

Open Air and Agentic Power: A Spatial Analysis of the Women's Cooperative Union of Food and Beverage Vendors

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Abstract

I present my artistic research project, “A Thought of the Outside”, in which I position “space as political discourse” that can help us exist outside state terror. I propose that in the quest for organising to escape spatiality bound by domination of the state, the “affilial formations” of political intervention, social work and NGOs—which arise as the main mode of amassing counter narratives and assembling—surface as provisional. Yet the physicality of space—the material site where all of these dire conditions occur—remains. I unpack the supposition that there is evidence that every political phenomenon casts a spatial shadow, but that we do not know how to see it because our spatial literacy is invested in materiality.

Working from the proposition that every political phenomenon casts a spatial shadow, but often in a way that requires a reading beyond the concrete materialities of the built environment, this contribution focuses on the state ban of the Women's Food and Tea Sellers' Cooperative operating in public spaces in Khartoum. This ban followed a long history of calls to “organise” by NGOs relying on a language of formalisation and representational structure as means of political engagement. The contribution proposes that the patterns of presence of tea ladies in the street—in the open air—is a resistant mode of spatial organisation that does not operate on the terms of physical bounded-ness of formal architecture but rather on others. As such it becomes the target for state terror and repression, indicating the state's attempt to also operate a form of spatial violence that is not limited to the physical environment. The open air, above the streets, and the “invisible labour” offered by the tea ladies' cooperative has given rise to a double occurrence of state terror, indicated by the Sovereignty Council in June 2020, banning the cooperative association for women from speaking out against the transitional government for its failure to compensate or support the tea ladies during the pandemic.

“Even for those who escape apathy, agency is problematic.”

Joy James^[1]

Any discussion of self-organisation and -determination necessitates scrutiny of the relationship that agency and power have with different groups' physical surroundings. Furthermore, every political

phenomenon casts a shadow; the shadow of agentic power can be seen in the different material and spatial conditions that distribute terror from a state onto its people. By viewing the conditions of the deployment of power and terror with a sense of spatial literacy, it becomes possible to apprehend a community's antagonistic proximity to the state. This also enables a better insight into how state terror is inscribed onto some communities over others for the purpose of informing how we can collectively accumulate agency through organising.

To illustrate the stakes and complexities of this agential and spatial dilemma, here follows a chronology of events involving the Sudanese “tea ladies” a once disparate group of street vendors whose attempts to organise led to a systematic hunt for 8,000 invisible labourers and a ban on selling tea in public spaces. The timeline charts their efforts and struggles toward agency from 1990 through to the present.

1990. The Women's Cooperative Union of Food and Beverage Vendors, led by Awadiya Koko, is established as a formal entity with a membership of more than 600.



photography by Ala Khier

When I look outside the window of my room in Khartoum, I see the glaring sun; the minaret in the background looks over an incomplete construction, erected two decades ago, with its reinforced steel entrails silhouetted against the sky, halted by yet another economic crash. I see a tea lady has set up shop on the other side of the road in the open air. She sits in a shadow cast by the incomplete building, making visible the boundaries of her shop. She is the fourth tea lady to set up shop there in the span of four weeks, each averaging a week of selling tea and dumplings. The tea ladies are frequently subjected to police harassment; their equipment is confiscated, and they have to pay fees to get it returned. These actions are accompanied by continuous accusations that they are “immoral uncivilized women” under the Public Order Act.^[2] This law has been disproportionately deployed against women. I have in the past

been subjected to its violence, but for the tea ladies it isn't just a matter of being removed from physical presence outdoors, it is also the removal of the means of survival itself.

How to apprehend or model the instantaneous strategising needed to maintain a mode of survival here? To answer this, it is necessary to consider the tea ladies' geographies of survival in the built environment, and to understand the role space plays in the process of performing political agency. What bearing does being outdoors, in the open air, in the shadows of tall buildings, and encountering state terror on street corners have on their political agency? How does it inform their modes of organising such as the Women's Cooperative Union of Food and Beverage Vendors, established in the early 1990s given that the tea ladies' attempts to claim their "right to survive" in Khartoum have been stuck between NGOs' rhetoric of "self-determination, governance, agency and empowerment", and the state's requests to speak to formal "representatives" for dialogue to commence? The outcome of their response to this dilemma was a formal ban that prevented tea ladies from addressing the state to support their selling tea in the majority of public spaces in Khartoum.

2003. Displaced women from Darfur, southern regions and conflict areas make up more that 75% of the tea ladies.



Husna, a tea lady, had set up shop for one week before she disappeared. Ola Hassanain, *The Garden*, 2018, photograph

In the image you see a tea lady, Husna, seated in the open air without a visible physical boundary one of many who disappeared quickly. She had told me that in one of her previous neighbourhoods a policeman came up to her and took her equipment: three kettles, a metal cupboard, and her jars of

sugar, tea and spices. The policeman accused her of working after curfew and said this meant that she was probably engaging in “immoral behaviour”. He set a fee for her to pay before she was allowed to have her equipment back. When she went to the police station to pay the fee and retrieve her things, the policeman told her that payment was not enough.

Did her vulnerability stem from her operating outdoors? Would an enclosed space have offered her the safety that the open air did not? How does architectural materiality script this encounter? Katherine McKittrick offers us a way to read the materiality that creates space. She describes a regulatory nature inherent in designed space. What McKittrick says for geography, may also be said of architecture and its “discursive attachment to stasis and physicality.” McKittrick notes that “[t]he idea that space ‘just is,’ and that space and place are merely containers for human complexities and social relations, is terribly seductive: that which ‘just is’ not only anchors our selfhood and feet to the ground, it seemingly calibrates and normalizes where, and therefore who, we are.”^[3] Much like the materiality of the slave ship, the materiality of architecture contains and regulates. Following McKittrick we could argue that architecture’s materiality “hides black humanity because it ‘just is’ and because those inside, bound to the walls, are neither seeable nor liberated subjects.”^[4]

I employ “materiality” here to refer to everything that *bounds*, and in turn, creates physical enclosures. It is the sidewalks and the walls around us, all that has been architecturally designated as “space”. In this context, the material is the fusion of matters from which our cities are made, as well as the information, ideas and ideologies of the architectural logics behind this fusion. The indoors would not have entirely precluded the tea ladies from state subjection. By this I mean that the tea ladies’ organising tactics were not geographically informed by how they have used the city, but rather by the spatial understanding that was available within NGO rhetoric on organisational tactics. Political recognition and access to resources and services are often used to pacify. One such incident would be the Awadiya’s courage award, which was constantly framed by NGOs as a marker of political advancement when her recognition had no bearing on the inevitable decision to ban tea selling.

March 2016. Awadiya Mahmoud Kuku goes from selling tea on the roadside in Khartoum to the US White House.



Sudanese entrepreneur Awadiya Mahmoud Kuku has been awarded the 2016 Secretary of State’s International Omen of

Courage Award, the US Embassy in Khartoum has announced.^[5] USA State Department, 2016, photograph: Public Domain

May 2017. Tea ladies are arrested and denied the right to be appointed a lawyer. Penalties and fees are issued with impossible deadlines under the Public Order Act.

September 2017. Khartoum Municipality issues a decision banning work on Nile Street, Green Square and a number of other places. Appeals to municipalities are rejected on the grounds that these public spaces will soon be handed over to private development projects.

The logic enacted in this series of events is that when demonstrating an agentic capacity “in opposition” to structural agency the capacity to act independently of structural constraints political agency is stripped bare.^[6]

More than 70% of the tea lady cooperative is composed of displaced women who have arrived in Khartoum from conflict zones in Sudan. Official state interpretation has marked them as displaced and dispossessed, essentially as “ungeographic”.^[7] It is through administrative practices and architecture that terror is cast as a “standard” practice both state administration and architecture enact arbitrary violence, which renders the state’s presence vague, as if to tell us that it shows up only when the policeman does.

What would happen if the tea ladies’ attempts to organise and gain self-determination reflected their geography and awareness that the outdoors of Khartoum scripts the same experience they had trying to get out of their respective homes under conflict? What does the apparent transparency of “open” suggest in terms of the political agency we think we gain through organising? Can the open air be divorced from the spatiality of state terror, and from the “affilial formations” of political intervention, allyship, social work and NGOs?^[8] These formations are the main sites we have for amassing counter-narratives and assemblages, and while they are important, they remain provisional and ad hoc, whereas materiality or space is durable, remains and continues.

The provisional nature of these assemblages invites a specific mode of survival and organisational structures that are predicated on the very conditionality and spatiotemporal transformations. The tea ladies’ survival mode has appropriated and made use of shadows cast by buildings. Shadows have a clear shape and boundary that relies on a mutually dynamic interplay between the built environment and sources of light. We can make associations with the transforming boundaries of shadows by denoting the necessity for flexibility in organising, but most importantly what it would mean for an organisation to part ways with longevity and turn towards transience. Can we imagine an organisational structure lasting for a few hours, disappearing once it has served its purpose? This is where the urgency for spatial literacy as a way of imagining and organising political consciousness emerges. Political philosopher Joy James notes that:

Mapping the political terrain is an imprecise craft. Boundaries are continuously redrawn through political conflict, compromise, and resignation. Losing one’s bearings becomes commonplace when following altered maps with abstractions about policing and policed bodies abstractions, which in their failure to address the racialization of bodies and punishment, lead to false notions of body politics and repression.^[9]

Social, physical and metaphysical space are products of the dominant group's or the state's logic. We should ask, then, whether it is possible to organise and work towards self-determination if agentic power embedded in state structure is predicated on violence. Similarly, is it possible to conceive of a way of organising that departs from theoretical analyses of spatial justice that give precedence to lived geographies of the groups in question, or as James puts it, how do we "travel beyond merely rhetorical radicalism to confront the structures of dominance?"^[10] What would it mean to think of organising as working in and amidst the shadows of buildings as the sun blazes down on a group of women selling tea?

June 2020. The Sovereignty Council bans the Women's Cooperative Union from speaking out against the transitional government for failing to compensate or support the tea ladies through the Covid-19 pandemic.

Concepts of self-determination and agency are entangled with tensions between formalisation which guides political imagination and materiality, such as the environment the tea ladies inhabit: the open air. The open air is an environment that is not yet materially bounded, yet holds for the tea ladies a geography of survival and a perspective of struggle that allows for them to embody characteristics of open air on the one hand being transparent and anonymous, thus in some sense unseen. On the other hand, it is a space derived directly from its surrounding architectural characteristics, the same as the bounded outdoors, and all that is already inside the architectural enclosures that are sites of state regulation and terror via policing.

The tea ladies' attempts to exercise political agency through accepted forms of (formal) community action, by forming cooperatives, paradoxically sealed their fate to always remain outside, in the open air, exhausted and dealing with the police forever. Dominant ideas of agency have long required a subject "without agentic power" as foundational to the existence of "agency". The experiences of those subjects the tea ladies', for example are necessary to give current political apparatuses of engagement a coherent form.



Given the name of "First Lady of the Sudanese revolution", Awadiya Koko is shown here sitting and feeding people in the open air at a sit-in, during which the tea ladies fed 5,000 people a day. Ala Kheir, 2019, photograph^[1]

Footnotes

1. James, Joy. *Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender, and Race in U.S. Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1996. p. 152.
2. Sudan's Public Order Law is derived from a set of legal provisions established in the Sudanese Criminal Law Act and the Community Safety Act. It came into effect and was applied for the first time in Khartoum State as the Public Order Act (hereinafter the Act), following the 1989 coup, which brought the National Islamic Front into power. Its name was later changed to the Community Safety Act. The Act includes several provisional articles on the general appearance, dress code, as well as the individual and social behaviour of citizens. Furthermore, it gives the state the power to act as a "regulator" of Sudanese people's behaviours, in a way that is deliberately humiliating, insulting and degrading to their dignity and in violation of their rights. The excessive application of the Act, and the methods of its imposition, in most cases result in judicial violations, especially against women, ethnic groups from marginalised areas, religious sects that do not subscribe to government's version of Islam, and the most vulnerable strata of society.
3. McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds: Black women and The Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2006. p..xi.
4. Ibid.

5. "Sudanese tea seller wins US International Women of Courage award". *Dabanga*. 4 April 2016. Available at <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudanese-tea-seller-wins-us-international-women-of-courage-award> (accessed 2024-04-16).
6. Campbell, Colin. "Distinguishing the Power of Agency from Agentic Power: A Note on Weber and the 'Black Box' of Personal Agency". *Sociological Theory*. vol. 27. no. 4. December 2009. pp. 407–18.
7. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, p. x.
8. Wilderson III, Frank B. *Afropessimism*. New York: W.W. Norton. 2020. p. 220.
9. James, *Resisting State Violence*, p.42.
10. Ibid., p. 202.
11. Lavrilleux, Ariane. "Awadeya Mahmoud Koko: From tea seller to union leader to 'mother of the revolution'". *Mada*. 21 May 2019. Available at <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2019/05/21/feature/politics/awadeya-mahmoud-koko-from-tea-seller-to-union-leader-to-mother-of-the-revolution/> (accessed 2024-04-16).