace both the stakes and some techniques of ethnographic duration and writing. I will share the basics of gathering ethnographic information, some strategies of analysis, and points of tension and consideration of “writing up.” Second, I will share an example of why that irritating question, i.e. “so what?”, is important in unsettling one’s default use of theoretical and conceptual frameworks. I specifically illustrate how the particular happening of outdoor shooting in the Egyptian film and media industry demanded a reshuffling of my disciplinary theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

“And Then!”: Layers of Writing Fieldnotes

Ethnography is about duration and participation, attunement not only to narratives and expressions but also to raw happenings. It is also about relationality, or how one’s presence inflects and affects a happening through observation, which always impacts the course of events in some capacity. While interviews are the most

familiar and manageable method, observation and participant observation are messier and trickier. Each method works on a different scale, and the layering of this multi-scaler information can be an overwhelming process. The process of ethnographic writing starts with: a) jottings, which involves writing down points that capture immediacies and first impressions on-site. It does not matter if these points are impressionistic, superficial or not completely accurate or detailed. This level of immediate writing is important because it retains one's primary reactions which are essential in acknowledging positionality and anchoring reflexivity. Jottings are as much a contact-sheet for happenings as well as for one's own first muddled encounters with them. From jottings, one would be able to then scale up to b) ethnographic sketches. Sketches are a chance to spend more time with happenings and their actors. They should be more detailed in terms of spatial, visual (or sensorial), temporal, and relational descriptions. To write an ethnographic sketch is to either transform jottings into a more coherent description of these conditions or to contrast these immediacies with what a longer encounter has brought to your attention. With accumulation of these scales of writing over a long duration, combined with interviews and other forms of knowledge (i.e. photographs, recordings, archives, etc.), one would then have the foundations for a fully formed ethnographic writing which then is transformed into a crafted, contemplated ethnographic narrative. However, there are other crucial analytical processes. Patterning is a primary analytical technique among others, such as discourse analysis. To put it simply, patterning is more than finding common occurrences or shared logics (this a valid use for sure, but it should not stop there because parallels can be interesting, but they can easily stop there, thus being reductive). Instead, patterning (Nina and Wakeford 2012) is to go over the accumulated layers of writings/information and disassemble them from linear or causal frames, and then to reassemble them in relation to their discontinuities, anomalies, and discrepancies. For example, if there is an activist group forming around a cause, it makes sense to trace their

shared motivations, but it can be even more generative to take note of instances where their practices differ or conflict which could reveal or at least account for more complexity that entails more than "a positivist claim."

This then takes us to how fieldwork can feature in a final piece of writing. The main thing here is to use field notes intentionally, not as an "accessory" or "spice" that adds anecdotal interest with no accountability to what else they entail. Using field notes to make or validate a claim—be it factual, historical, hypothetical or theoretical—is one of the ways. However, this approach can easily place a happening in the functionalist slot of "proof" which also condenses the durational aspect of ethnographic methods. Another approach that retains the sense of duration of ethnography is basically not starting from a claim but working in reverse; to first analyze the happenings on their own terms, giving that as much validity as theory, archives, or even statistics. In a sense, this achieves the leveling out of the habitual hierarchy of theory and empirics, which leads to the superimposition of the former on the later. I will illustrate this point further in the following part.

"So What?": Media, Outdoor Shootings, and Urban Anthropology

My ongoing Ph.D. research on and with the technical workers of the Egyptian media industry focuses on the politicized socialities in media production, which is itself connected to dense webs of political and urban economies. Now the theoretical coordinates that I am working with are the anthropology of media, the anthropology of infrastructure and urban anthropology broadly, in addition to the anthropology of the Middle East in relation to political economy and conceptions of resistance. Each of the sub-disciplines is densely rich ethnographically and theoretically, and each can be sufficient for analyzing this topic. Additionally, there is much to say here about what concepts like "political," "urban," "resistance," or even "Middle East" are, and where do I situate my project in their theoretical debates. But, for the sake of concisely demonstrating how the "so what?" strategy works, I

will focus here on an example from my process of writing one of my qualifying exams which is basically a literature review on urban anthropology to demonstrate my “specialization” in this sub-field and to situate my research topic in the sub-field. The struggle was to find a way to demonstrate how analyzing the daily livelihoods of media’s technical workers, as part and parcel of urban infrastructure, can reformulate dominant understandings of media’s relation to politicized socialities.

During my fieldwork, Hady, a young production assistant, told me about the arrangements and negotiations around outdoor shooting as a central part of his job during an interview back in the summer of 2018 in Cairo:

“Every outdoor location has a contractor. No crew can shoot a minute in Heliopolis for example without having an agreement with ‘am Sobhy. Thirty years ago he was a fruit seller in the area, and now he has almost complete authority on the shooting locations in the area from apartments, shops, to street corners [...] Even when we have all the legal permits to shoot outdoors, there is no way we can get the job done without constant arrangements and negotiations with the people who have actual authority on their streets.”

The city of Cairo inspired a prominent wave of neorealist Egyptian cinema, especially during the 1980’s,¹ and it is still the locus of narratives in award winning ‘alternative’ film productions.² This observation is not new, and there are various analyses in film theory on cities (e.g. Bruno 1993; Clarke 1997; Massood 2003; Penz and Lu 2011; Pratt 2014). Media effectively shape the urban imaginary of a city and its dwellers with all the complexities of politics of class, ethnicity, and gender, etc. (e.g. Ginsburg 1995; Mazzarella 2003; Shafik 2007; Abu-Lughod 2008). But Hady’s stories, among others’ experiences, illuminated a thread that weaves films and cities not only symbolically and aesthetically but also economically, socio-politically, and physically. Then I asked myself: “so what?”; Cairo’s streets remain predominantly inaccessible to filmmakers without the long complex process of obtaining filming permits from multiple state au-

thorities, especially under the current militaized authoritarian regime. Counter to the state’s scrutiny over the city, there are still ways to ‘steal’ outdoor shots if one negotiates an agreement with the people who have immediate authority over “their streets,” as Hady stated. These people could be a kiosk owner, a doorman, a low-rank traffic officer, who can both allow one to ‘steal’ shots, but also can render the state-issued permit useless if they wish. There are also curious if not disruptive pedestrians who would gather around a shoot to catch a glimpse of a star or to peek into the frame for fun. When a shoot is suspended because of a policeman wants to check filming permits or an electricity glitch, the crew of technical workers, be it an assistant of production or a lighting technician, resolve or patch this issue through different ‘competences’. These competencies may be social, affective, physical or technical, or all combined. When the shoot is resumed, the entirety of the production system is not made more efficient, and the process of out-door shooting does not become any less turbulent. However, within every instant of a glitch, the technical workers function as a backup infrastructure to the failures of the infrastructures of media-making, while helping to maintain and reproduce the semi-haphazard system of media production and with it the entire political economy of the media industry. On its own, “outdoor shootings” consist of streets, permits, workers, sensory ambiances, visual references, class and gender configurations and relations, networks, skills, labour, socialities, imaginations, economies both formal and informal and so on. It indexes various “analytical categories” of often separate bodies of theory: it meshes them, refutes them, and ultimately speaks back at them.

This was an example of analyzing the happening on its own terms. But, by asking “so what?” every time I encountered a resonance or a parallel between theory and information about outdoor shooting, I started perceiving these particular happenings as being able to trespass the theory/empirics dichotomy. So what if Marxist theoretical frames can help me position media’s technical workers as urban precariats (e.g. Har-

vey 2006, 2008), so what if I can read Egypt's media industry as post-industrialist or informal economy (e.g. Low 1996; Simone 2004), or as a prominent shaper of urban imagination and experiences of modernity (e.g. Appadurai 1990; Buck-Morss 1992, 1995), and so what if there are entanglements of media in urban infrastructure (e.g. Larkin 2008)? Through centralizing the happening of outdoor shootings to the way I surveyed the literature, I set up three main stages to argue that if the relationship between the labour of media-making and politics are conceptually reorganized in relation to urban infrastructures, it can reveal other critical ways to theorize what can constitute political socialities beyond dominant conception of "resistance" that is either associated with labour unions and organized formal social movements, or microcosms of quotidian struggles and survivals, or the avant-garde artistic ventures battling over representations. By politicized socialites I meant the kind of social processes, networks, and relations that get to be viewed as "political" because they contest but also comply with power structures be it concrete or abstract. In part one, I staged the theoretical connections between media, social imaginaries, and modernity. Then, through a close reading of Appadurai's analysis of the social lives of commodities, which lacked consideration of space, I established the ways that "media-in-the-making" can be analyzed as commodities that are part and parcel of urban space as it pertains to notions of contested modernity. I then juxtaposed conceptions of mediascape with Larkin's "media infrastructure" to highlight the necessity of cross-reading media and the urban both symbolically and materially. Accordingly, I established the base for analyzing the labour of media-making as the shared infrastructure between media and the urban. In part two, I provided an overview of the anthropology of infrastructure to foreground the critical ways in which media's technical workers are tied to the urban as a dynamic infrastructure and accordingly to the neoliberal economy and different modernities. I established this claim by conjoining Simon's concept of people as infrastructure and Berlant's (2016) analysis of how

infrastructural breaks allow certain modes of sociality to form, with Ferguson's (2013) argument about labour as social membership and his theory of "declaration of dependency." In part three, I highlighted how the anthropology of cities mostly focuses on labour and social movements in relation to politics, and how on the other hand cities and politics are a prominent locus of many artistic and cinematic endeavours and theorizations. Through tracing the threads of theorizations in four conceptual configurations: (a) labor/politics, (b) city/labor/politics, (c) media/politics, and (d) city/media/politics, I established the need for a conceptual reconfiguration, if not hybridization: the politics of media-labor within and against the city.

Tours and detours through various bodies of theory, and asking "so what?" made evident that a happening like outdoor shooting is not just a metaphor for political socialities but it is on its own able to reorganize the default parallels one can make with several theoretical frames. Leveling the hierarchy of theory and empirics is not to maintain situational equity but to create a dynamic range where they speak to each other. What I did here is not necessarily explain "outdoor shootings" better to eventual academic readers, instead I show how this happening can challenge or complicate explanatory theoretical defaults. Through the happenings of outdoor shooting, what they refute and complicate about segmented theoretical suppositions, allowed me to engage theory more subversively through an attunement to laboring people as infrastructure that this happening demanded. This was a useful exercise of testing the limits of how theories can be reconfigured not only interdisciplinarily but also in response to the complexity of real-world-happenings.

Notes

1. Mohamed Khan and the City Rhythms, Mohamed Al Masry, Cairo's *Cinematheque Magazine*.
2. El Said, Tamer, dir. 2016. *The Last Days of the City*. New York: Big World Pictures.

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