

Positions Through Dialogue

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Sarah Sobier

My dialogue with guest researcher Franca López Barbera guided me to see road blocks and possibilities of my current approach. I described to her at the point of my project where I incorporated the broken fingerprint typeface in dialogue with my mother, I felt either unsure of whether to return to the design of the typeface itself or to consider how it was being presented. One of the main points I brought up to her were the perceptions of my project to non-Arabic speakers and whether, without a long-winded explanation of my process, the structure needed reworking.

Franca commented that she found my understanding of gestures the most compelling, though she felt the visual presentation came across a bit flat. She observed that, despite the typefaces being derived from fingerprints, these marks could be interchanged with any irregular shape without conveying a specific significance. Franco also pointed out that the blank squares I chose to represent absence did not fully convey what I wanted. What she did encourage me to focus on more was leaning into moments when words fail us, and all we have are gestures, repetition, and the strategies humans use to communicate without a voice. This advice shifted my perspective, from where I had ended to now potentially returning to where I started, gestures.

Other points France made were opening up my inquiry to wider challenges, like intergenerational struggles with language, how assimilation contributes, or the cultural influence of imperial language dominance.

For my next set of dialogues, both were generally towards the subject of identity, translation as an individual and artist. It came from the long reflection I was having on the work I've done throughout my artistic journey. Most of what I explore is the diasporic experience, especially in the most estranged form. Both consisted of Sudanese artists and researchers who were found through their own blogs on the app Substack.

Mohamed Ahmed is a British-Sudanese artist and researcher who published a piece titled Children of Translation. A reflection of what role language takes within the diasporic experience. How are immigrant parents use our mother tongue as a form of comfort and ground. Contrast to how their children struggle with broken speech and cognitive load of translation. The isolation and strong longing that comes when you experience a disconnection with language. This piece was one of the closest representation of my internal conflict with my speaking abilities with Arabic, wanting to reclaim it in order to feel more inclusion.

One of the questions I asked whether we, as a diaspora, feel a large sense of guilt, if we are constantly playing catch-up with what we've lost. Trying to seek the same comfort our families had, and if we should create a new space for us. Ahmed responded saying he sees relearning his language as a bonus than a comfort. Acknowledging the challenges of generational gaps, stepping into a discomfort in order to grow.

Basma Khalifa also a Sudanese artist and filmmaker. The piece she published is titled Being the Story and the Storyteller. In this reflective piece, she explores how a person's identity, culture, and race can precede the artist's visibility. She reflects on the power of pulling from lived experiences, but also how it feels limiting and almost exploitative.

She wrestles questions of privacy, creative neutrality, and vulnerability, describing as an ongoing push and pull as she navigates her creative process.

As I've developed my inquiry throughout this brief, I've felt moments of extreme vulnerability with learning and being okay with being seen trying to gain that connection again. The title, Being the Story and the Storyteller was exactly what I had placed myself into. In this process, I wished to understand at my own pace, to create work doesn't have to center my conflicting feelings I haven't completely processed yet.

I asked Khalifa about if the invasiveness of the making process is an unavoidable part of finding balance between story and storyteller? She emphasized that it is the importance of making a conscious decision about what you include or leave out. She reflected on needing to give herself permission to "take it down a notch" to allow other parts herself emerge in art or outside of her work. Adding, being Sudanese will always anchor her, but not all of her.

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