

From protests to pomegranates: Exploring narrative through practice-based research

WHERE DO WE GO AFTER RESISTANCE?

This question has been probed numerous times academically, socially, and politically, but less often emotionally. In response to the current state of affairs in the United States, I recently attended a number of protests, just as my parents did several years ago, during the height of tension between the US and Iraq. While protests are continuously organized and attended, especially in light of the proliferation of rising conservatism and oppressive regimes, the general consensus is that they do not work effectively in swaying governments or inciting political change. Micah White, one of the founders of the Occupy movement, writes in *The End of Protest: A New Playbook for Revolution* that the traditional protest model is anachronistic and ineffective, now functioning largely as a form of expression or a display of solidarity (White, 2016, p. 89). But it was the direct generational link between my parents, protesting outside the US Embassy, and me, now doing the same, that prompted me to think more deeply about what I am perpetuating or reproducing by taking part in this kind of resistance.

BY NEDDA BABA

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In my artistic practice, I have worked extensively with found family photos and media images of the Iraq war to explore tensions between conflicting representations of the people and landscapes in these images. One of my aims has been to resist and reshape the dominant narrative surrounding this identity. In *The Better Story: Queer Affects from the Middle East*, Dina Georgis argues that “by expressing postcolonial injuries exclusively through the terms of resistance and agency, we limit ourselves and the potential for political change” (2013, p. 98). She later states that “postcolonial studies have not helped us think through the emotional fixities of identities” (p. 103), and I agree with this. Through a deeper consideration of post-colonial concepts of identity, I concluded that working with images kept me locked in a frozen state and did not produce results that I could find beneficial to the history being explored at large. Instead of engaging with a practice steeped in

representation, I shifted my focus onto something that necessitated more time from the audience and could yield a deeper sense of understanding beyond this fixity in identity.

As Susan Sontag wrote in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, “Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us” (2004, p. 71).

PRESERVING THE PAST

The shift began with a personal anecdote from my grandmother that had fascinated me for quite some time. On her last day in Iraq in 1977, she ate two fresh apricots and unconsciously threw the seeds in her suitcase before leaving. They travelled with her to England, where she stayed for two years before finally settling in Canada. She found the seeds again and began to sprout them in a couple of pots, only to find little green bursts of life emerging from the soil months later. Today, plotted in the front yard of my family’s home are two large apricot trees, grown serendipitously by my grandmother 37 years ago. They bear hundreds of fruits almost every summer.

Aside from apricots, there were four

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other fruits that my family incessantly gathered and feasted upon throughout my childhood, and these were figs, sweet limes, fresh dates, and pomegranates.

During the winter I began to collect, deseed, and catalogue the remains of pomegranates, without thinking too deeply about *why* I was doing this.

It wasn't
until
I performed
the
deseeding
that I realized
I was enacting
what I had
tacitly
learned
at
an
affective,
pre-conscious
level.

Here I was, reproducing an act that is central to the identity of many who live in the diaspora: to preserve and uphold a precious remnant from the past.

But in consciously examining this, I made other discoveries, and the repetition of this act unravelled many of the expectations that surrounded it. There is a great deal of inconsistency in the aesthetics of the pomegranate. Formally, the size, shape, and colour can vary a fair bit, but the taste—which one would assume is most central to the fruit as an edible object—varies even more than any other aspect of the pomegranate. In fact, the only true consistency I found was in the way the object sounds when the skin is scored and peeled back, the seeds are cracked off the flesh,

and
their
resonation
as
they
fall
into the bowl.

An interesting parallel can be found in the way that these fruits—colloquially deemed “exotic”—are also in a state of

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diaspora as a result of their migration through imports and exports. But while it is meant to serve as a reminder of a family history situated in Iraq, the fruits we consume in Canada today do not share the same country of origin. Pomegranates, for example, are often imported from Israel and Peru.

As a result, the connections that are expected to exist in these fruit are not there, and the associations that are discovered are, in turn, unexpected. When so many links to those memories—and thus, the way they function as a binder in diasporic identity—fall apart, what remains?

CATALYSTS FOR BECOMING

It is at this point, after conscious consideration, when a process of mourning can be pursued and followed by an openness to change. In *Precarious Life*, while speaking of mourning in a post-9/11 context, Judith Butler considers that “one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation” (2004, p. 21). Instead of preserving the past, I now

ask: what are the transformative qualities of this object, and how can it be used as a catalyst for becoming something otherwise?

Through mourning, the post-colonial self can heal, change, and develop. With personal narrative as the foundation for this research, I continue to explore how performance, object manipulation, and growth can create a shift in focus from fixation on the past to a willingness to release transformative potential and bear new fruit in the process. 🍁

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