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Crossing the Divide: Art as Mediation and Pilgrimage

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Abstract

Founded on my personal experiences of growing up in an interfaith household and my high school semester abroad in Israel, my artistic practice seeks to build bridges between people, connecting diverse communities across divides (cultural, religious, economic, racial, ethnic etc.). Through two processes, mediation and pilgrimage to self, specifically in using myself as an active participant, I argue that the process of making can become the neutral ground in which to build relationships and begin to imagine coexistence.

Mediation is expressed by Homi Bhabha’s definition of negotiation: “The ability to articulate differences in space and time…to intervene in the forest of signs and mediate what may seem to be incommensurable values or contradictory realities,” and specifically involves collaboration with Washington University in St. Louis alumna, my friend, Ayesha Mohyuddin. Pilgrimage to self is defined as self-implication, a journey back into personal and historical memory to move forward, gaining an awareness of my own participation in systems of oppression.
I. Introduction

I come from an interfaith household. I grew up in between two different worlds, suspended between a liberal Jewish mother and a conservative Catholic (now anti-religion) father. My household was constantly with opinions, heated debates, and different declarations of faith and belief. Despite the frequent clashes, I ended up somewhere in between. It was not until a high school semester abroad in Israel, in which my all Jewish class agreed that Jews should not be allowed to marry non-Jews, and with only two days dedicated to learning about the experiences of Arab Israelis, that I realized my interfaith background was not the norm and I began to negotiate the definition and existence of an “Other.” I arrived at bible scholar, Regina Schwartz’s quote, “‘Violence is not what we do to the Other…[it] is the very construction of the Other” (Rosen 138). This time in Israel, combined with my interfaith childhood, led me to ask the question, can an artistic practice build bridges between people, connecting diverse communities across divides?

As I seek to answer this question, I have identified two main processes in which I cross divides and build bridges: mediation and pilgrimage to self. I engage in mediation through collaboration, with me as an active participant working with fellow artist, Ayesha Mohyuddin, on the works, Two Prayers and Al’Abjadia – Alef Bet. In pilgrimage I utilize my art to implicate myself in systems that create divides, either by physically retracing imagined boundaries as in An Archive of Boundaries or in a critical reflection of my own past actions and
experiences as in 2010. The crossing of divides becomes more about the process than the product, with the final piece serving as a document, a residual of the process of collaboration, the process of self-implication. Ultimately, both mediation and pilgrimage to self are required to begin to build a bridge.

III. Mediation

My artistic experience with mediation is different from the traditional role of the mediator, generally in which, a trained professional serves as a third party to outline the terms of an agreement or negotiate a settlement between two opposing sides. Instead my mediation falls in line with Bhabha’s definition of negotiation, “the ability to articulate differences in space and time…to intervene in the forest of signs and mediate what may seem to be incommensurable values or contradictory realities” (8). In my most successful mediations, I am not a third party, but an active participant, and the making of art serves as the mediator. To illustrate this I look at two of my works, Al’Abjadia (2015) and Al’Abjadia – Alef Bet (2016), which are both collaborations with artist Ayesha Mohyuddin. Ayesha is third generation Bangladeshi American. As the only Muslim family in her small Tennessee hometown, she was keenly aware of how her faith and background made her different, and formed her own deep sense of religious identity. Her childhood was also filled with an interfaith focus, as her mom is the cofounder of the interfaith group, Sons and Daughters of Abraham. Her personal art practice is located in navigating the internal, spiritual sphere of being Muslim and the public
realities of this identity in post 9/11 America, and in balancing her firm identity while deeply listening to the stories of others.

In *Two Prayers*, we recite the Athan\(^1\) and Sh’m\(a\)^2 intentionally replicating the unintentional polyphony that occurs during Muslim and Jewish times of prayer within major Israeli cities. The sound component of the work is accompanied by a dual projection of the prayers’ texts visually interweaving. Simultaneously, this represents both a phonic harmony and an often-abhorred societal coexistence.

The Muslim Athan reverberates throughout Israel several times a day. Sometimes this prayer coincides with times of Jewish worship and the services phonically blend together. However, for some who have been in Israel for a lifetime and do not use the Athan as a Call, this prayer is something to be ignored, white noise. To intentionalize this phonic blending and bring it to the forefront of consciousness, we seek to combine our moments of personal spirituality, our own personal experiences with the Athan or Sh’m\(a\), with moments

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\(^1\) The *Athan* is the Muslim Call to Prayer, traditionally recited five times a day.

\(^2\) The *Sh’m\(a\)* is the main Jewish prayer, traditionally recited twice a day.
of a region’s spirituality, which although divided and often times in opposition, come together in unintended ways, using sound as an entryway.

The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, made up of Israeli, Palestinian, and other Arab musicians, also utilizes sound to demonstrate coexistence. The orchestra was built upon the friendship of its co-founders, Palestinian author/scholar Edward Said and Israeli conductor/pianist, Daniel Barenboim. The creation of art, in this case music, is what brings together a community made up of people from many different, potentially opposing, backgrounds. Just as the final assemblage of prayer is the product of conversations between Ayesha and I, each concert represents the process of practice and time spent working in collaboration to create the final product, beautiful music.

*Al'Abjadia – Alef Bet* (alphabet in transliterated Arabic and Hebrew respectively) is an exploration into the visual and sound similarities between the Arabic and Hebrew Alphabets. This series of monoprints is visually founded on *Two Prayers*, and inspired by our amateur explorations of religious language, in which we were intrigued by the similarities.
between the sounds and meanings of Arabic and Hebrew words (i.e. Sadaqah-Tzedakah-An Act of Giving). Each print is a pairing and overlapping of a Hebrew and Arabic letter with similar pronunciations, from nun and nuun to kof and kaf. It is accompanied with a collaborated sound recording of the Arabic and Hebrew alphabets. Ayesha and I worked together to pair the letters, based off our own basic religious school knowledge of the alphabets. Language in Israel-Palestine is overtly political with Hebrew, Arabic, and English as the three national languages; there is contention over languages used in schools, work places, and other public spaces. Yet the ancient roots and similarities of the two languages and alphabets continue to speak to an unintentional coexistence. Further referencing sound, the black versus white prints add an element of rhythm and syncopation, the way audibly running through the Al’Abjadia – Alef Bet would feel to the reciter. Despite being an exploration into the two alphabets, Ayesha and I are not fluent in either language, and pronounce the letters with distinctly American accents.

Figure 3. Sophia Keskey and Ayesha Mohyuddin, Al’Abjadia – Alef Bet, Kaf-Kof, 2016, Monoprint
A studio artist who frequently creates spaces for mediation in his work is Krzysztof Wodiczko. Wodiczko is normally not a participant in his conversations, instead he acts as the conductor, remaining an active component. In his *St. Louis Projection*, audio testimony is given by St. Louis residents who have lost someone to gun violence, interspersed with stories of prisoners serving time at Missouri State Correctional Facility. The hands of the speakers are projected on the surface of the St. Louis Public Library. The mediation within *St. Louis Projection* occurs between the juxtaposition of those who have lost a loved one and the prisoners who committed similar acts. Although Ayesha and I do not directly give testimony, others’ stories are referenced in the overlaying of texts and sounds, a confusion of participant, bystander, victim, perpetrator, etc.

Both *Two Prayers* and *Al’Abjadia – Aleph Bet* utilize language as the common (and dividing) denominator, which transforms and reconsiders a system, the system and politics of language and prayer, and acknowledges “the necessity of narrative ‘in which human beings appear to each other…an initiative
from which no human being can refrain and still be human’,” (Bhabha 8-9).

Through these two projects, Ayesha and I developed a relationship, weaving together our two narratives, our two systems of religious languages, to create a new narrative. It is a small demonstration that a Jew and a Muslim can work together to produce something beautiful, which, in its existence, recognizes the ever so present existence of conflict. The making of art serves as a neutral ground (which we admittedly politicized through our interaction), in which we can collaborate and bring together our two religions, cultures, and experiences. With the process of creation as the mediator and the final product as a record of the mediation, we can create a symbol for hope, a microcosm of coexistence.

**IV. Personal Pilgrimage**

The two works I discussed above locate me as an active participant in the mediation. However, despite being a component of the collaboration, I am also a part of the systems that make mediation necessary. There is an element of trust inherent in a successful mediation. A collaborator should be genuine, willing to recognize his or her faults, to be aware of his or her own part in the system. In my practice, I self-implicate through pilgrimage to self. Through this process, I revisit overarching systems of oppression and personal memory of willed ignorance that I either participated in or still continue to participate in. In taking a pilgrimage back through my memory, I critically examine the divides and boundaries that are deeply a part of me, in some ways atoning for their existence and attempting to correct them through artistic critique. By journeying back into
personal and historical memory, I am able to implicate myself, to move forward by gaining an awareness of my own role in oppression. In doing so, I can also highlight and bring attention to the divide. Ultimately, I chose the word pilgrimage, in part due to its religious history, but primarily because it alludes to a repeated process: I should return to these memories not just once, but consistently throughout my life. To demonstrate this personal pilgrimage, I chose two works, *An Archive of Boundaries* (2015) and *2010* (2016).

In *An Archive of Boundaries*, I walked a portion of the boundaries of a 1937 Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) Map of St. Louis, placing the historical de jure segregation into a contemporary context of de facto segregation. Through documenting my steps,

I complete a pilgrimage of self, a recognition of my white and socioeconomic privilege. The documentation in film, photo, and book form records my footsteps taken to walk the borders of this historical map in its contemporary

Figure 5. Sophia Keskey, *An Archive of Boundaries*, Installation View, 2015, Multimedia

Figure 6. Sophia Keskey, *An Archive of Boundaries*, Book of Intersections, 2015, Book Board, Book Cloth, Cardstock, Linen Tape
context. It represents a larger archive of walked borders. This exercise parallels the journey of Francis Alys in *The Green Line* (2004), where Alys dripped a line of green paint along the armistice barrier between the West Bank and State of Israel. He describes this pilgrimage with the quote, “Sometimes doing something poetic can become political and sometimes doing something political can become poetic” (Alys). Like *Green Line*, my filmed footage documents a small portion of footsteps taken along the HOLC borders of St. Louis communities, specifically those of Clinton Peabody Public Housing and Lafayette Square. The book is a series of polaroids, which records intersections along the HOLC boundaries I walked within the St. Louis Central West End area. The polaroids are accompanied by a system of mapping and an ongoing archive of research on divides in the City of St. Louis.

The quiet act of walking within *An Archive of Boundaries* does not have the drama of Doris Salcedo’s *Shibboleth* (2007), in which the gigantic fault line replicates the physical violence of ‘borders…the experience of segregation, the experience of hatred” (Rosen 119). Instead, the footsteps are a way to both acknowledge that I have not had to truly experience the violence of segregation,
that in many ways I help perpetuate such barriers. *An Archive of Boundaries* allows me to consider my role in the continuation of de facto segregation as a Washington University in St. Louis student, as someone who identifies as white, and as someone with the economic means to move where I need.

2010 is a reflection on and accumulation of my high school semester abroad in Israel. My semester is represented in books, each highlighting a different snapshot from Facebook, in which I have cut myself out, with redacted corresponding journal entries both from the abroad experience and my 2016 reflection, juxtaposed with photographs pulled from the Google search: “Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.” Another iteration is a large-scale installation, consisting of large printed images of my semester abroad with the Google photographs projected.
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over. It took six years of artwork, research, writing, and education to critically revisit this four month trip in which I was both a part of the religious and ethnic majority, and yet also a clueless and willfully ignorant tourist.

Components of 2010 engage with questions of what it means to be a visitor in an area of conflict, media consumption (as most images from the Google search were from news sources), personal embarrassment and guilt, what it means to be a part of the majority, and more. The layers of 2010’s images, text, and cutouts mimic the self-conscious reworking of Dan Eldon’s journals (1985-1992). His earliest journals reappear in snippets throughout journals created later during his young adulthood. A tourist, and later a photojournalist, in Kenya and Somalia, Dan recorded not only his surroundings, but also the culture of his time, his

Figure 10. Sophia Keskey, 2010, Page Spread, 2016, Book Board, Book Cloth, Cardstock, Linen Tape

Figure 11. Dan Eldon, The Journey Is the Destination: The Journals of Dan Eldon, Book Spread, 1997, Multimedia
friendships, thoughts (relevant or not), and more. My books are not the energetic overflowing of information and ephemera in the way Eldon’s journals exist as windows into his mind, the 80s, and a time of intense conflict in Somalia and Kenya. However, 2010 reengages my time as a tourist, engaging with different levels of awareness and thought, simultaneously self-conscious and self-aware. 2010 allowed me to consider my lack of engagement with other realities beyond the one that was given to me in my organized abroad experience. It allowed me to consider the experience of riding a tank used in the Six Day War, or my involvement in a fun five day army training that all Israeli young adults experience for two to three years, all facts I never considered during those four months.

Both An Archive of Boundaries and 2010 involve critical self-reflection, primarily predicated on my majority identities. By implicating oneself in these experiences, a mediation can become more meaningful. Pilgrimage to self allows, even requires, for more listening and engaging with the other perspective, as well as acknowledgement that crossing divides is not simple, that at times I will be wrong. By returning to experiences that now embarrass me with their ignorance or by walking in the footsteps of boundaries that I perpetuated, I begin to develop a consciousness of my majority identities, of how they interact with my present, and how they might impact my future. Mediation attempts to build awareness between peoples and intentionalize coexistence, it is authenticated and strengthened by the self-awareness gained through pilgrimage to self.
V. Conclusion

Ayesha and I are both removed from Israel and Palestine. Our collaboration is orchestrated remotely via Skype, long texts messages, and phone calls. I am removed historically from the original drawing of the HOLC redlines, and as someone who has benefitted from the existence of redlines, I am removed from their severe consequences. Because of this physical separation, I more or less exist in a space of safety to create this work. I believe that in some ways this safety allowed for Ayesha and I to imagine these collaborations, but it currently leaves the mediations in a transitory phase. The next step would be to move our work from safety into a more vulnerable space for it to have the impact we seek. Just as 2010 delves into personal vulnerabilities, my artistic practice should be made vulnerable as well.

Although building bridges and crossing divides come from a spiritual space for me, the process of mediation and pilgrimage do not have to be ones of spirituality. Using art as a way to engage with boundaries between people, allows me to pull from my interfaith background in a way that has always been entwined with my faith. However, mediation and pilgrimage can come from many different places – from deeply lived experiences, other identities, etc. Ultimately, beyond the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, which is the context of my mediation and pilgrimage to self, these processes allow art to actually become the bridge between people, the component that crosses the divide, in a way that traditional mediation cannot. In the way that Bhabha begins to lead the reader to see art as
the window, as the “seeing” and “speaking between,” for me, art becomes the aid
to bring people together (17).
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