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## [YOU ARE WITH] KIN AND [YOU CAN BE AT] EASE

Abdul Azim Al Ghussein  
*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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[You Are with] Kin and [You Can be at] Ease

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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May, 2018

## Acknowledgment

I would like to thank my family for their love and support and reminders that there is always enough. I would like to thank my committee Holly Morrison, Cara Benedetto and Hilary Wilder as well as faculty member Hope Ginsberg for their support, encouragement and patience. I would like to thank Lina Younes, Khalid Mezaina, Talal Al Gergawi, Ahmed Bouholaigah, Hadeyeh Badri, Mays Al Beik, Moza Al Matroushi, Salama Nasib and Saif Mhaisen for listening to me talk through my ideas, talking to me through theirs and being the community that I needed. I would also like to thank Adam at Hashem's for being generous with his family's experiences. Lastly, I would like to thank my fellow graduate students in the Department of Painting and Printmaking for the time we spent together.

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## Abstract

[YOU ARE WITH] KIN AND [YOU CAN BE AT] EASE

By Abdul Azim Al Ghussein, MFA.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2018.

Major Director: Holly Morrison, Associate Professor,  
Department of Painting and Printmaking

This thesis is an exploration of hospitality, sharing and acclimation within a studio art practice as a means of fostering consideration of others. I employ a practice whereby I disrupt the typical gallery context, and through the production and dissemination of consumable items from the Middle East, I examine how resources can be used, valued, and shared to accommodate various and unspecified others and provide opportunities for crossing thresholds of guest and host relationships.

## Welcome

You are with kin, and you can be at ease. There is enough for you. There can be enough for everyone.

### Histories, Displacement and Acclimation

I am a Canadian expatriate of Palestinian origin. I was born and raised in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). My father was born in Palestine and spent most of his life in the United Arab Emirates. My mother was born in Kuwait to Palestinian parents who immigrated to Canada. My father left Palestine over 40 years ago. He hasn't been back since. When I ask him what Palestine looks like on a map, he gives a detailed description including distances in kilometers, areas of interest, street names, and the names of families who lived on these streets when he left, all from memory. When I was asked 'Where are you from?' as a child, he taught me to say 'Palestine' and not 'Canada' --which is my country of citizenship. My mother has never been to Palestine, and neither have I. My family's success in finding a home after leaving Gaza was possible through their hard work, resourcefulness and the welcome they received.

In Arabic, you greet a guest by saying أَهلاً وسهلاً (Ah-lan wa Sah-lan) meaning '[You are with] Kin and [You Can be at] Ease'. It also means 'Welcome'. A guest's response to

that is 'أهلين و سهلين' (Ah-lain wa Sah-lain), which literally means 'Two Kins and Two Eases', or 'Welcome twice over'. This saying is often overlooked in Arabic. Arabic speakers refer to its metaphorical meaning, instead of its literal meaning. It is the first thing a host would say to a guest, usually at the threshold of the hosts domain. It is an invitation to no longer be alone.

Growing up as an expat living in the UAE, I was too often aware of my status as foreign. I was also aware of when someone made me feel at home. It was not an easy task. Most of the population in the UAE is made up of expatriates, and they too feel their foreign status. In a place where the majority are displaced, and the local minority feel outnumbered, it is through welcoming that a community can be fostered. Various Arab cultures take great pride in their hospitality. The sensitivity to hospitality is rooted in Bedouin tradition. Due to harsh environmental conditions and scarcity of resources, Bedouin culture prioritizes generosity, especially towards guests. When a guest is received by Bedouins, a drink is traditionally served to quench a very likely thirst, but also as an opportunity to welcome someone into a foreign domain.

In understanding my own displacement, exploring these definitions was very important in my self-identification. Figuring out the complexities of my cultural identity, and how I navigate cultural specificities in my work is a difficult process. My understanding of home comes from my family, who experience home at various capacities as exiles, expatriates and immigrants. Edward Said describes an exile's experience of at least two cultures, the exile's own and the one of their host. The knowledge of two cultures gives

the exile an 'awareness of possible dimensions'<sup>1</sup>. In growing within a largely expat community, daily life is built upon the interaction with people, places, items and rituals of many cultures. The studio arts practice I have developed in Richmond, Virginia, is based on the imitation of consumable cultural items and rituals. In the employment of these items and rituals through gestures of hospitality, I aim to extend the awareness of the other dimensions, and allow for an audience to cross a threshold into the domain of another.

I value resourcefulness as a communal survival skill. I learned to be resourceful and welcoming from my parents. Being expats never stopped my family from creating an inclusive and welcoming space be it a small flat in the heart of Abu Dhabi, a villa in a Dubai suburb, or a camping tent in the middle of the desert. They have made homes where they were welcomed and know the difficulty in finding a welcome. I learned that there is always enough food for whoever comes knocking on the door. I learned that one can always give, even if it is a polite nod, a demitasse of coffee, or a loaf of bread. I learned that it doesn't matter who the guest is, it matters that anyone could be, just as my family is in the UAE. I learned that you can be a host, even when you are a guest, and that one day you might find the roles have reversed. I also learned that it doesn't matter where I am or what I have available, I can always make a space in which I can welcome and hopefully in turn be welcomed.

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1. Said, Allen, Roger, and Edward W. Said. 2001. "Reflections on Exile." *World Literature Today* 75 (3/4): 111. doi:10.2307/40156768.



In Derrida's analysis of hospitality, a relationship is set up between two parties: a host and a guest. The host is defined by having authority over a domain, the guest is defined by their need of the resources available within a domain they have no authority over. The host is further defined by their need of a guest in order to gain recognition of their authority over a domain. It is through these mutual roles that one can develop an understanding of their own identity in relation to others.

Through replicating culturally specific gestures of hospitality, I want to make spaces in which the viewer is invited to consider the labor and the resources involved in welcoming them and others into a domain. The offerings: water, bread, soap, become gestures that allow for the acclimation of the audience into the domain of another. The text is an offering as well, in the form of instruction and invitation. The items are replicated locally from items that I am longing for from other domains. They are commonly found and fairly cheap to obtain in their native lands, but far more difficult to find or make in the United States.

Bedouins live in harsh conditions. Living in the desert means that one has to move wherever the resources are. This makes for a very unusual host. The domain is not a geographical location but a community in which a group of people can provide for one another as equals. The community is both domain and the resource, especially when material resources are dictated by the environment. Such harsh, unpredictable conditions have led to a strong code of generosity in Bedouin culture. If one is to encounter a Bedouin tribe, and accept their hospitality, one will be nourished, sheltered,

and cared for as any member of the tribe. This offer lasts for three days and three nights. During those days and nights, the tribe can ask for nothing of their guest, not even their name. Upon the fourth day, the guest must make a choice: either leave and no longer share the resources of the tribe, or become part of the tribe. The assimilation becomes a form of non-monetary exchange. The guest becomes part of the host, and in becoming part of the host, must take on duties as any member of the tribe does. This exchange is mutual but not commodifiable. Both the tribe and the guest can benefit from this assimilation, both could also be at a disadvantage. In harsh conditions however, the assumption is that through the mutual care for one another, the resources of the tribe and guest, now tribe member, can be better shared. The tribe has gained a new member, with their own skills and abilities adding to the tribe's community, while the former guest has gained a community that can care for and support them.

Bedouin hospitality gives opportunity to cross the threshold of host and guest. It is an opportunity to acclimate. One can only be a guest for so long, without actually having become part of the host. Bedouin culture also offers an absolute form of hospitality; there is no invite necessary. Guests coming into the Bedouin tribe are often unexpected, yet always accounted for. They are accounted for through the treatment they receive as a member of the tribe. This absolute form of hospitality requires that resources within the Bedouin domain are split equally amongst all individuals within that domain, both Bedouin and guest. If the guest is acclimated, they become as any member of the tribe and subject to the rules that govern them.

## Relational Aesthetics



Rikrit Tiravanija – Untitled 2015 (Eau De RRose of Damascus)<sup>2</sup>

“I started to make things so that people could use them ... [My work] is not meant to be put out with other sculpture or like another relic to be looked at, but you have to use it...”

(Rikrit Tiravanija in Kraynak 1998: 36)

When considering Bourriaud's definitions of relational aesthetics, relational (art) and semionauts presented in *Relational Aesthetics*, relational art is characterized by relying upon human interactions within social contexts rather than in private spaces. Through

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<sup>2</sup> “Untitled 2015 (Eau De RRose of Damascus).” 2018. Sharjah Art Foundation.

<http://sharjahart.org/sharjah-art-foundation/projects/untitled-2015-eau-de-rose-of-damascus>.

the creation of alternative possibilities of interaction, an alternative to a global capitalist system is presented. There are problems within such thought; assuming that globalization is leading to a world-culture is not accurate. Historically speaking, cultures have developed differently. While globalization is formed over mutual aspects of different culture, it does not create a worldwide culture that is accessible to everyone. Histories of oppression, and colonization are built upon perceived differences between cultures and have contributed to social and national interactions.

In comparison, in Certeau's *Practice of Everyday Life*, there is an exploration of defining power through 'strategies', while 'tactics' refers to measures taken due to an impossibility of separation of spaces of the other. Through an understanding of hospitality, and in turn the identification of another, a familiar space does in fact signify who is a host and guest. The 'strategies' described by Certeau, speak to measures taken to define extent of power between two parties; one party ultimately has more power. 'Tactics' on the other hand, relate to measures taken within an 'other's space', implying a continuous exchange within a power dynamic<sup>3</sup>. In her article '*Everyday life, 'relational aesthetics' and the 'transfiguration of the commonplace'*', Anna Dezeuze explains that while Bourriaud assumed a universality in human interaction, Certeau emphasized an investment in the 'specificities of the practice with which specific art practices stand in dialogue' <sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> De Certeau, Michel, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (University of California Press, 1984), 15-28.

<sup>4</sup> Anna Dezeuze (2006) *Everyday life, 'relational aesthetics' and the 'transfiguration of the commonplace'*, *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 5:3, 143-152

## Practice

On my first day in Richmond, I was invited over by a friend of a friend from Dubai. He was very accommodating and asked what I enjoyed doing in Dubai, and suggested where I might find similar activities in Richmond. Before I left, he handed me an empty Gatorade bottle. I was confused. He explained that after he visited Dubai many years ago, he got used to having a bidet in the bathroom. When he returned to the United States, he could not return to a bathroom without a bidet. In the Middle East, a bidet is a very basic feature in every bathroom. Most Arabs have difficulty using bathrooms outside the Middle East because the bidet is considered luxurious or excessive, and is infrequently found. It is an issue that many travelling Arabs are too embarrassed to speak about, but devote much time planning around. It is a source of great anxiety. 'I've found that the sporty Gatorade bottles are the best when it comes to water pressure' he elaborated 'I thought you might need one'. Though given to me by someone I had just met, this was the most thoughtful gift I have ever received. In the midst of navigating my new surroundings, finding a new house, completing paperwork, and registering both at the university and with the government offices, my new friend gave me one less thing to worry about.

I realize that I have spent significant effort in making myself feel more at home. When I had first arrived, I had two suitcases worth of clothes and the tools and books that I thought were necessary to bring to a new home. I would soon learn that these items did very little to ease my homesickness. I lived in a hotel for the first couple of weeks, while looking for a place. Most realtors I contacted took two weeks to respond. The uncertainty of not knowing where I would live was frustrating. I would later find a house that I had to wait a month to move into. I found a temporary place on Airbnb. Living in someone else's home was slightly less frustrating.

Once I moved in I spent a lot of time in my apartment. I became dedicated to feeling more comfortable and making my new apartment a familiar place. Going outside to new places in Richmond fills me with anxiety. I can never guarantee that I would feel welcomed. I like working in my kitchen. There I can make things that feel familiar as in a domain I have felt welcome. During semester breaks, I would bring items with me from Dubai to make Richmond homier.

Many long-term expats in Dubai joke about the things we are asked to carry when visiting the United States and other far away countries. This is followed by arguments and discussions with one's parents about the luggage capacity, and extra screening when entering the United States with a Muslim sounding name. One does not worry about the food going bad; most goods that I've brought to the United States were

bought at roasteries and therefore dry. One does worry, however, about getting stopped at customs, with a Muslim sounding name and enough dry goods to open a small shop.

When I returned to the United States for my second semester of graduate school, I carried with me:

- 2 kilograms of coffee (Levantine and Arabian, both roasted in Abu Dhabi)
- 1 bottle of orange blossom water (imported from Lebanon)
- 8 bars of Nabulsi soap (of which I gave half to my uncle).
- 1 dallah (Arabic coffee pot for serving) (made in China)
- 1 set of 12 qahwa (coffee) cups (also made in China)
- 500 grams of edible frankincense (imported from Yemen)
- 1 kilogram of dates (local from Al Ain)
- 2 grams of Saffron (imported from Spain, but is called Taj Mahal)
- 2 kilograms of zaatar from Palestine (of which 1 kilogram was meant for my uncle).

Buying the items in the United States would cost about 5 times the price I bought them for in Dubai. I'd also be limited to the brands that are exported to the United States.

These items could be bought at any roastery or grocery in the UAE, as they are common items required in many households. The items I had been carrying for myself were essential to making my house in Richmond, a more familiar space.

My house is nearly empty and my pantry is always full. I find it difficult to convince myself to buy something that cannot be shared. I find the most value in making sure that a person in my temporary domain does not have to feel unaccounted for. I feel the most shame when I have made someone feel as if they are unwanted or unwelcome without provocation.

I carefully plan and allocate my resources so that I can produce as many opportunities of welcoming. The Gatorade bottle I received as a gift was a reminder of the potency of such consideration. In my first few studio visits, I gifted soap that I had purchased online, which I had waited a few weeks for. My supply was depleted, and I couldn't afford to purchase more for the remainder of the semester. Once I learned to make my own soap, that imitated the original, I was able to share more with a greater number of guests. The soap bars differ as they have been acquired through different means: one was imported through various parties, the other was created faithfully in my kitchen.

In my studio practice, deciding where to spend my resources is ultimately a decision regarding where to place value. In the pursuit of sharing as a welcoming gesture, the items that are shared are the ones that demand that more resources be spent on them. The resources include ingredients, time, skill and experience. I also find value within sharing the cultural specificity of what is shared, and how it can be accessed.

Resources such as time and money are scarce. I am constantly reminded that there are not enough resources within this new foreign domain. I recognize my own domain



similar to that of a Bedouin tribe; it is what I can carry with me rather than where I am located. In reading Edward Said's *Reflections on Exile*, I was compelled by his description of the exile as valuing mobility and skill above all. While I had a set of skills, I realized I did not have the ones I needed in order to feel at home in Richmond. A professional literacy in the Adobe Creative Suite did not make me feel comfortable in my new home as brewing a good cup of Levantine coffee did.

I moved my practice into my kitchen as a means to set up a more comfortable space for myself, and allay the anxiety of displacement. There my resources could be best used to create a sense of well-being, and to experiment with skills I wished to develop further - such as baking, soap making, meal planning, and spice blending. Upon exhausting the capabilities of my kitchen, the practice moved back into my studio, where it was informed by the experience gained in the kitchen.

In the kitchen I was able to make familiar dishes I missed from previous domains and make myself feel more comfortable. More importantly, I was able to make things that I could share with others. The labor performed in the kitchen resulted in smaller, consumable work.



Dinner Party for 30: Pickled grapes, Roasted Lemon, Red Bread, Rose Sugar Glass,  
2017

Upon the consumption of what was produced, the audience becomes familiar with the item, and with me. The items are consumed twice, they are shared with the guest, and are depleted from my inventory. Then through the guest's consumption of the item, the item is depleted from the guest's inventory. The longer lasting effect of the shared item is in the experience of consuming it. The sight, taste, scent and feel of the item is recorded into the audience's—the "guest's"—memory.

As soon as I figured how to sustainably obtain ingredients to make soap, I had to figure out how to make large quantities. I couldn't produce at the scale of a factory, in which a basement floor is fitted with a wooden frame, and filled gradually with the soap mixture. I made small wooden box molds. At first, I was only able to produce 24 bars at a time, which took an hour. I would spend 2 weeks, three hours a day, making soap for my candidacy show. The following semester, I was able to make a hundred bars in a single session. I became much more comfortable with lye, and could manage time more efficiently. I failed at an attempt to construct a device for cutting all one hundred bars at once so I cut, stamp and wrap each bar by hand. This is how it is done in traditional Nabulsi soap factories.



*Mushtaq*, 2017, coffee, cardamom, olive oil, coconut oil, shortening, lye, water

The word stamped on my soap says مشتاق (Mushtaq). The significance of the word became apparent to me after reading about the 12th-century map maker Al Idrisi and his map نزهة المشتاق في اختراق الأفاق (Nuz-hat Al Mushtaq Fi Ikh-tiraq Al Afaq), known in Latin



as the Tabula Rogeriana. The Arabic name can be translated to (The [pleasant] journey of the one who is longing to permeate/traverse the Horizons/Boundaries). The word مشتاق (Mushtaq) refers to one who is longing. When asked by my family and friends in Dubai how I am doing, I usually respond with 'مشتاق'. It means 'I am longing' but lacks a specific object. When spoken in Arabic, it is usually assumed that the speaker is expressing a longing for the listener. In the title of Al Idrisi's map, it refers to a longing for discovery. I think of that word as a description of the feeling that led me to graduate school in the United States. Through the language of Levantine soap stamps, this word now indicates not who made the soap, but rather the state of the maker.

The Bedouin coffee ritual gradually shifts from a welcoming gesture to an opportunity of assimilation. With every serving, the familiarity of the guest and host grows. Parallel to the familiarity, the symbolic meaning of each serving represents that growth. The spaces in which a host serves coffee to a guest is often regarded as a more public space than the rest of the home. It is also a place of conversation, debate and discussion. In Bedouin camps, the tent in which guests are received is distinct from the other tents, in which any one may enter. In Levantine and Maghrebi architecture, the courtyard is a place in which guests are welcome, and often the closest space to the entrance of a home. It often features a fountain or pool of water, by which guests have their coffee. In the Arabian Peninsula, the guests are received in a room known as the مجلس (Majlis), meaning place of seating.

In moving the work from a studio space to a gallery space, I have to reexamine my role as a host. The work exhibited becomes an extension of a studio practice into a foreign gallery space. In the installation, I am addressing my limits as a host in a space in which I am hosted. The gallerist takes a role of the host, in which the artist and artwork are guest. Consequently, the artist takes on a role of a host when the audience comes in. In breaking down this relationship through Derrida's understanding of hospitality, the gallerist is host, as the artist requires the resources offered within the gallerist's domain. The artist becomes host when the audience comes to the artist's domain; the space in which the work is exhibited, in order to experience the work.

In relation to Bedouin customs, the opportunity of assimilation is important in my work. Through text available to the audience, I address ways in which kinship can be attained through the items offered to the audience:

# there can be enough for everyone

## Enough

is what is available shared between us

is when I can't say thank you for coming, but prepare for your arrival

is when you are a guest, but eat and drink the same as the host

is when you are a host and your pantry is empty, so your neighbors give you something to offer your guest

is when you can't get the ingredients you need, so you replace them with what you have

*Enough*, 2018, vinyl wall text, detail, MFA Thesis Exhibition

There can be enough for everyone

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*Enough*, 2018, digitally printed label, paper cups, detail, MFA Thesis Exhibition

If you thirst,

Orange Blossom Water

It takes

Up to 15 years for an orange seed to grow into a flowering tree

Hundreds of grams of flowers to make a few milliliters of floral water

3-5 business days for an order of orange blossom water to arrive from an ethnic food store

4 months to finish a bottle of orange blossom water

5 milliliters to make a cup of white coffee



2 hours to get through border control and additional screening at Orlando International Airport



*Enough, 2018, digital print on paper, detail of bread serving sheet, MFA Thesis Exhibition*

If you hunger,

Bread, oil and spices

We are kin when we

Eat the same bread and salt

Have four servings of coffee together

Spend 3 days and nights with each other



*Enough*, 2018, digital print on paper, stamped soap, glue, detail of wrapped soap, MFA Thesis Exhibition

If you are longing,

Soap

[I am] Longing [for]

Them

You

There

Here

While I am a guest within the gallery, albeit at a different capacity than the audience, I offer the audience an opportunity at kinship. This can be illustrated through two manifestations: kinship with the artist, and kinship with the other audience members who partake in the offerings. The former kinship is active in the audience is invited to consume the offerings I have made. The latter is active when the audience considers how much to take, and how much to leave behind for others.

## Recipes

Keeping recipes has become an important component in the documentation and perpetuation of my studio practice. In keeping recipes, I am able to note modifications, quantities, ingredients and their replacements. I can also share the recipes themselves when I have run out of ingredients, or if I am teaching the process. Some ingredients do not require replacements, as the originals are quick and cheap to obtain within my means. Some are even made available within the United States. Other ingredients are more difficult to obtain and require replacements. Negotiating the replacements is a matter of time, money and fidelity to the original that is unique to each ingredient. The replacements require testing before I decide on which to use.

## Water

### Orange Blossom Water:

1 tsp Orange Blossom Water

1 demitasse Water

### White Coffee:

1 tsp Orange Blossom Water

1 demitasse hot water

To prepare the water, mix one teaspoon of orange blossom water with a demitasse of water. The ratio ranges from 1:10 to 1:12. I use Cortas brand orange blossom water because it is easier to obtain in the United States than other brands.

The brand Cortas, which is commonly found in the Emirates, is imported there from Lebanon. It is available in most grocery stores. Cortas, a Lebanese food company, specializes in preserved foods such as floral waters, pickles, and jams. Due to the ease of transporting such foods, Cortas has an office in Dallas, which distributed their products in the United States. I have been able to purchase their products from various sources in the United States; through amazon, through an online Persian food store, and through a Lebanese roastery.

## Coffee

Levantine:	1 tbsp. cardamom
1 tsp Levantine coffee	2 tbsps. Arabian coffee
1 demitasse water	2 cups water
Arabian:	

To prepare Levantine coffee, a specific pot called a rakweh is used. The rakweh has a wide base and narrow neck. The water is boiled in the rakweh, after which the coffee is added and left on a medium heat. The coffee will froth at the narrow brim of the pot. In some Levantine methods of preparation, the coffee is boiled several times over until it is

no longer frothy. In other methods, the froth must be maintained and spread equally if more than one serving is prepared.

Levantine coffee, like Turkish coffee, is characterized by the fineness of the grain. The preparation of these coffees does not involve a filtration process, and so the grains are consumed with the beverage. This process necessitates a fine grain. Levantine coffee ranges from medium to dark roasts, with sugar added during preparation to preference.

Arabian coffee is coarsely ground. It is prepared by bringing water to a boil, then adding the coffee and cardamom. A light roast is usually used. It is usually served in a pot with a long-curved spout. In Arabian tradition, the coffee is served in a small cup called a finjan, which is never filled to full capacity, as that would suggest that it is enough for the drinker to be sated, and therefore discouraged from asking for more and encouraged to leave upon finishing their drink. The guest must indicate when they have had enough otherwise the cups are continuously refilled by the host or server.

In Bedouin custom, coffee is usually served as a welcoming gesture. It is fairly ceremonial; each serving is a symbolic representation of the boundaries of guest host relationship. The first serving, known as *finjan al haif* (al haif means thirst or a warm dry wind originating in the Arabian Peninsula), is poured in a finjan. The host will drink this serving to show that there is nothing harmful in the coffee and it is the same coffee that is served to the guest. The second serving, *finjan al daif* (cup of the guest), is poured in another finjan, and is meant for the guest. The guest must drink this cup to show that

they trust their host. The third serving, *finjan al kaif* (the cup of leisure/choice/whim), is the cup which the guest can drink at their leisure, thus spending more time to consume and enjoy the coffee. The fourth cup, *finjan al saif* (the cup of the sword), is the most serious cup. By drinking this cup, the guest is becoming part of the tribe, and may be called upon to fight at the side of their host if need be. There is no obligation to drink this serving.

## Bread

2 cups flour

1 tbsp. yeast

1 tbsps. sugar

1 tsp salt

1 cup warm water

To make Arabic bread, first mix the dry ingredients together. Then add water gradually while mixing the ingredients in a large bowl. Knead the dough till it is consistent, soft and not too sticky. Cover the bowl for two hours, allowing for the dough to expand.

When the dough is twice its original size, split it into 4 equal parts. Then roll each piece till it is just over a half a centimeter thick, and circular in shape. Leave them to rest for 15 minutes while preheating a large flat pizza pan on the stovetop. Place one flat piece of dough at a time on the pan over medium heat for about a minute and a half. The dough will begin to rise, which prompts one to turn it over using a spatula. The dough will begin to rise again, making the bread puff up like a balloon. Flip the bread a few

more times to make sure that the bread is cooked all the way through. Once the bread is removed from the pan, they are ready to cool down and be eaten. In Arabic, the expression 'There is bread and salt between us' means that we have shared the bread and salt of the same domain and we are kin.



*Enough*, 2018, audience partakes in the installation at the MFA Thesis Exhibition

The serving of bread at the thesis exhibition is an offer to have bread and salt between the guests and me. This is a symbolic offering using locally-recreated foreign gestures



of welcoming. The bread serving also includes eight bowls: one filled with olive oil, and seven filled with spice blends from the seven Middle Eastern Countries that were banned through the issue of executive order 13769 . While salt is present in the bread recipe, I have regarded the seven spice blends as a more specific manifestation of flavors that especially difficult to find, and share, in the United States.

## Spice Blends

<p>Iranian Advieh:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 1 tsp cinnamon</li> <li>- 1 tsp coriander</li> <li>- 1 tsp nutmeg</li> <li>- 1 tsp ground cardamom</li> <li>- 1 tsp rose petals</li> <li>- 1/2 tsp cumin</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 90 g coriander seeds</li> <li>- 10 g cumin seeds, roasted</li> <li>- 120 g dried Qurtum</li> <li>- 400 g ground sumac</li> <li>- 300 g sesame seeds</li> </ul>	<p>Somali Xawaash:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ½ cup Cumin seeds</li> <li>- ½ cup Coriander seeds</li> <li>- 2 tbsp black pepper</li> <li>- 1 tbsp Cinnamon</li> <li>- 1 tbsp Cardamom</li> <li>- 1 tsp Cloves</li> <li>- 2 tbsp turmeric</li> </ul>
<p>Iraqi Baharat:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 2 tbsp black pepper</li> <li>- 2 tbsp paprika</li> <li>- 2 tbsp cumin</li> <li>- 1 tbsp coriander</li> <li>- 1 tbsp cloves</li> <li>- 1 tsp nutmeg</li> <li>- 1 tsp cinnamon</li> <li>- 1/2 tsp cardamom</li> <li>-</li> </ul>	<p>Yemeni Hawajj:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 4 tbsp cumin</li> <li>- 1 tbsp cardamom</li> <li>- 2 tbsp turmeric</li> <li>- 1 tbsp coriander</li> <li>- 4 tbsp black pepper</li> </ul>	<p>Libyan Bzaar:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 1 tbsp turmeric</li> <li>- 1 tbsp caraway</li> <li>- 2 tsps coriander</li> <li>- 2 tbsps black pepper</li> <li>- 2 tbsps paprika</li> <li>- 2 tbsps cumin</li> <li>- 1 tbsp coriander</li> <li>- 1 tbsp cloves</li> <li>- 1 tsp nutmeg</li> <li>- 1 tsp cinnamon</li> <li>- 1/2 tsp cardamom</li> </ul>
<p>Syrian Zaatar:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 180 g dried thyme</li> <li>- 90 g fennel seeds</li> <li>- 90 g anise seeds</li> </ul>	<p>Sudanese Nuaimiyah:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 1 tsp cinnamon</li> <li>- 1 tsp cardamom</li> <li>- 1 tsp coriander seeds</li> <li>- 1 tsp black pepper</li> </ul>	

The spices are akin to salt in the bread and salt expression. The difference is that salt tastes the same, while the blends, though sharing many ingredients, create many possibilities of flavors. The spices available to the audience at the exhibition allowed

them to try possible flavors derived from the seven Muslim-majority countries affected by the Trump administration's travel ban, and permit the audience to cross a barrier between their domain and another—the domain of those actively banned from entering the United States--into their own bodies.

Most of the spice blends required similar ingredients, yet smelled different after the ingredients were mixed at different ratios. The nuance of flavors created with the same ingredients referred to the cultural specificity and trade history of the countries from which they were derived. Countries that had more access to trade with India featured more cardamom in their recipes, while other blends highlighted resources available within the country itself. In the Iranian Advieh recipe, roses are used to give the blend a floral flavor, while Yemeni and the Somali blends featured some of the highest ratios of turmeric in relation to other ingredients. Syrian Zaatar featured a large ratio of Origanum Syriacum, which is common plant in the Levant region.

## Soap

3.065 kg Olive Oil

2.975 kg Coconut Oil

2.975 kg Shortening

1.328 kg Lye

3.320 kg Filtered Water

This recipe was altered from the original Nabulsi recipe, to a version that produces a very similar soap, but within my means. Olive oil is very expensive in the U.S. I first measure how much of each ingredient I can purchase within my budget. I then I base the recipe on making it as close as possible to Nabulsi soap; olive oil should be the most in the ratio of oils. 34 (Olive Oil) :33 (Coconut Oil) :33 (Shortening) is the ratio that allocates the highest percentage of olive oil, while allowing me to make more bars of soap with my finances. Based on the quantity of oil available, I can use the soap calculator to know how much lye and water to add. I use a 2.5:1 water to lye ratio. The soap calculator allocates the correct amount of lye to use based on the saponification value of the oils.

Begin by heating the solid oils so that they become liquid. Mix the correct amounts of water and lye together in glass or stainless-steel containers. The lye solution and oil mixtures must be within 5 degrees Celsius before they are mixed. This requires that the solutions cool down. When both mixtures reach the optimum temperature, 50 degrees Celsius, add the lye water to the oils while stirring. Use a hand-held blender to continue mixing until the soap mixture reaches trace. Trace is when the mixture shows evidence of the movement that occurs within it; it is thick and viscous. The mixture is then poured into wooden box molds on the floor. Both the mold and the floor are covered in parchment paper. The box is then covered and left to cure for 24 hours.

Unmold the soap after 24 - 48 hours of curing. Using a ruler, create a grid. Follow the grid when cutting up the soap with a soap cutter. Stamp the soap using a stamp and

mallet, and stack in towers to allow for the completion of the curing process. The process takes two weeks because 66% of the fats are solid. A 100% olive oil soap could take months to cure. Wrap the soap after it is completely cured.

I developed an allergic reaction to soap sometime in the last 5 years. I tried various other soaps to sooth the terrible itching on my arms and legs and nothing would work. My father gave me a bar of soap wrapped in paper. 'I've been using Nabulsi (from Nablus, Palestine) soap for years' he said 'I think it'll work for you'. He was right and I have been using it since. Now my father buys soap for both me and himself when he visits the roastery.

There are three major soap centers in the Levant: Sidon in Lebanon, Nablus in Palestine and the more expensive soap from Aleppo in Syria. European Castile Soaps are believed to have been made with knowledge of soap making that came from the Levant through crusades. Alternatively, the Ancient Romans did use soap. The Lebanese soaps are scented with musk and other regionally sourced perfumes, while the Nabulsi soap is mild and unscented, the Aleppo soap is green due to the presence of laurel oil in the recipe. My Syrian friend swears by the Aleppo soap, it's great for all skin types she says, while my Lebanese friend praises the soap factories of Lebanon as being the most innovative in the region.

Nablus used to have many soap factories in the past. Now there are only 3 soap factories, 2 of which are available at the roasteries in the United Arab Emirates: The

Known/Famous/Reputed Camel Soap, and The Two Keys Soap. They all use a similar process of soap making. They combine the third press of olive oil with lye (sodium hydroxide) and mix it thoroughly. The mixture is poured onto the floor, and left there to cure.

Once hardened, and that takes a very long time, a grid is drawn onto it using a dyed flax string. The soap is then stamped with the seal of the soap factory. The seal usually indicates the name of the factory, the family that owns the factory, and the city in which the soap was made. A rake like cutting tool is used to cut the soap into bricks. The soap is then stacked into tall chimney like structures where they continue curing for months. Once cured, the soap is wrapped in wax paper bearing the details of the soap. The person wrapping the soap can go through 500 bars an hour. The first bar I wrapped took me an hour.

The care I put into making each individual soap bar, an object that I've formulated and touched, is transferred through the audience's use of the soap. The soap is held against the body, suggesting intimate contact such as an embrace. The word مشتاق (Mushtaq) inscribed on the soap then indicates a longing for the body of another, for contact and connection. The thought of using the soap I've made and given, precipitates a moment of thinking of an "other"; an act encouraged through the point of dissemination when the audience and I must contemplate the intimacy of connection, ponder similarity and difference, consider the domains of public and private, and think of the allocation of the material for people beyond ourselves.

## Thresholds Crossed

### Roasteries

I recall going to the local roasteries with my parents. There you could hear the full variety of Arabic dialects. The roasteries would be visited based on what items my parents wished to purchase. The Lebanese Roastery had a better selection of coffee, while the Cheese and Pickles Centre, known colloquially as the Sudanese, had a better selection of olives and, predictably, pickles. Both stocked nuts and bread. The breads available at the roastery include various types made in a variety of ovens. People can find the bread made in the manner they prefer or of the region they are from. Afghani bread, khubiz, lavash, sammoun, ka'ak and many other varieties of bread illustrate the many ways in which the similar ingredients are shaped by rituals and resources of the regions they originate from. On the other hand, people who could have never had access to the bread of another region, now can break the same bread as a person from another country does.

In my search for regionally sourced ingredients, I came across a roastery in Dearborn, Michigan. This roastery, Hashem's, stocked many items and ingredients that I was invested in either obtaining or recreating. I recognized that this roastery has made a sustainable business in pursuit of what both what roasteries were doing in Dubai and what I was attempting to do in Richmond. In my own practice, I am interested in facilitating encounters of assimilation, and opportunities of care through interactions with

items and rituals that are perceived as coming from other domains. Roasteries in Dubai make items from countries which expatriates come from available to a diverse population. This allows the expats to purchase items that are from a familiar domain in their current foreign domain, for a fairly cheap price in comparison to alternatives found at a supermarket or to shipping the items from their native country. Reading up on the history of the Dearborn, Michigan based roastery, I was compelled to speak to the family that runs the business to understand their motivation behind the business, and their decision to include items in their store that come from places other than Lebanon.

The family had owned the shop for three generations, two of which were based in the United States. I was told of how the business was moved to the United States because of the limited comforts from home available to the family upon immigration. Soon the business expanded from selling coffee to selling other goods imported from Lebanon, the country they immigrated from. The store today sells imported items from various countries of origin for the immigrant population in Dearborn, Michigan. When the store first opened, most customers were Levantine. Following, customers were from more recent migrant communities. Today, the customers are varied: recent immigrants, citizens, people of various ethnicities, and tourists frequent the store. Items carried by the store run the gamut from ethnic food and beverages to utensils and apparatuses for the preparation of cuisines from around the world. The store stocks Lebanese and Turkish rakwehs, fanajeen and coffee, Arabian Oud burners, Thai Tamarind paste, Greek Pickles, Iranian Lavash -- an extraordinary array of products too numerous to list.

Hashem's is mainly known for selling Levantine style coffee which is the most popular item in the store, and the item a new customer is most likely to try. The store's website contains the recipe, instruction and a tutorial video on how to prepare a traditional cup of Levantine coffee. The store's proprietor believes that providing such a resource is an easy way to get someone to partake in a new experience, especially when it is foreign.

### The Pleasant Journey of the One Who is Longing to Traverse the Horizons

In the early 12th century King Roger of Sicily, a Frenchman from Normandy, invited Mohammed Al-Idrisi, a Spanish born Arab, to his court to begin working on a map of the world <sup>5</sup>. Al Idrisi was well travelled, having traversed North Africa, Arabia, Asia and most of Europe. King Roger wanted the renowned cartographer to make an accurate and practical map of the known world, with information on populations, their cultures, resources, and economies. Most maps at the time inaccurately depicted continents, had Jerusalem as the center of the map, and served as symbolic representations of locations. Navigator and merchant maps were practical but were far from inclusive, bearing only points of interest such as ports and coastlines.

King Roger had put Al Idrisi in charge of geographers who worked towards the map. Historical maps from European and Middle Eastern sources were referenced. These

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<sup>5</sup> Hibbs, Brady, " e Book of Roger" (2015). History Class Publications. 22.  
<https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/history/22>



maps proved to be inconsistent, and lead the geographers to interview travelers at the nearby ports in Palermo, Catania, Messina, and Syracuse. When inconsistencies came up in the information, Al Idrisi would omit all information that was not unanimously agreed upon.



*Nuzhat al-mushtāq fī ikhtirāq al-āfāq*, Tabula Rogeriana, 1553 AD copy of original made in 1152 AD, preserved at the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford <sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> "World Map." 2018. *De Civitate Dei. - Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts*. Accessed May 8. <http://bodley30.bodley.ox.ac.uk>

The map, titled *نزهة المشتاق في اختراق الأفاق* (Nuzhat Al Mushtaq Fi Ikhtiraq Al Afaq), was carved onto a silver disc, roughly 6 feet in diameter. The information was gathered and detailed drawings of the map were collected into a book and included descriptions of the geography, culture, ethnography, cuisine, topography and streets of the regions in Arabic and Latin.

Upon King Roger's death, tensions in Sicily grew especially towards the many outsiders that populated the island. The disk was destroyed not long after its creation. Fearing for their lives, the Muslims of Sicily fled. Al Idrisi was able to transport his notes with him, and recompiled his book in the Middle East, where it was disseminated. Al Idrisi eventually returned to Ceuta, ruled by the Almoravids, where he remained to his death.

The map was an image put together by the efforts of various individuals from many nations working together. Their collaborative efforts achieved more than they could have done alone. The information contained in Al Idrisi's book would not reach Europe for another 300 years, when it was translated into Latin from the surviving Arabic version.



*Enough*, 2018; bread, oil and spices, paper, aluminum, MDF, detail MFA Thesis Exhibition

I recreated the disc in my studio by engraving several large trays. The trays were the table tops I used to present my work--consumable offerings--to the audience. The decorative motifs that were usually present on such trays were replaced with a map that depicted a world pieced together by people from various nations. The historical narrative around the map and its creation illustrates both the triumphs of contact and collaboration between diverse groups, as well as the loss that comes with the othering of individuals.

## Work

The necessity I feel in practice comes from current global political climate that fosters nationalism and xenophobia. During my first year in the MFA program, executive order 13769, more commonly known as the Muslim ban, was issued. The ban is an active prevention of possibility. It is based on a belief that the “other”, that “difference” is a threat. When I offer the items in a gallery space, I am allowing the audience to consume the items that come from and are made by others, and broach camaraderie. In their participation, the audience is reaching out to a distant other, enacting a longing for connection.

In capitalist approaches to the art gallery, work can be experienced by many, yet owned by an individual entity. The ability of the audience to obtain and consume the work that is available in the art space disrupts notions of a capitalist approach to the art space.

The social disruptions I insert in the space of display offer a possible alternative interaction with artwork in the art space—one that extends itself beyond the confines of the space. Water and bread nourish the body even after the audience has left the art space, soap is used in a private space. The items and their effects are held in the body and mind after the audience has departed the art space.

While some systems are the result of one having the ability to make or find it, other systems are forced upon an individual. This could be due to limited agency, ability or resources that enable one to find or make a system. Within forced systems, little consideration is given to the needs of the variety of individuals. There is focus on more productive and quantifiable results than the well-being of its constituents. Participating in such systems and the patterns within these systems, can only lead to a repetition of their results. If one is unsatisfied in a system, and cannot leave or change it entirely, a practical option is to disrupt it. In small disruptions, an eventual change can occur in a pattern. These changes might require time to manifest visibly, but they are less prone to radical opposition. In recognizing a system in which individualism has left so many feeling uncared for or overlooked, especially due to their lack of commodifiable contribution, a disruption seems necessary to change that pattern.

The patterns in my studio changed: where drawing had once been very important in my practice; soap making, spice blending, coffee roasting became more significant. This means of working created foreign items out of local materials. Sharing the items was like sharing a point of contact and transformation. Items rooted in other cultures become transformative to the new audience as they are consumed and absorbed through close physical contact. I changed patterns both within and outside my studio as both became spaces for transformation and contact. Ingredients were transformed into foreign items,

that were given to guests, who, in turn, allow themselves to be transformed through the consumption of the ingredients.

As a displaced person, the only way to make practice sustainable is to make it so it can move with me. The items I create are activated once they move from the studio or gallery to the space outside an exhibition: the soap is active when it is used in a bathroom, a zine is active where it is being read. I made an effort to identify the parameters in which I justify my own making. Retroactively, I have been able to place them within these parameters:

1. My work had to be easy to move. Guests must be able to pick work up or interact easily with it. I should be able to move the work easily, considering the uncertainty of my current geographical location and of resources.
2. The materials I use should be easily obtained, for my own ability to produce, and for an audience that is interested in producing similarly.
3. Priorities in labor are given to aspects of the work that are disseminated. Resources, such as labor and finance, are allocated towards the making of the disseminated items.
4. I should use my own skill set in the production of the disseminated items. If I do not have the skills, then I acquire them.
5. The studio is a place where I make offerings to guests.
6. What is shared is an invitation for an individual to acclimate with an “other”.



7. I work in a sustainable manner by minimizing waste in production through use of recycled and recyclable materials, and wasteless production processes.



*Enough*, 2018, audience members interact with items offered

In preparation for the thesis show, I made hundreds of items to share with the audience. There were 400 bars of wrapped soap, over 60 flat breads for the opening night, 500 labelled cups, and 6 liters of orange blossom water. The bread was depleted within the first 5 minutes. I had to restock much earlier than I had anticipated. The restocked bread lasted a little longer, but was almost completely gone within the hour. The last piece of bread lasted for another hour. I observed that the audience was far more conscious of



finishing a visibly limited amount. When the bread stock was abundant, the audience would take an entire flat bread for themselves. The bread is usually not taken as a whole in the Middle East, each diner takes a portion, based on their predicted need. If they desire more, they would take more later. When there was a single piece left, the audience would take only as much as they needed in anticipation of possible audiences that might want to try the bread. I observed members of the audience carefully splitting small pieces of bread so that the next audience member may still have a piece. I also saw some audience members pour water into the cups of other audience members before helping themselves.

This observation allowed me to reconsider how I would restock the bread for the duration of the show. I would make one large flat bread every morning, and place it on the table. The next morning, I would notice that it had been gradually consumed bit by bit, rather than the whole piece being taken. This was evidence of awareness of others that might access the space. I cannot say for certain that every member of the audience had the same considerations, but considerations of others were made by those who interacted.

The water was replenished several times during the opening night. The soap was completely depleted by the following weekend. I noted that the water, the easiest to replenish, required the most upkeep. It seemed that it was the most disseminated of the three items available in the space. The last few bars of soap, just like the last piece of bread, lasted longer on the table than the first few hundred.

Sharing the recipes, skills and information that lead me to my work allows an audience to examine the elements with which I have staged a disruption. In many ways the process echoes the acclimation and welcome my family has received in their displacement. In my practice the roles are reversed; the audience is invited to be acclimated by me, a person who is displaced. The items I make to share enable contact between people. The reversal acts as a new possible dimension that is presented towards the audience, just as the water, bread, spices and soap create opportunities for contact and transmutation of the self with others.

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