



Atmospheric memories: Affect and minor politics at the ten-year anniversary of the London bombings



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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses how the ten-year anniversary of the London bombings was made present through political affects and atmospheres on 7 July 2015. Although the anniversary of a terrorist event forms an opportune moment for invoking the nation as united in feeling, we are interested in how people attune to political atmospheres of memory and trauma in multiple ways, which do not always cohere to sovereign narratives about unity and certainty. By focusing on these events through an attentiveness to the atmospheric and affective, we examine how these events were recalled, memorialised, felt and sensed in the small-scale ceremonies taking place across London on that morning, by way of a multi-authored sensory auto-ethnography. As such, we are led towards various moments of encounter, which involve 'minor gestures' (Manning, 2016), and imply ways of responding to acts of terror that rub against the unifying forces of the state. In contrast to the 'rolling maelstroms of affect' (Thrift 2004: 57) pursued by the state and media following a terrorist attack, this project is attentive to multiple, uncertain and ambivalent encounters. These matter because they suggest other ways of being political and of responding to both terrorist and state-led violence.

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1. Introduction

7 July 2015 was the ten-year anniversary of the bombings on London's public transport system. Many experienced these bombings in tragic and devastating ways and hundreds more were exposed to this disaster as it resonated throughout London, the UK and the world. The 2005 London bombings were intensely personal events for some, yet they were also major political events that took place as part of the global War on Terror. In this paper, we engage these anniversary events by presenting a sensory auto-ethnography of the affective atmospheres, bodily experiences, and encounters (Wilson, 2016) between the materials and bodies that we witnessed, felt and experienced at these commemorative events taking place at the four locations of the bombings - Edgware Road station, Tavistock Square, Aldgate station and King's Cross. An attentiveness to atmospheres becomes another route into the

politics of memory and trauma – one that facilitates an analysis of the 'microhistories' and counter-histories to 'officially sanctioned historical accounts' (To and Trivelli, 2015: 306) as well as of how not all manifestations of remembering can be reduced to 'intentional and conscious articulations' (Tumarkin, 2013). In this paper, we are particularly interested in the minor ways in which people engaged, recalled and affectively encountered the histories of these events.

Our interest in atmospheres builds on a body of work in Geography (Bissell, 2010; Anderson, 2009; McCormack, 2008), Design and Architecture (Böhme, 1993; Degen et al., 2015; Zumthor, 2006), and the Geographies of National Identity (Sumartojo, 2016; Closs Stephens, 2015; Jones and Merriman, 2016). Approaching atmospheres as 'something distributed yet palpable ... that registers in and through sensing bodies whilst also remaining diffuse' (McCormack, 2008: 413), we were interested in how we came to feel, engage and embody these events through a combination of material and immaterial elements - including infrastructure, people, colours, lights, built environment, rhythms, noises and material objects. We suggest that drawing upon the concepts of affect and atmosphere enabled an approach that rubs against the unifying narratives of the state. For example, it made it possible to ask: how

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were these events affectively transmitted across various urban spaces and among different publics on this anniversary (To and Trivelli, 2015: 307)? This brings into view the plurality of voices and forms of remembering taking place – against attempts at narrating the events as part of the history of the nation-state (Edkins, 2003). Furthermore, in examining the dispersed and multiple publics that were brought together through these events, we were reminded of the ‘viscerally local’ nature of what took place as well as how the events assembled people from many different parts of the world (Smith, 2011 on the events of 11 September 2001). Finally, through an engagement with affect and atmosphere, other people, who might have a loose, non-familial, or *indirect connection* to these events came into view – those who were working in London on that day, or who also travelled on the trains and bus and survived. Put another way, they served to remind us of the unseen everyday geographies of the War on Terror (Amoore, 2009).

Having written on political responses to the London bombings in their immediate aftermath, Angharad was keen to examine the multiple ways in which the events of 7 July were being remembered on the ten-year anniversary. She invited Sarah and Vanessa, both PhD candidates at the same Department as Angharad at the time, and Shanti, whom she had just met through a Royal Geographical Society annual conference, to collaborate in this small project with her. To enable the work, we undertook a sensory auto-ethnography (Pink and Morgan, 2013). We paid particular attention to sounds, music and silence; visual cues; gestures, touch; as well as to our orientation with the built environment. Accordingly, this led us to ask: what might the concepts of affect and atmosphere do to our understandings and engagements with a political event such as this one? In this paper, then, we consider the various ways in which we came to encounter these events by feeling our way in and out of different atmospheric spaces, and how we became attuned to ways of feeling and acting politically that operate beneath the radar of dominant accounts of remembrance. Through the work, we became interested in ‘minor gestures’ of remembrance (Manning, 2016), which were ambivalent, uncertain and did not carry any particular meaning. These stood in contrast to the ‘rolling maelstroms of affect’ (Thrift, 2004: 57) that typically sweep across cities following a terrorist attack and which are mobilised into claims about ‘us’ and ‘them’. We argue that such moments matter, because they affirm or gesture towards alternative and non-statist ways of being political (Isin, 2012; Squire and Darling, 2013). That is to say, they refuse to accept the state’s way of making sense of terrorist attacks, by distinguishing between order and disorder, war and peace, a state of norm and emergency (Taussig, 1992). Instead, they invoke the everyday ways in which relations of empathy, care and fragile resilience exceed accounts about a unified, fortified community.

2. Politicising atmospheres

Questions of affect and emotion are foundational to the politics of fear and belonging. Yet the question of what exactly these concepts might offer critical approaches to the study of terrorism are only just being drawn (Anderson and Adey, 2012; Heath-Kelly and Jarvis, 2016). Engaging the affective register means addressing the ‘ways in which flows of emotion coalesce to form a social phenomenon that is beyond individual subjective responses, feelings, and sensibilities’ (Crang and Tolia-Kelly, 2010). Affect therefore orients us towards the relational as well as the phenomenological. It is to be found ‘in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves’ (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010:

1). Likewise, atmospheres may be ‘manifested as intensities or turbulence that derive from their constitutive elements, but yet [exceed] lived or conceived space-time’ in unpredictable and varied ways’ (Sumartojo, 2015: 60, drawing on Anderson, 2009). In this context, the concepts of affect and atmosphere help loosen the grip of debates about a national and/or urban/cosmopolitan group – that is brought into presence through terrorist events (Closs Stephens, 2007; Weber, 2006). Instead, we were able to ask – how are different publics assembled and disassembled through the marking of a public event such as this one? And how were the events of the London bombings experienced and felt through various major and minor acts of remembrance that took place on this day?

We claim that an attentiveness to ‘atmospheres’ goes hand in hand with a political concern for ‘minor gestures’ (Manning, 2016; see also Katz, 1996). Manning describes the minor gesture as ‘the force that opens experience to its potential variation’ (2016: 1). She explains that whilst the minor moves alongside major keys, it has a different rhythm. For example, we might expect that many rituals and performances deployed as part of the anniversary of a terrorist attack in the UK would affirm the status, narratives, and metrics of the state. However, what we found in the small-scale ceremonies, organised by the London Assembly, and designed for family and friends rather than the broader public or media,¹ was that these included many other modes of encounter – which were innovative, fragile, but inherently affirmative – and composed of other ways of living. For instance, in the public ceremony of remembrance held on 7 July 2015 at the public memorial in Hyde Park, Emma Craig, who survived the bomb on the train at Aldgate when she was 14 years old said: ‘Quite often people say, “it didn’t break us, terrorism won’t break us”. [But] the fact is, it may not have broken London, but it did break some of us.’² This statement offers an example of a minor gesture – in that it refuses to reproduce accounts about unity. Instead it courageously activates ‘new modes of perception, inventing languages that speak in the interstices of major tongues’ (Manning, 2016: 2). As part of our fieldwork, we sought ways of working that would be open to following such moments. We were alerted us to non-speech acts, including bodily gestures such as a nod or small movement; to touch, including between bodies and matter through the fabric of the urban infrastructure; and to refrains such as a line from a song cutting across the morning air and changing a mood or ambiance. Whatever their form or content, we describe them as minor because they exceed the dominant ways of understanding what it means to be political at times of remembering.

Thus we propose that an emphasis on affect and atmosphere lends a slightly different starting point for engaging with the politics of these anniversary events. For example, whilst trauma studies has traditionally drawn on productive engagements with psychoanalytic discourse, leading to analyses of how part of a subject remains ‘missing’ in relation to any social or symbolic order (Edkins, 2003), and powerful political questions about how some lives are grieved more than others (Butler, 2006), Cvetkovich is critical of the ways in which trauma gets used to reinforce nationalism, and seeks to expand the ways in which we think about it, to show how trauma can produce ‘all kinds of affective experiences’ (2003: 19). We therefore use the term ‘atmospheric memories’ to name an attempt to think about memory not as something that is individualised in bounded persons, or as belonging to a group – activated at times of remembering – but as something that is transmitted through affective forces, that is felt in and across bodies, and comes to presence through the orchestration of official

¹ Interview with Senior Events Officer, London Assembly, 23 July 2015.

² See also, ‘7/7 bombings: London remembers’, by Wallop (2015).

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