Nishaan

Urdu Textuality as a Site of Transnational Agency

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Abstract

This thesis is an interrogation of the Urdu calligraphic script using different material explorations of drawing, painting and found objects. Through interaction with this script, I trace the shift in the letter-form's evolution as a religious edict to cultural signifier and contemporary construct of transnational and decolonial rhetoric. Theoretically scoping Iftikhar Dadi's scholarship on '*calligraphic abstraction'*, through the lens of Walter Mignolo's '*decolonial aesthetics*', Crang and Ashmore's '*transnational spaces of things*', I consult Linda Tuhiwai Smith's '*decolonizing methodologies*' to embrace Urdu [script] as a pedagogical tool – through visual art installation, and as methodologically employed in the practice of *Sufi dhikr*. Investigating the influences and confluences of colonialism on my aesthetic tastes as a transnational subject, I reflect on its reverberation on my artistic practice, in my frequent lettering of the Urdu script. Through research and reflection, I inquire how South Asian patterns inform transnational praxes. Linking *'calligraphic abstraction*' and *dhikr*, I observe the transnational's situation – in decolonial aesthetics.

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Dedication

For my dad, *whose life's work has been to financially, [emotionally and spiritually], support the educational pursuits of family members, and specifically, impoverished youth and orphans in Pakistan. Your commitment towards helping others actualize their dreams in this field, astounds me*.

I hope to one day continue your legacy – by creating an educational trust of my own.

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Glossary

Urdu: Pakistan's National language. Widely spoken in India, Urdu and Hindi share vernacular although their scripts are completely dissimilar (with Urdu adapting a *Persio-Arabic* script) (Rahman 2011).

Partition: In 1947 division of British India, formed Pakistan (*14 August*) and India (*15 August*), as two sovereign States (Rahman 1997). This came at the dissolution of British colonial rule in the IndoPak subcontinent (ibid.). The split caused antagonism between Muslims and Hindus as well as other minority sects – of which political tensions are prevalent till today (ibid.).

***Nastaliq*:** The historical, curvilinear stylization of the Arabic/Urdu script, widely used in Pakistan; *nastaliq* script is a Persio-Arabic derivative (Dadi 2020).

Nishaan: Mark / mark-making / marking
***Khamoshi*:** Silence
***Azaadi*:** Freedom
***Laaiq*:** Worthiness
***Talaash*:** Seeking
***Tanhaii*:** Solitude, loneliness

***Matka*:** Clay pot
***Lakri ka Pahyya*:** Wooden wheel

Sufism: The metaphysical and mystical component of Islam, often controversial (Dunn 2010).

***Dhikr*:** Sufi *dhikr* (or *zikr* in Urdu) means 'to recite' or 'recitation'. *Dhikr* invokes recitation of the word of God, in repetition as a specific form of meditation (Amuli 2012).

Decolonial Aesthetics: DA recognizes that "sensing was colonized" (Mignolo 2019). It ushers a return towards *aisthesis* from aesthetics, questioning the attitudes and tastes of what constitutes as "beautiful and sublime" within the Western canon (Mignolo 2011). Furthermore, it allows for decolonial thought, attitude and tastes: '*aisthesis'*, to query the emergence of *altermodernity* as the preferred contemporary aesthetic (ibid.).

Altermodernity: Art-critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud uses the term altermodernity to define contemporary arts practices that challenge and question societal, political and anthropological understandings (2009).

Transnational: Representing different nationalities; existing beyond national borders.

POC: Person of colour.

Third Culture Kid: TCKs are children or 'adults': (*ATCK*), whose primary developmental years occur in a country / culture *other* than their parents' passport culture (Reken 2015). The first is their home or host culture, the second where they expatriate, making the third – a negotiation of the first two cultures (ibid.). Often children of cross-culture (i.e., those who spend significant portions of their childhood exposed to foreign culture[s]) fall into this category too (Reken 2017).

Calligraffiti: A contemporary form of calligraphy, combining traditional Arabic calligraphy and graffiti style, re-popularized in the last decade by artist el Seed (2014).

Calligraphic abstraction: Coined by Iftikhar Dadi, 'calligraph abstraction' points to the Urdu/Arabic script in its postcolonial / decolonial agency and praxes (Dadi 2014).

Reflexivity: Critical realism theorist Margaret Archer refers to "reflexivity" as the way to make sense of the outer world by "conscious deliberations that take place through 'internal conversation" (2007, 3).

Intraaction: Karen Barad's *intraaction* points to the interactive phenomena of a condition that exists as predetermined, in the quantum field (2012). This is opposite to the *inter-action* of a determinate set of circumstances and precludes conditions for reflexive outcomes (ibid.).

Habitus: In critical theory, Bourdieu's concept of the *habitus* refers to the structural shaping of tastes and attitudes based on the surroundings that influence our agency (Kapchan 7).

Prologue: tootey chappal[1]

1986, my earliest memories of Karachi. I am age 6; I wander the dimly lit corridors of *Nana's*[2] 60s-built KDA[3] mansion. In the background, staff bellow in *Urdu* – a language foreign to my sensibilities. The murky city's ambiance matches the Far East – pungent, aromatic, boisterous, controlled chaos. Yet something feels different here. We have just moved from Hong-Kong, where the first five years of childhood were spent. Running past KDA's[4] narrow halls, I think I am at a hotel. Ornate light fixtures with decorative switches, sit atop dull, chinoiserie vintage *wallpaper* – that towers over dusty maroon Persian rugs, on classical black and white marble tiles. My grandfather's house is a waiting place till we find a home. Educated at *Hong Kong Montessori* and subsequently, *The Kellet School* (a prestigious, British institution in HK), I am in for a rude awakening. In a few weeks, Foundation Public – the *house turned school* – becomes the place I struggle to integrate. British born[5] having lived my first year in Singapore (where I later return aged 20), I know not of the weightage of displacement – one that becomes the onset of lifelong fracture. It is in these 14 years in Pakistan, I fall in love with a culture I never quite feel I belong to – a place I call home – one I come to love as much as I fear.

[1] Torn slippers.

[2] Nana: Grandfather, maternal; (*not* grandmother).

[3] Karachi Developmental Authority, Scheme 1. Old, affluent residential area.

[4] KDA – nickname for my grandfather's house, also the neighbourhood in which it situates.

[5] I was born in a clinic on Harley Street in London, England.

***Figure i**. KDA, Back Porch**,** Karachi*

***Figure ii**. KDA Driveway**,** Karachi*

so, here you are

too foreign for home

too foreign for here.

never enough for both.

— Ijeoma Umebinyuo, (Questions for Ada)

1

Nishaan

Growing up I had a monstrous time grasping the Urdu language. It is difficult to pinpoint when Urdu script made its initial appearance in my studio practice. I became fascinated by the lines and interstices of the script's movement – the ways the letters curved and bent in perfect symphony. Drawing in this fashion reminded me of the majestic and ornamental calligraphy I witnessed in the shrines of Iran. There, I stood for hours marvelling at the intersection of Islamic calligraphy and geometry. In youth, I took many trips to Tehran, where my grandparents had moved – after years of living in London, England; (in the 80s, I spent many summers at their residence watching British Kids TV). Consequently, my first lessons in conventional calligraphy occurred at the Iranian Cultural Centre in Karachi, in the early 90s. What led me there was the building's beautifully tiled façade – turquoise, dark-blue and white Arabic scripture, rendered in traditional fashion. It stood out against the backdrop of rubbish piles and dilapidated fruit-carts

on its dirty Clifton sidewalk. The opportunity to once again encounter this technique attracted me, more than the lessons themselves. Concurrently at school, I faced the arduous task of learning to read and write essays in Urdu. As long as I can remember my grammar was shot. Only English was spoken at home.[6] What followed was a complex relationship with after-school tutors; their frequent turnover lasted over a decade. Onerous Urdu lessons and perpetual scoldings, paired with the relentless teasing of school friends[7] [8] – became the harbinger for crippling shame and insecurity, (masked by indifference to learn the language).

On macro and micro levels, struggle ensued. Karachi's violent backdrop brought with it, a [personal] reputation constantly at stake.[9] Hijab[10] (worn from age 9), the prominent grandfather and belonging to "a well-known Khoja family"[11] gave no absolution for error. In school, I failed

[6] During Partition in 1947, English along with Urdu was established as one of Pakistan's National languages. To date, English carries classist connotations of superiority and intellectualism (Rahman 1997).

[7] A high-school incident I recall: my friends made a circle around me and jeered "talk in Urdu" – so I did. I was mocked. They probed as to which province in Pakistan I was from. I'd never thought about it. Going home, asking my mother "if I am Punjabi, Sindhi, Pathan or Baluchi" she said, "neither. We are *Gujrati*". I was 19 when I learned this.

[8] Called "*burger*" - this derogatory term describes someone who is "too Westernized", "not from here", privileged or with 'a White complex'. Author Sanam Maher explains this categorization in 'The Rise of Pakistan's 'Burger' Generation' (2016).

[9] I grew up in a strict conservative family. My [maternal] grandfather was well-known in social and political circles. Consequently, I was recognized and known to people whom I did not know, constantly on-guard of my "reputation" - which had to remain flawless.

[10] The headscarf.

[11] This phrase I heard frequently growing up. We were Pakistani, but as I later found out, Gujrati and "Khoja Ithna Asheri" meaning our roots were from India, pre-Partition. My family also has roots in Iraq (from where they fled to Pakistan during my mother's childhood – for fear of Saddam's regime), further complicating historical lineage.

miserably.[12] Both in and out of the institution, I endured incidents far too traumatic to mention – (some involving shady police and guns, all of which people around me had no knowledge). By my late teens I was suicidal and cutting myself. In the East you don't talk about problems. You pretend they don't exist.

Drawing Urdu becomes an expression of belonging and repatriation. In Pakistan, your [English] accent determines your pedigree and privilege; where Urdu exists visually, pitch is not present. In my practice, Urdu is the aural vernacular with which one embraces culture's positives and negatives. The rendering of script in fractured form, allows my studio to become a receptacle for self-reflexivity and inquiry. Following the abrupt strokes of ink on paper, these gestural movements are witnesses to my transnational trauma. They provide space for contention, where I am not judged for my messed-up grammar and befuddled accent – where I do not butcher one of the most beautiful and poetic dialects. At this site I make peace with memories of transition and displacement.

This thesis is an interrogation of the Urdu calligraphic script using arts-based material exploration. Through interaction with this script, I trace the shift in the letterform's evolution as a religious edict to cultural signifier and contemporary construct of transnational and decolonial rhetoric. Theoretically scoping Iftikhar Dadi's scholarship on *'calligraphic abstraction'* (2009),

[12] My time at Catholic school, provided rigid scholastic experience. I entered the "Cambridge" section in the 6th Grade for GCSE O-Levels (to be taken after 11th grade) - through the Board of England. Our teaching was in strict English; we read classic novels. I failed 6th grade, repeated it, scraped through 8th and dropped out after the 9th. *During this time,* ***I failed every mandatory Urdu lesson.*** My teacher hated me. After dropping out, I enrolled in the Urdu O-Level exam, directly through The British Council, Karachi. It was the late 90s. Fortunately I found a tutor who had in her possession - examination booklets of the past 20 years' Urdu O-Levels. I memorized each of them. I sat for the exam during November - (which excluded the GCSE 'oral' component). Much to everyone's disbelief (and thanks to memorization), I got an '*A' in Urdu*! I went back to St. Joseph's to tell my teacher who scoffed in my face.

through the lens of Walter Mignolo's 'decolonial aesthetics' (2011), Crang and Ashmore's 'transnational spaces of things' (2009), I consult Linda Tuhiwai Smith's 'Decolonizing Methodologies' (2012) to embrace Urdu [script] as a pedagogical tool – through visual art installation, and as methodologically employed in the practice of *Sufi dhikr*. Throughout this project, I investigate the influences and confluences of colonialism on my aesthetic tastes as a transnational subject, reflecting its reverberation on my practice, in my frequent lettering of the Urdu script.

Auto-ethnographically I use "*calligraffiti*" (el Seed 2014) and *"calligraphic abstraction*" (Dadi 2009) as a methodology to inspect my transnational selfhood.[13] English to Urdu lexicon is one way I participate in this identity. Penning the Urdu script creates an outlet for feelings of dissonance that come from my lived experiences as a 'Third Culture Kid' (Vhymeister 2015).[14] Contemplating Urdu script as a prefiguration of transnational iconography, by painting Urdu

[13] Transnational here refers to my lived experiences in the UK, Far East, and Pakistan; it further speaks to cross-cultural travel during this period (Reken 2017). Childhood summers in England, adolescent summers in Iran, at my [maternal] grandparents', formed attachments to extensive home bases (Reken 2017). These exposures reflect my inability to grasp Urdu - whilst only reading, writing and speaking in English.

[14] Researcher and Academic Erik Vyhmeister in his TEDx Talk, speaks about the challenges of "Third Culture Kids" as varying in identity, and experience, based on lived experiences. However, some commonalities TCKs share are in managing and dealing with things on their own, establishing a firmer sense of autonomy (2015). The challenges that arise in switching school systems and languages, (that Vyhmeister himself dealt with [ibid.]) – relate to my own challenges of childhood displacement (in London Hong Kong, Singapore, Karachi etc. - by when one's primary developmental stages neared completion). Vyhmeister notes, the main challenges of the TCK are in feelings of "rootlessness", "migratory instinct", "too many friends", not one secure network community in a single place and dealing with "home is elsewhere" (ibid.). Benefits of the TCK's "adaptability and flexibility" in integrating into new environments, plus "confidence in change" results in having "lots of friends, everywhere" and adopting a "primacy of now" (Vyhmeister 2015).

calligraphic letterforms on found objects, I afterward examine how Urdu (in its visual agency), operates as a spiritual catalyst through transliterating *Sufi dhikr* (onto paper). Replacing aural Arabic with written Urdu, I draw words in abstraction and repetition whilst in a cogitative state. In doing so, I inquire the potential of this script, to be freed of its colonial and religious imprints.

Based on the abovementioned, I examine the *episteme* (Nordquist 2017)[15] of 'calligraphic abstraction' as a socio-politico mark-maker; I respond to its literature, as it relates to my studio practice. The assemblage of found objects, collection of [vector] prints, wallpaper, vinyl floor-tiles, hand-painted wooden tiles and calligraphic ink-scrolls, seeks to better understand transnational identity and the importance of its role cross-culturally. I go into detail about each of these projects later in this paper. In researching the script, I catechize:

1. How might South Asian patterns inform transnational praxes?
2. How does the intersection of 'calligraphic abstraction' and Sufi *dhikr*, situate the transnational – in decolonial aesthetics?

[15] In classical thought, episteme is translated as scientific thought, the basis of all epistemology - (and its etymological derivative). Used by Foucault, it ascertains the culmination of a set of relations that coalesce a particular historical period (Norquist 2017).

2

Calligraphic Abstraction as Transnational Iconography

The Arabic / Urdu script is a delicate, intricate, fascinating letterform. Diasporic Pakistani art-critic, historian, academic, and artist Iftikhar Dadi, widely researches the emergence of "calligraphic abstraction" as a decolonial phenomenon (Dadi 2009). Former chair of Cornell's Art Department, Dadi microscopes the use of Arabic calligraphy in the works of renowned South Asian artists Anwar Jalal Shemza[16] and Ibrahim El Salahi,[17] as forerunners of this movement – following their time at the Slade School of Fine Art, during the postwar era (Dadi 2014.). This unique method of abstracting Arabic letterforms within a postcolonial framework has been specifically articulated by Dadi to introspect these artists' exposition and subsequent reaction to

[16] Renowned artist and writer, Anwar Jalal Shemza was born in India, lived in Pakistan and subsequently the UK, most of his life (Dadi 2009). He published several novels and books of Urdu poetry (ibid.). After marrying an Englishwoman and having his first child, Shemza relocated to Pakistan for a year (ibid.). His diasporic experiences influenced his ways of making, which caused Shemza to feel out of place in the IndoPak subcontinent, causing him to relocate back to the Midlands near his wife's parents (ibid.). This shifting and relocating profoundly affected his work (ibid.).

[17] Ibrahim El Salahi a former politician, diplomat and painter was born in Sudan and spent much of his life in the UK, where he still resides. Salahi founded the Khartoum School, a modernist art movement, formed in Sudan in the 1960s (ibid.). Famously, Salahi spent numerous years in false imprisonment – the anguish of which informed his later works (Tate Museum 2020).

their formalist academic training at the Slade (ibid.). When asked of the term "calligraphic abstraction" Dadi enunciates,

> *So, it's probably a projection from me rather than from Masson. You see, one of the things I take seriously from postcolonial pedagogy is the question of categories - you have categories that don't quite address the situation at hand, you know, and that's the condition that we inhabit…so [of] the terminology, in a sense, El Salahi and Shemza are not thinking of themselves as part of this larger movement. I'm the one grouping them together (…) In a sense 'calligraphic abstraction' is my invention to characterize the work of this diverse group of artists. Will the term have problems? Probably. But will it also enable certain things to become visible? That's what I'm hoping for*. (Dadi 2014, 0:46: 20, Postwar Keynote)

During the postwar/postcolonial era (of the 1950s and beyond), calligraphic abstraction became the vehicle by which these artists sought to depict the tensions of their lived experiences in diaspora, as well as come to terms with coalescing new (Western / hegemonic) ways of thinking through making - in order to amalgamate with imperialist academic pedagogy (Dadi 2014, Postwar Keynote). "Radical aesthetic shift brought about by these artists who started to use calligraphy in a non-traditional, non-religious format shifted the way the letter-form was used" (Dadi 2009, 563). Moreover, Dadi's expository research touches on Sadequain,[18] (a self-taught Pakistani artist), as an influencer of this movement; Sadequain's infamous calligraphic works broke the boundaries of traditionalism and nationalism in Pakistan following his time in Paris during the 60s (Dadi 2016, Asian Abstractions).

[18] Sadequain or Sadequain Naqqash was a controversial artist, born in Amroha, India who died in Karachi, Pakistan (1930-1987). Influential and celebrated for his French influences in the 60s, he died penniless (Dadi 2020).

Indexing the convergence of abstract art in modernism with reference to Arabic letterforms, Iftikhar Dadi points at "Islamic discursive textuality", as highlighting the cultural problematic of the Global South, (namely South-Asia, Middle East and North Africa) during the "wake of decolonization" (Dadi 2010, 556). Between 1955 and 1975, artists from these regions used Arabic calligraphic script as visual markers to execute postcolonial socio-political trajectories by using the Arabic motif in new ways (ibid.), changing the way classical Arabic calligraphy was viewed within Western pedagogy and teachings of Islamic Art History:

> *Arabic script was not simply utilized in a classical manner to render beautifully a religious verse or endow it with ornamental form; rather, the script was often imbued with figuration and abstraction to a degree that resisted a straightforward literal or narrative meaning.* (Dadi 2010, 556)

This was a bold move on the part of the artists; religious and cultural connotations of the Arabic script carried within it, weighty implications of religious tenets such as obedience to God (Masip 2019), reverence of the Divine and a nationalistic allegiance to country or culture– the move towards abstracting a sacred or sanctified motif signified a move away from tradition whilst simultaneously retaining the longing to revere parts of it. Furthermore, figuration in Islamic Art was uncommon, if not forbidden, within certain Muslim sects (*Religious Prohibition Against Images*, 2021), and (with)in particular contexts (*Figural Representation*, MET 2001).[19] "The

[19] Figural representation within traditional Islamic Art is historically controversial with varied rulings occurring within different Islamic sects (Sunni, Shiite etc.) (Religious Prohibition 2021; MET 2001). Political tensions further these complications, with fundamentalists [Islamic] sects, taking it upon themselves to adjudicate these rulings. (Rahim 2019)

challenges that decolonization posed for culture in Asian and African nations" surged a "profound and intensive search for new artistic languages" which inherently would "seek to recover expressivity that had been repressed under colonialism but that would also actively produce a new modern culture" (Dadi 2010, 560).

Dadi frames calligraphic abstraction as "a new cultural language that would exploit the opening provided by decolonization (…) to enact a truly world- historical shift in politics and culture" (Dadi 2010, 561). Salahi's stark methodology of blending calligraphic abstraction and cubist modernism to an already situated traditional "aesthetic of grammar" (Dadi 561), would incidentally only be formulaic to the artist some decades later (Dadi 2014, 0:03:07).[20] This strategy developed by Salahi between 1958 and the late 60s, (and concurrently by Shemza), enunciated the artist's "working out of his concerns by praxis and the overthrowing of his academic training" (Dadi 556). Salahi on returning to Khartoum after his time at the Slade, felt the desire to undo the taught rigid colonial ways of making (ibid.); it is here that Salahi starts to imbue his African abstract art with calligraphic letterforms reduced to geometric shapes or pulled apart in form:

> I limited my color scheme to somber tones. . . In the next step I wrote letters and words that did not mean a thing. Then came a time when I felt I had to break down the bone of the letter, observing the space within a letter and the space between a letter and the other on the line. I wanted to see what was there and find out their basic components and origins. There the

[20] Dadi talks about El Salahi's famous painting 'The Last Sound' as embodying "celestial bodies", encompassing the Islamic practice of reciting prayers for the dead and dying (Dadi 2014, 0:03:07). This painting was for its time, revolutionary (ibid.), and in many cases, still is.

> Pandora's box opened up wide before my eyes. . . in place of those broken- up letters I discovered animal and plant forms, sounds, human images, and what looked like skeletons with masked faces. (Ibrahim El Salahi, Dadi 2010, 563)

Dadi states,

> *This transformation demanded breaking open the Arabic letter and exploring the new aesthetic universe that emerged from the fragments and the interstices. Fracturing the Arabic letter also broke the classical calligraphic text as a repository of received meaning.* (563)

Calligraphic abstraction was in many ways revolutionary as it not only overthrew the traditionalist / Islamic ways of depicting Arabic calligraphy in modern art – it simultaneously lent itself to become a visual signifier of decolonization.

The meanings imbued by the processes of *calligraphic abstraction* are thus multifold. In achieving a [post]modernist praxis in art by essentially rejecting claims to an unvoiced, enforced Islamic methodological rendering of script, it claims agency as an individualistic and decorative form of art, devoid of overt religious symbolism whilst still retaining autonomy to revert to religious symbiosis – should it wish to do so. Contrarily, by combining cubist art and abstracted letterforms of the Arabic script (ibid.), this method seeks to decry a formalist, colonial pedagogy (as purported by the Slade (ibid.)), by creating a new [post]modernist visual aesthetic, inclusive of Arabic, thus bringing back into the artmaking, all elements it sought to absolve. This kind of

oscillation is akin to the "circulatory regimes" of transnational praxis,[21] that authors Sonja Ashmore and Philip Crang discuss (Ashmore, Crang 671), which I investigate later in this paper.

> *While El Salahi's contribution is distinctive in developing an aesthetic of decolonization for the Sudan and much of Africa—situated among Islamic textuality, African plastic forms, and transnational modernism—it can be usefully compared to other modernist artists from the Muslim world who were engaged with similar cultural problems in the wake of decolonization from the mid-twentieth century onward. (Dadi, 2010, 556)*

Although Dadi defines "calligraphic abstraction" as postcolonial restitution of South Asian artists in diaspora, this stylization's historical precedent emerged during the 40s in Iraq and was called the Hurufiyya Movement (Leech 2017; Dadi 2014, 0:37:00). Today, artists such as el Seed, Hassan Massoudy, Shazia Sikander and notably Shirin Neshat, employ the use of postmodern contemporary Arabic calligraphic letterforms, and their variations, in splendid displays of sculpture, performance art and architectural works (Sultan 2017).

Dadi interrogates Shemza's and El Salahi's time at the Slade as having a strong influence on these artists' work, forcing them to embody colonial praxis when it came to artistic pedagogy "and how their experiments remain relevant to our globalized world today" (Dadi 2010, 559).

[21] Authors Crang and Ashmore describe "circulatory regimes" as the introspection of a transnational space that indexes the "complex character of that 'ground', thus giving things the agency to act beyond the "circulatory regimes" that constitute their makeup.

Despite Shemza and El Salahi's familiarity of each other, Dadi's findings have linked them in an irrevocable manner (Dadi 2016).[22] Dadi recalls an incident where Shemza was unhinged:

> *One evening, when I was attending a Slade weekly lecture on the history of art, Prof. Gombrich came to the chapter on Islamic Art – an art which was 'functional' – from his book, 'The Story of Art'. I remember leaving the room a few minutes before the lecture finished and sitting on a bench outside. As the students came out, I looked at all their faces; they seemed so contented and self-satisfied. I went home and looked again in the mirror. This time I couldn't find any familiar face at all, neither the beginner at the Slade, nor the 'celebrated artist'. I couldn't talk; I just stared. After all, it wasn't a very pleasant sight. (…) No longer was the answer simply to begin again; the search was for my own identity. Who was I? The simple answer was: A Pakistani. But this wasn't enough*. (Dadi 2009, 2)

This incident with Gombrich reflexively highlights the South Asian transnational's experience in diaspora, in that, immersion in and encountering of Western/hegemonic pedagogy invites new ways of thinking - whilst proving improper integration of the classic canon. The artist as such, begins to disregard his cultural traditional prowess and starts to abandon it in favour of a more appealing contemporary dialect. Thus the "Islamic" (in art), takes shape of the "Islamicate" (Babaie 2020, Textual Abstraction One)[23] – now seeking to separate itself from the very framework that gave it significance.

[22] Both Shemza and El Salahi attended the Slade in the 1950s, undergoing similar diasporic experiences (Dadi 2016); Dadi considers this happenstance astounding.

[23] Sussan Babaie moderating the Courtald's lecture "Textual Abstraction" (2020), refers to the "Islamicate", coined by Marshall Hodgson in his posthumous publication (1974). This term describes art that breaks from the religious umbrella of "Islamic" art.

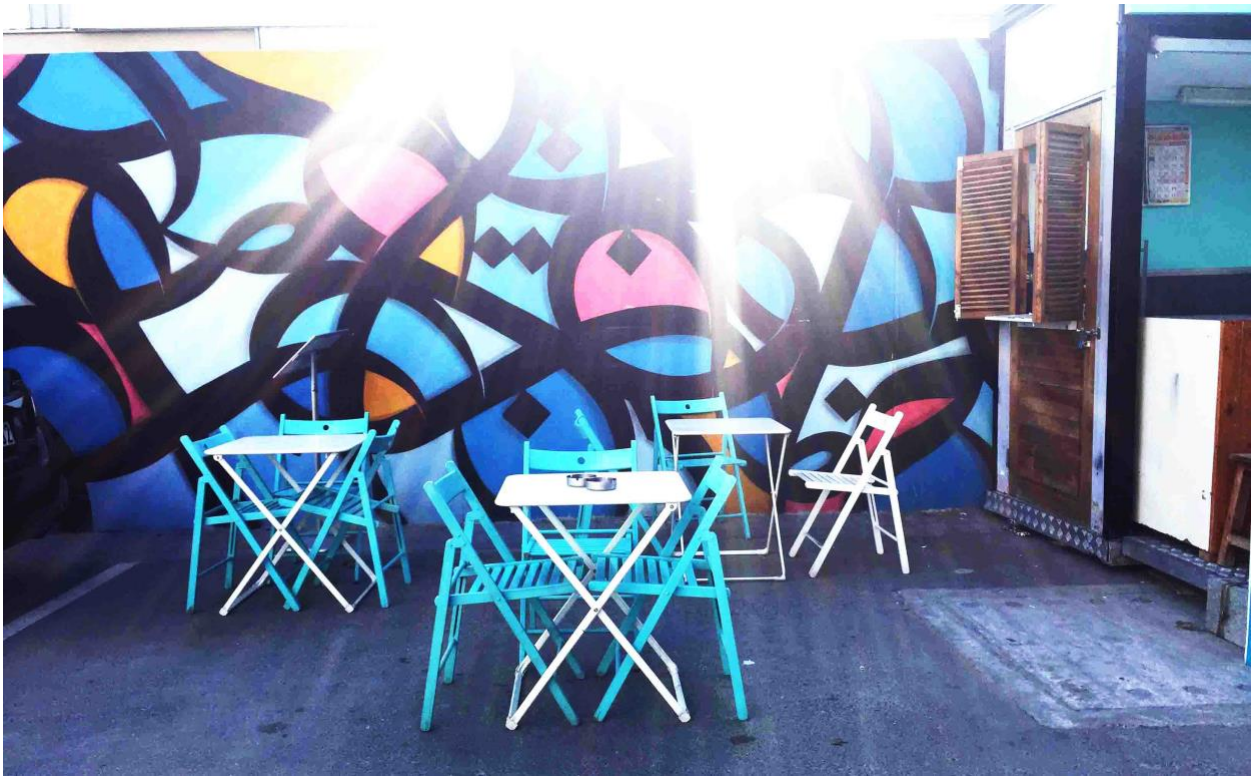

Figure iii. el Seed mural, Alserkal Avenue, Dubai UAE, Dec 2019

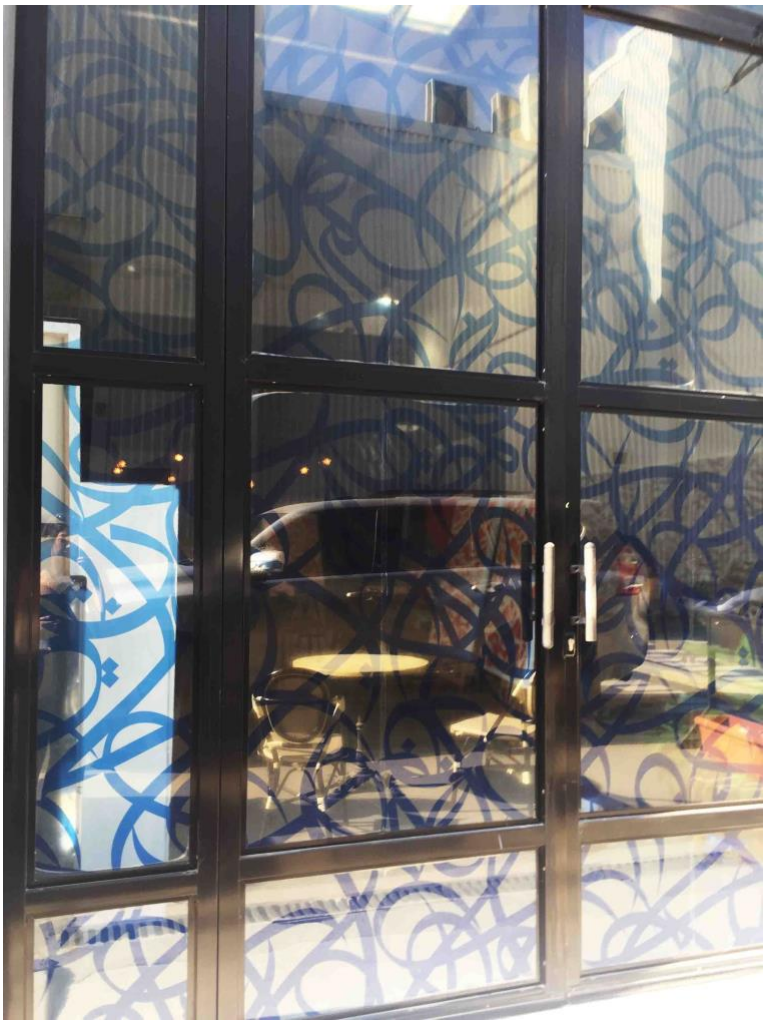

*Figure iv**. el Seed Studio facade,** Alserkal Avenue, Dubai UAE, Dec 2019*

3

Pattern, Appropriation and Transnational Spaces

Transnationality and translocating bring with it an interlinked smorgasbord of attitudes and cultures. Authors Philip Crang and Sonia Ashmore in their 2009 essay, 'The Transnational Spaces of Things: South Asian Textiles in Britain and *The Grammar of Ornament*' talk about the "transnationality of material culture" (665) that objects enact as they move across borders. Furthermore, some of these objects embody South Asian prints on textiles, or patterns on objects, which become transnational mark-makers, encapsulating within them the knowledge and lived histories of the artisans who created these patterns, (during colonial rule in British India) (Ashmore, Crang 662). In referencing historian and academic Pierre-Yves Saunier on his exposition of the "missing elements and analytic priorities" of transnational history, Crang and Ashmore tend to Saunier's proclamations of three particular elements of the transnational (659).

To substantiate Saunier's argument, the transnational must preclude in its agency, an independent asserted particular socio-political / economic structure / space or place where in its entirety it is "freed from a 'scalar imagination"; therefore, in its agency "the transnational needs careful and subtle spatialisation" (Ashmore, Crang 658). Secondly, the transnational space comprises of "circulatory regimes" opposed to the oversimplified notions of circulation and "ideologies of free flow" that often obscure this regime, which is specifically highlighted by Crang and Ashmore's spotlight on Owen Jones' use of South Asian pattern and textile in Jones'

'Grammar of Ornament' (661). Jones explicitly takes advantage of his colonial positionality to construct The Grammar (showcased in 1851 at The Great Exhibition), which in turn executes "a circulatory regime in the context of an imperial British design culture" (Ashmore, Crang 667, 658). Consequently, by taking South-Asian designs across the border and validating them as worthy - (through display at The Great Exhibition [Ashmore, Crang 659]), Jones is enacting an imposed circulation of Western ideology through appropriation of pattern – which later re-circulates into the cultures and tastes of British South Asian diaspora (ibid.).

Thirdly, according to Crang and Ashmore, Saunier posits the transnational as "politically progressive" (Crang Ashmore 659). It is in this pompous pronouncement that Saunier fails to acknowledge the implications of his use of "progressive". To suggest the transnational as such, entails it may be otherwise (less progressive), therefore, "downplaying the darker sides of connection" (Crang Ashmore 659). This is an objection semiotician Walter Mignolo also attests to in his works on "coloniality: the darker side of modernity" (2009).[24] "If objects have social lives and cultural biographies, they cannot be taken for granted, cannot be assumed to be 'one thing'" (Crang, Ashmore 659). According to these three "analytics and priorities", the transnational, often overlooked in contemporary anthropological scholarship, requires calculated introspection of these spaces, through the sharp lens of these analytics. This in turn, enables actors to accurately, etymologically and epistemologically, "respond to these priorities" (Crang, Ashmore 659). Asserting how the transnational space is formed and linked through meaning given to material objects as they traverse borders and are placed into new / western /

[24] Walter Mignolo in his essays 'Decolonial Aesthetics' and 'Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of the De-Coloniality. Globalization and the decolonial option', attests to Western modernity as "the darker side of coloniality" (2009).

homogenized cultural contexts of sociology and economy, the legitimization and exchange or transference of meaning on these objects, often brings into lived spaces, nuances of sullied independence. This assuredly causes the transnational space (and object that is conferred upon it), to be conceptualized as "fractured, multi-dimensional, disjunctive and conjunctive" (Crang, Ashmore 659). To its contention, an object of sanctity is paradoxically mediated as a token of cultural exoticism or vice versa. A *tasbeeh* from Najaf, Iraq,[25] might be sold as a necklace in a New Age store at Kensington Market in Toronto - contrarily, the found objects I obtained at the market in Karachi (and brought back to Toronto), are now posited for plinths, intended to become in their "temporalities and spatialities of the here and now" (Crang, Ashmore 659), consecrated objects.

Regarding Owen Jones' *Grammar of Ornament* – on the colonialism of IndoPak subcontinental pattern and design, Ashmore and Crang state, "on ideological grounds Jones explicitly discouraged the direct copying of the designs displayed in the Grammar, since it would produce, in his view, reproductions devoid of cultural context or meaning" (664). Jones' blatant discouragement is paradoxical as it is in this justification of Jones' appropriation of Indian textile and pattern that the South Asian *poc*, loses agency over their authentic design, whereby, cultural prowess and sovereignty of South Asian pattern is handed from one colonizer (in this case, Jones), to the next, (patrons of the 1851 Great Exhibition in Britain – where the Grammar was displayed [ibid.]). Contrarily, Jones did not acknowledge Indian ornament, pattern and design as

[25] *Tasbeeh:* prayer rosary. The markets in Najaf, Iraq, housed next to the historical 'Holy Shrine of Ali' (covered in decorative calligraphic ornament), is said to house prayer objects of mystical properties. Thus, a *tasbeeh* bought at one of these markets is said to possess sacred and spiritual qualities.

having ‘roots in Islamic Art’ (Latif 2016), of which neither do Crang or Ashmore – in their lengthy exposition on the appropriation of Indian pattern by the British Raj (664.).

To this end it can be argued, the ontology of the South Asian transnational exists (in one way), through veneration of the decorative in art form. This takes the appearance of oriental carved wooden objects and/or textiles that imbibe in their anatomy, time-honoured, traditional calligraphic art. Often in the inscription of Arabic calligraphy, and in praise of God, the act of carving, painting and decorating these objects is an age-old historical tradition (Masip 2019). Through performing these practices (that are currently experiencing a revival) (Masip 2019), the lived histories of these [decorative] objects, shift the compass back to “decolonial thinking, and doing so is to continue re-inscribing, embodying and dignifying those ways of living, thinking and sensing that were violently devalued or demonized by colonial, imperial and interventionist agendas as well as by postmodern and altermodern internal critiques” (Mignolo 2011).

El Salahi’s methodology of combining Arabic calligraphic textuality and African sculptural form to create a new discursive (Dadi 2010, 555), is what I refer to in my use of found objects from, my ‘home’ city of Karachi.[26] For this thesis installation I selected particular objects to further explore ‘*calligraphic abstraction’* (Dadi 2009), as it relates to my transnational praxis. Additionally, I recontextualize these sculptural pieces as “sacred objects”, as defined by sociologist Ruth Van Reken in ‘*Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds*’ (2017). These cultural possessions become “one way we stay in balance” (ibid.); translocal/TCKs form connections with more than one ‘home’ location and “each sacred object serves as a good reminder that the current moment or scene is part of a bigger story of our lives” (Reken 252).

[26] Home here, refers to my parents’ home - my host culture. Referring to *‘TCK’ identity*, Pakistan becomes the place of negotiation where I grapple with [my] cross-cultural translocality, and issues of diaspora (Reken 231-268).

On calligraphic abstraction, transnational spaces, and decolonial aesthetics, I respond with an arts-based methodological approach in an effort to understand interdisciplinary / contemporary artistic practices, as well as make peace with my transnational identity and the spaces it occupies as I move(d) across borders. In the words of Ibrahaim El Salahi,

> *I understand that every artist has a message to deliver in his or her society. . . By nature, to start with, one has to address one's Self, the satisfaction of which is initial and crucial in the creative process. Secondly, one addresses Others in one's own society and culture from which one has borrowed and absorbed a great deal that is to be repaid in kind. And thirdly, last but not least, one ultimately does address All, meaning humanity and human society at large.* (Dadi 2010, 561)

Words that appear in my artwork: '*azadi*, *khamoshi*, *laaiq*, *tanhaii* and *talaash'* – circumscribe my lived experiences, traumas and healing, that have occurred as a result of being translocal. I carry lessons that have come from these artists, whose canons have left indelible marks on the history of calligraphy as it now stands – moving with the tide of the digital era in welcoming an *au courant* form of postmodern calligraphic praxis.

4

Calligraphic Abstraction and Transnational Selfhood

Translocality. *Third culture kid*. Calligraphic abstraction. Separately these phrases spotlight their individual erudition and areas of research. Ontologically, they are connected. Research undertaken for thesis, reviews facets of identity formation, in particular to *third culture kid* and *cross culture kid* identities (Pollock, Reken, Pollock 2017), as well as the tangible and geographical spaces / "geopolitical epistemology" (Mignolo 2011, Decolonizing Epistemologies) occupied by the transnational, cross-culturally. This corporeal focus delves deeper into the translocality of found objects and their shifting meanings – based on them as visual, socio-politico signifiers, enacted in form. This trajectory furthers the methodological approach of calligraphic abstraction, by painting abstract Urdu calligraphic text onto the surface(s) of (these) found objects. To understand how this thesis has come together, it is important to look at some of these areas briefly - before contextualizing them within the artwork and installation schema.

Academic Erik Vyhmeister on being a *'third culture kid'* states, "I don't feel like home is a place like I can ever settle down and not move. I realize this is not shared by all *third culture kids* but it's something that is common in us" (2015, 0:7:38). Abstracted, the Urdu script, negotiates in my artwork – the disjointed identity of "third culture" (Reken 2017). This refers to transnational identity in diaspora. It further understands where my identity may now socially be categorized as *poc* or cross cultural, (rather than "third culture kid" [ibid.]). Due to emerging research on transnational and decolonial thought, emphasis on border epistemology (Mignolo 2011), rather than sociological constructs of *'Third Culture Kid'* (as put forth by Reken) (ibid.) –

redirects the anthropological gaze towards concepts of "epistemic delinking" (Mignolo 2019). TCK identity, feelings of displacement and lack of belonging (Vyhmeister 2015), manifest in my studio-practice. This is apparent in my decision to illustrate Urdu, and specifically words such as: 'seeking', 'freedom', 'silence', 'worthiness' and 'solitude/loneliness' [in Urdu]. These iterations point to the anxiety of cross-cultural diasporic experiences, as well as mirror their strengths (for example in developing acute language skills / decision making [ibid.]), to adapt to changing situations and / or language barriers, different epistemologies / Western pedagogy etc.

Using Found Objects from *Karachi*, I investigate TCK identity tensions, in concurrence with Eastern/Western dichotomies of belonging. Pakistan is as much 'home' as Canada is.

> *Methodologically, tracing the movements of things is a way to flesh out, and complicate, such generalised political judgements. 'Following' things, tracing out their biographies and their changing valuations, is a method for mapping transnational cultural politics.*
> (Crang, Ashmore 660)

The [vector] patterns I illustrate, intend to trace the influence of colonialism on Urdu by subverting the text as decorative pattern, embedding hidden meanings of displacement and rejection of colonial constructs – in the form of fractured lettering. Reflexively, through its use in my practice - Urdu script becomes the agent by which I negotiate my "*adult third culture kid*" and "cross culture" identities (Pollock, Reken, Pollock, 231). I use Urdu script to tell [untold] stories of transnationality in conjunction with the wider TCK narrative.[27]

[27] I'm 12 years old. It's the day to submit our artwork at St. Josephs Convent Girl's School in Karachi. At this new school, teachers are frightfully strict. The art department is airy with big gothic windows; I love drawing up there. I've been up all night meticulously imitating a paint-by-numbers landscape, mixing and placing colours myself.

Of the found objects procured [in Karachi], some present in their entirety whilst others, painted on with script, act as cross-cultural agents of my translocality; this assemblage becomes a commentary of moving and shifting, belonging and crossing borders with items that hold sentimental meaning. In transporting these from Karachi into my home in Toronto, I bring a tractate of shared experiences with my family - in the items' procurement as well as the interactions they brought, with different [classist] members of Pakistani society – (with whom I would not have conversed, were it not for this palpable [material] exchange). Along with claimed denotations attached to these [found] objects, come historical contexts embedded in their agency. "Things do not just move through a transnational space, they are transformed in movement" (Ashmore, Crang 661). Reflexively they are conduits for cross-cultural / decolonial dialogue. Itemizing the repercussions of colonialism in British India – [some of] these objects exist as physical remnants of the IndoPak subcontinent, pre-Partition.

When it is time, I hand in my assignment with tepid anticipation. Alas, all enthusiasm is dissipated. A waving finger, furrowed brow and orange-bob jerk up and down at me. "Samia! Did you do this yourself?! Tell me the truth. Someone did it *for you* right?". "N-no. No miss. I-I did it". I get yelled at anyways.

This is one example of how at a young age, [negative] responses to pedagogical art making, are constructed within my identity, where, in later years, creative productivity may be late to develop (due to an internal response of fear) - in dealing with hierarchical power structures (Pollock, Reken, Pollock 2017). In this case "freedom" or "*azadi*" - is the freedom to express oneself creatively in a Western / pedagogical framework. At the same time if it is a colonial framework, it reflexively enacts the same power-structures as the rigid Catholic schools in Pakistan did. Freedom then becomes a postcolonial / decolonial approach to undoing ones' knowledge/understanding from tau(gh)t structures of learning, creativity and expression.

5

Urdu Script as Reflexive Decoloniality

Decoloniality and identity-politics presently go hand in hand, demanding platforms for open discourse. Argentinean semiotician Walter Mignolo argues complex colonial matrices of power have been created and controlled by Western hegemonic institutions, with the advent of the Enlightenment period, carried forward by neoliberalism – the effects of which must be undone, in the academe and otherwise (2009). In his essays, "Decolonial Aesthetics" and "*Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of the De-Coloniality. Globalization and the Decolonial Option*", Mignolo enunciates Western modernity as "the darker side of coloniality" (2011; 2009), pointing to "decolonial aesthetics" as a way to "liberate" artistic sensibilities of the 'Global South' (ibid.),[28] trapped within the "*aesthesis"* of Western artistic practices (ibid.). "Decolonial aesthetics, in particular, and decoloniality in general have joined the liberation of sensing and sensibilities trapped by modernity and its darker side: coloniality" (Mignolo 2009).[29] In conversation with revered Indigenous scholar, Linda

[28] The use of this term implies "third world" countries/cultures. "'Global South' refers broadly to the regions of Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania" (Dados, Connell 12). On Quijano's exposition of "coloniality of power" (Mignolo 2009), Dados and Connell state, "The term Global South functions as more than a metaphor for underdevelopment. It references an entire history of colonialism, neo-imperialism, and differential economic and social change through which large inequalities in living standards, life expectancy, and access to resources are maintained" (2012).

[29] In a lecture at the *Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum*, Mignolo refers to modernity as a "narrative" presented as a "rhetoric of salvation by conversion" (2014). Mignolo outlines the current socio-political backdrop alongside the history of modernity (in the 16th and 17th centuries), as the advent of this imperialist imposition (ibid.). With the

Tuhiwai Smith, both deliberate Mignolo's concepts of "delinking" with respect to the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge across academia, [and] in conjunction with Maori Indigenous epistemologies (Mignolo, Smith 2019). Mignolo underlines Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano's coining of "coloniality – the underlying logic of all Western colonialism", as the point of arrival of decolonial though and awareness (Mignolo, Te Tuhi, 0:7:54).[30]

Reflexively, coloniality's ideology spurs the way actors disseminate knowledge in socio-politico and economic forums, in turn, influencing their positionality in *habitus*; the rejection of this subjective lends thought to new systems of "pluriversality" (Mignolo 2011)[31] as globalized opportunity, in opposition to dichotomous hegemonic matrices of colonial and imperialist structures: (of thought, rationality and thus infrastructure) – that concurrently, arbitrarily hold the dominant socio-politico systemic (and infrastructural) narrative(s). Mignolo looks to Western modernity as colonialism's point of arrival, hiding its "darker side" – coloniality – in Western

knowledge of historical precedence, comes awareness of the powerful influences of Western categorization and thought (propounded by the Renaissance) (ibid.). Mignolo argues it is at this juncture "that the logic of coloniality also emerged" (ibid.). Outlining the disadvantages of a capitalist globalized system, he refers to "coloniality/modernity" as "already a decolonial concept", pointing to "art, aesthetics, how are we thinking about these kinds of things today?", as a way to confront and begin to undo, effects and consequences of colonialism as we now observe them (Mignolo 2014).

[30] Quijano "explicitly linked coloniality of power in the political and economic spheres with the coloniality of knowledge" (Mignolo 2009, 305) and argued "if knowledge is colonized, one of the tasks ahead is to decolonize knowledge" (ibid.).

[31] Pluriversality conceptually popularized by Mignolo and Arturo Escobar (in Escobar's 'Designs for the Pluriverse', 2018), attests to pluriversal thought and knowledge where sovereignty and agency hold their own accord as opposed to homogenizing within a system; a pluriverse of individualistic thought favours a unified universal.

thought and taste (2019). To embrace a modern/postmodern ideology, is to in essence, reject pre-colonial structuration.[32]

> *Aesthetics becomes the branch of philosophy that regulates and legitimizes the genius that produces fantastic work[s] of art. It's a form of control of your subjectivity. And what is your subjectivity? Your subjectivity is aesthesis*. (Mignolo Te Tuhi, 0:37:16)

With the advent of modernism and postmodernism, traditional praxes – such as Indigenous ways of making, as well as Latin American and South Asian cultural practices have witnessed a reemergence in the cultural and diasporic imaginary, under the wake of decolonization and decolonial thought (Mignolo 2011). Mignolo argues for a decolonial aesthetic within the social strata, in order to challenge altermodern aesthetics in contemporary arts practices (ibid.). Mignolo emphasizes altermodernity rejects notions of heterogeneity in arts practices and therefore homogenizes artistic and cultural praxes under the altermodern umbrella of 'contemporary' / Western aesthetics (ibid.).

> *Altermodern aesthetics claims postmodernity is passé and that a new modernity is emerging reconfigured by globalization. Accordingly, artists are supposed to engage with this new globalized perception by means of translating values from their respective cultural backgrounds in order to be legitimized in global circuits.* (Mignolo 2011)

[32] Anthony Giddens' structuration theory awards equal harmonics to structure and agency within society (1984). This becomes the blueprint for determining socio-political patterns and reflexive outcomes as a result of their symbiosis (Mignolo 2011, 104).

Mignolo points to 'decolonial aesthetics' as a return-movement to reclaim decolonial thought and taste –overshadowed by modernists and postmodern [institutional] rhetoric (ibid.). "Delinking means research for liberation" (Mignolo*, Te Tuhi*, 0:20:13). In "delinking" from altermodernity, there is room for decolonial tractate and aesthetic – to exist in a pluriversal, space – as opposed to being suffocated by a homogenized, contemporary aesthetic (Mignolo 2011). This in turn, allows both spectrums, altermodernity and pluriversality, to function alongside one another, instead of the former imposing a reflexive praxis – which may inadvertently, overshadow a decolonial agenda and (re)enact and imperialist one.

Mignolo's "Decolonial aesthetics" (re)introduces a shift from aesthetics to *aisthesis*:

> *Sensing was colonized and controlled through the scientification of aeisthetic as a theory of the beautiful and the sublime (...) art began to be articulated with aesthetic and the universalization of a provincial culture, which is Europe, began to take hold.*
> (Mignolo Te Tuhi, 0:37:45)

Dialoguing with Linda Smith, both theorists dissect Mignolo's concept of "delinking" from Western notions of aesthetics within the arts – moving back to a wholesome "Kaupapa Maori" way of approaching research in a more organic fashion (Te Tuhi 2019). During this exchange, Smith remarks, "part of the dehumanizing process was to deny that we were creators of knowledge" (Te Tuhi, 0:14:44).

Considering Urdu through this lens of '*decolonial aesthetics*', it is necessary to review the script's historical lineage as a visual mark-maker:

> *Research in the academia is mainly for modernization, modernity and development. The research we need is research for liberation (…) the academia is not enough. Because the academia restricts everything to the written word, to books and to digital archives. Life is much bigger than that.* (Mignolo, Te Tuhi, 0:19:39)

From its wide stylistic usages in *nastaliq* and *shikasteh* (Dadi 2020),[33] Urdu shifted from being a spoken language to ocular propaganda signifier, widely used in political poster art and slogans (apparent at the time of General Zia's rule in Pakistan) (Dadi 2009). Historically, the scriptural nature of *nastaliq* in Arabic was adapted *as nastaliq in Urdu* (Dadi 2020, Textual Abstractions). Hence, I argue, it is, in essence, *impossible* to separate this script from [its] religious symbology and connotation – as these precedents are embedded within the very strokes of its character(s). Furthermore, due to the "*Urdu Hindi controversy*" (Dadi 2020; Tariq 1997), Urdu was imposed by the British as one of Pakistan's National languages during Partition.[34] This move delegitimized Pakistan's indigenous languages; it subjugated Urdu as an imperialist structure (*Urdu Still Under Effects of Colonialism, 2013*).

> *Colonialism, coloniality teaches us to hate who we are as a people. It teaches Indigenous peoples to hate themselves, to hate their language, to hate social institutions (…) you can love*

[33] Names of the historical, curvilinear stylizations of the Arabic/Urdu script (Dadi 2020).

[34] Urdu and Hindi sound almost identical although visually are completely different. For instance, I can watch Bollywood movies and understand them although I cannot write or read Hindi. Similarly, I can read and write Arabic and read Persian, although I cannot speak or understand these languages (all of which use the *Nastaliq* script).

what we did, you can find accomplishment, you can find things to admire, (…) excitement and joy. (Smith, Te Tuhi, 0:27:24, 0:28:28)

In Islamic arts, reprehension of figuration (Met 2001)[35] led artists and artisans to lettering abstract shapes/negative spaces of the script (Dadi 2009), as signifiers of *aesthesis* – therefore, enacting decolonial aesthetics. Observing lines move and letters meld, Urdu (in its visual iconography) embodies this shift, from Arabic (as a traditional/religious signifier), to a politicized etymological construct, (during the Postwar era) (Dadi 2014), circling back as a reflexive decolonial agent. In using Urdu to negotiate "third culture identity" in diaspora (Reken 2017), my handwriting (learned as *nastaliq* in school), acts a chord, connecting me to the weightage(s) and shared histories of colonial agendas, conversely seeking reclamation from it.

[35] See pp. 9; *footnote #19* (Figural Representation, MET).

6

Dhikr in Script

Dhikr is one of the ritualistic facets of Sufism, the mystical (sometimes controversial) part of Islam (Dunn 2010).[36] Whilst participating in *dhikr*, to review the entirety of its history and comprehension, in the limited capacity of this extrapolation – lends an impossible feat. As a practice-led, methodological approach, in conjunction with research on the Arabic/Urdu script, I humbly microscope and introspect *Sufi dhikr* as postulated in my studio practice. Within the history and etymology of the Arabic/Urdu calligraphic script, recitation, repetition and inscription have been intrinsically tied. "Many eminent calligraphic artists were themselves Sufi teachers-mystics or their followers, disciples, who had set artistic standards that became canonical" (Teparic 1). Methodologically, using script as a lens: "invoking God's names *(dhikr),* as one of the important factors for reaching aesthetics, i.e., ability to 'see' its inner beauty and finally realise it" (Teparic 1), has awarded *dhikr* with a Pentecostal-like ontology – through which one encounters transcendence. "On the human side, *dhikr* is both the awareness of God and the expression of this awareness through language, whether vocal or silent" (Chittick 49). This practice-led, self-reflexive approach to interacting with script, is based on facets such as *"silent"*, "*vocal"* (Bashir 2013) and self-reflexive *dhikr*.[37]

[36] Historically, for religious hardliners and Islamic fundamentalists, the practice of Sufism poses a threat to the strict laws of Islamic jurisprudence (Geels 60). Sufism in Islam is akin to Western spirituality in that, "the practice of Sufism is the seeking of truth through love and devotion to God; a Sufi is a lover of Truth, of the perception of the absolute" (Dunn 14). In some cases, the mystical component of Islam is often overlooked as 'too transcendental' and less practical (Geels 1993).

[37] I coin this term to describe the practice of *dhikr* through the lens of sociologist Margaret Archer's "self-reflexivity" (2007).

In traditional calligraphic practice, the student/calligrapher is not given "*ijaza*" or *permission* by their master to practice, until the teacher/master feels their disciple is ready (Masip 2019):[38]

> *In ways that mirror the Sufi master-disciple relationship, serious students of calligraphy are expected to study with a certified calligraphic master who ultimately has the right to bequeath an ijaza — a certificate of permission to be a khattat, or recognized calligrapher and member of a certain calligraphic school.* (Sharify-Funk)

Without the master's "*ijaza"*, it is considered an insult for the calligrapher to make his or her mark in the Islamic Arts corpus by autonomously engaging with this sacred practice (Masip 2019). *Calligraffiti* and *calligraphic abstraction* break from traditional calligraphy's methodology, in agency and application.[39] Concurrently, I instill a contemporary approach to *dhikr* as a spiritual meditative conduit (in my studio practice) - purporting the same ideological transferences that *calligraffiti* and *calligraphic abstraction* employ in their postmodern / contemporary manifestations.

Disjointing from traditional praxes where recitation of *dhikr* occurs in the presence of a master and teacher, the method I employ in enacting this praxis involves isolating oneself in one's studio (in this

[38] Interesting to note: most calligraphy masters are male, as is with the case of Sufi masters (Geels 1993) – giving both the aural and visual facets of practice, an overarching patriarchal umbrella. In many Sufi traditions, public participation of *dhikr* (or zikr), consists primarily of male participants (Manoharan, Xygalatas 2019).

[39] *Calligraffiti* rifts from traditional calligraphy by merging with a graffiti style (el Seed 2014). Its sovereignty as a fractured version of the Arabic script, independent of a master's "*ijaza*" for his disciple to openly practice, creates new pathways of embracing Islamic culture, whilst simultaneously "delinking" (Mignolo 2009) from it.

case home),[40] treated as a "sacred space" (Klotz 14).[41] By not having *ijaza* from a master, I perform both calligraphy and *dhikr*, and enact an intimate parlay – within and without this transnational space.

ge, if primary adulation of this medium is achieved through a Western / Islamicate lens,[42] the distinction between traditional expository Islamic art and the Islamicate canon (Babaie 2020, Textual Abstractions One)[43] posits questions of sovereignty, agency and lack of respect for tradition. *Calligraffiti* – the term itself becomes an infraction on sacred sensibilities [of the script] (that traditional contemporary calligraphers such as Hassan Massoudy and Nuria Garcia Masip continue to impress upon). In a studio visit with el Seed last year,[44] the renowned *calligraffiti* artist attested to this etiquette. Despite success (in this discipline), el Seed is avowedly criticized [by long-established practioners], in his disregard for calligraphy's nomenclature along with his unconventional (yet astoundingly beautiful) praxis (2019).

[40] Due to the current ongoing Pandemic and citywide lockdown (2020/2021), my small apartment has turned into a makeshift studio space.

[41] In '*The Sufi Book of Life'*, scholar and academic Dr. Neil Douglas Klotz refers to "sacred space" as a portal in which the Soul connects to the Divine through the process of *dhikr* (14).

[42] Occult practice or practice of divination (such as receiving psychic messages) is forbidden and/or heavily frowned upon in traditional Islamic practice(s) (Razawi 9, 0:28:09). Through the *Islamicate* lens, Klotz's Sufi guide that 'acts as an oracle' (2005), potentially contradicts traditional Islamic and even Sufi practice, whilst concurrently legitimizing it.

[43] Art historian and curator Sussan Babaie moderating The Courtald's lecture series: "*Textual Abstraction Within Transnational Modernism*" (2020), refers to the "*Islamicate*" (a term coined by Hodgson in his posthumous 1974 publication). This describes art that breaks from the religious canopy of 'Islamic'.

[44] Personal studio Visit with el Seed: ***26 December 2019***, Alserkal Avenue, Dubai, UAE.

7

Dhikr as a Self-Reflexive Methodology

In Sufi practice, in order to reach the level of *irfan*[45] through *dhikr*, the presence of a master is required, so that the master is able to remove the disciple's "spiritual diseases"[46] in order to reach a state of complete transcendence (Razawi 9, 0:31:00). Soul purification, without the presence of a master is considered extremely difficult to achieve and, in some cases, admonished (ibid.). Therefore, my asomatous aspirations are methodological, rather than ambitious. Following a traditional YouTube recording, [47] recitation of and reaction to – *dhikr* – is translated and transfixed onto a long drawing scroll, by illustrating Urdu letters and words in ink. I use traditional bamboo (pens carved by myself),[48] large ink brushes and Western calligraphy pens. Onto the paper are imposed, large gestural, abstract, calligraphic letterforms. Aural and

[45] Irfan is the highest level of spiritual enlightenment to be attained within the Sufi Order. This "*maqam*" (distinction) distinguishes from Western spirituality (eg. New Age occult ideologies, numerology, astrology, witchcraft etc). To reach this level is considered God-like and deemed next to impossible (Razawi 9, 29:00).

[46] Razawi, (Islamic scholar and researcher on Transnational Shi'ism) (Harvard 2021), explains "spiritual diseases" as facets of the human condition, including anxiety, depression, restlessness and low energy states (2020, Night 9).

[47] For this method, I chose *dhikr* recordings of the *Naqshbandi Sufi Order*, one of the many Sunni Orders (Bilgrami 2020). Musically, this form of devotional worship appealed to me. I was unaware of the sectarian and religious classifications of Sufi (Sunni and Shiite) Orders, which I later came to know of – in interviewing Sufi academic, scholar and doctoral candidate Muna Bilgrami (whose father is renowned Sufi master *Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri*) (ibid.).

[48] These bamboo pens were carved, under guidance of a traditional calligraphy master in Karachi, with whom I sat for lessons [in Urdu]. This occurred during my trip back to Pakistan, at the onset of the IAMD Master's program.

corporeal movements follow traditional formats: (in reciting, repeating and drawing). However, Urdu and not Arabic words, parse onto the scroll. This inflection paradoxically breaks from traditional praxes of calligraphy, creating new discourse, whilst simultaneously fracturing a classical one. The way these letters are superimposed and interspersed on the paper reflects socio-politico commentary of tensions between traditional Islamic art praxis and the Islamicate as discussed earlier.

Embodying a traditional/cultural and albeit religious practice – in turn, methodologically secularizing its praxis - *as Urdu [words], not Arabic* – allows for interjection of ontological and transnational/decolonial dialogue. "The visionary aspect of Islamic calligraphic art has most directly affected its formation, as well as the aesthetics itself" (Teparic 1). From the perspective of the mystic's imaginary, *dhikr* acts as a way to absolve [oneself from] cultural identity and connotation, without eradicating [its] essence and importance. The need for this release arises from a complex anxiety of having to procure an identity of *this or that* – to belong to *space or place* (Vyhmeister 2015), whilst continuously feeling inept – a phenomenological attribute present in transnational/*adult third culture* identity (Pollock Reken Pollock 2017).

> *Calligraphic art was considered sacred too, and some groups of mystics used to contemplate for hours watching it. According to some traditions, this artistic skill is realised through spiritual visions, but also used as a medium for reaching spiritual realisation.* (Teparic 2)

My first time performing Sufi *dhikr* as well as learning about its rich historical and participatory gnosis was distracted by observing its patriarchal nature (Manoharan, Xygalatas 2019). Most recordings online featured male gatherings. However, I did engage in a Zoom *dhikr* session, (discussed later). "The very discipline of calligraphic art as a sacred skill or in glory of

teachers of this sacred science (…) exists above the perception of all five senses" (Teparic 2). With interest in the mystical qualities of Urdu/Arabic script, (alongside being a long-time student of Western spirituality) (Tolle 2006), I was drawn to calligraphy's esoteric nature - that supersedes and underlies the sociological, political and ontological framework(s) of the script.

In as much as I engage as an active agent in my conferred identity, I simultaneously seek to absolve myself of these labels – to connect to the Divine/Spirit /Being: (what some call *'God'*). "The practice of Sufism is the seeking of truth through love and devotion to God; a Sufi is a lover of Truth, of the perception of the absolute" (Dunn, Mascetti and Nicholson 14). Using this methodology, I inquire: am I able to create renewed script – an alternate visual language – challenging colonial imprints and connotations? Whilst the lexicon emerged as a religious symbol, and came to be popularized as secularized modern, postmodern/contemporary and now decolonial – in its *aesthesis* – is it possible to go beyond this? "For the Sufi, language provides a systematic (but not necessarily "linear") means of attaining to and expressing spiritual states of being" (Sharify-Funk 2018). You cannot separate the script from its religious connotations – or can you? During the Renaissance, the Arabic/Kufic script was widely appropriated and utilized as decorative (Schimmel 2). In an instant, the sacred became the profane, until it was reclaimed [by the Islamic arts corpus], back as the sacred:

> *[Of] the Quran itself: the Arabic language in this sense is considered sacred but it's also used for secular poetry (…) the Arabic language is also a major factor in the shift, and within this calligraphic movement is the move from the sacred to the secular.*
>
> (Salah Hassan, Textual Abstractions Two, 0:14:57)

Was it wrong – to copy and essentially strip the Divine word of title, reducing it to a mere form of exoticism? Yes. One could argue *calligraffiti* unintentionally originated, ironically in the Renaissance period – (when the focus was on religious vernacular and 'religious' art such as frescos). This is the same period Mignolo attests to as "the darker side of modernity" (2019).

In deduction, participating in traditional/metaphysical praxis in order retain a meditative, otherworldly, state whilst rendering and repeating the same word, *over and over* – proved monotonous. The *methodology of dhikr*, to strip [oneself of] identities, and the weightage of *not fitting in*, is self-reflexive. In my journey towards inner peace, through an arts practice-based, research methodological approach, by connecting with script through [the act of] parsing *dhikr*, using *Urdu as Arabic*, I argue "intraactive" (Barad 2012), [self] reflexive calligraphic abstraction is the vehicle by which I witness my identity labels of *third culture kid* / *transnational*, whilst simultaneously, in exposition through various abovementioned theoretical lenses, arrive at absolution [in Spirit] – where I am no longer the labels. I am, in its "nothingness" of "vacuum fluctuation" (Barad 2012),[49] the energy of Spirit underlaying these [transnational] experiences.

Can the Urdu calligraphic script, as a visual marker and agent of transnationality in *habitus* – act as an intangible tangible, to take [with me] wherever I go? Does this calligraphic iconography allow claim to a sense of belonging and location in its "ego/theo/geo body politics of language" (Mignolo 2009, 307)[50] –in enacting a "decolonial aesthetic" (Mignolo 2011), whilst simultaneously granting permission to relinquish these labels by practicing *dhikr*? Contrarily, in doing so, I reflexively enact religious symbiosis (versus spiritual), whereby - in seeking gnosis

[49] Barad's "vacuum fluctuations", refer to the "indeterminate" qualities in the quantum field that allow conditions to manifest as the result of their pre-existing "particles", in "an un/doing of identity" (15).

[50] "Delinking (…) denounces the pretended universality of a particular ethnicity (body politics), located in a specific part of the planet (geo-politics)" (Mignolo 307).

through Script, I perform the very conservative sacred notions of script (Urdu/Arabic), [through historical lineage and shared histories] – that ideologically went through processes of undoing/decolonizing (Textual Abstraction Within Transnational Modernism 2020). In seeking absolution, I arbitrarily enact decolonial rhetoric.

The inconclusive and 'intraactive' (Barad 2012) quality of *textual renderings* of Urdu, become a reflection of my identity, seeking to belong, finding meaning in [transnational] location, only to come to conclusion that the path of the Seeker[51] leads one within. As much as the words *laa'iq (worthiness), 'talaash' (to seek) and tanhai'* (solitude/loneliness) allow articulation of [one's] positionality in academia, society, temporality: it is in their illegible fragmentation and disruption that peace, and [spiritual] salvation emanate. Looking at the intersection of Islamic mysticism in script and calligraphic modernism as a site of 'decolonial aesthetics' (Mignolo 2011), new pathways to confront, interpret and understand these complex letterforms begin to emerge.

Parsing script in bold, gestural agitation on the scroll, highlights the affect and concursion of coloniality on my practice. In the lecture, *Textual Abstraction Within Transnational Modernism*, Iftikhar Dadi refers to Adolf Loos' decry of ornament (2020). Loos and contrarily Dadi, I argue, decry stylization of script – and the religious symbiosis that accompanies it. By presenting a new modernist way of approaching text i.e., *calligraphy without frills* – it denies the rich historical and cultural ontology embedded within it. To decry script of religious symbology is to deny its mystical properties. To strip calligraphy of its decorative aspect is to strip it of its ontological lineage. And to do that is to deny the existence of the 'Other'. "Colonial difference is

[51]The spiritual Seeker as described by Amuli in *'Dhikr and the Wisdom Behind It'* (2012).

making us believe some people are inferior to others" (Mignolo 2014). This in turn, disavows intellect from the 'Other', positioning him as the '*savage'*, by subjugating his learned aesthetic.

> *Younger artists that also experimented (…) developed a more conceptual approach that differed from earlier generations. Rasheed Qureshi, in his work, 'the past of roses', an installation at Cornell University (…) lots of elements of Sufism, the abstraction of calligraphy, calligraphic-like but not really readable sculpture but also references to the importance of mathematics or numerical figures in the context of Sufi mysticism (…) the Sufi imaginary like Ibn Arabi and Rumi (…) [of] Dia al-Azzawi (…) in the work of these artists, abstraction and figuration can be interpreted as a modernist renewal of a traditional artistic form, as a vehicle of individual expression and subjectivity (…) as a critical engagement with Western modernism.* (Salah Hassan, Textual Abstraction 2, 0:33:22)

For this thesis I performed *dhikr* in repetition of a single word or phrase. Listening to Arabic renditions, I wrote in Urdu instead. Hours of searching "*Sufi dhikr*" on YouTube rendered no results of female masters and/or disciples engaged in this practice. On 30 July of last year (2020), I participated in a *Zoom Dhikr Session*, that included both male and female participants although the audience was primarily female (2020).

> *We start talking about gnoseology instead of epistemology because gnoseology means knowledge, gnosis, conocimiento, (birth) (…) not in the sense of episteme (…) gnoseology takes us out of epistemology (…) knowing and imagining and creating (…) aesthesis is a kind of delinking from aesthetic and epistemology, relinking with gnoseology and aesthesis, and opening up a different kind of debate – sidelining the pretended universality of aesthetic (…) delinking from the category of Western knowledge.*

(Mignolo, Te Tuhi, 0:38:56)

Mignolo's concepts of "liberating" the senses and "delinking" (ibid.) caused me to review these praxes as ways to connect with calligraphy's shared histories synchronously realizing the gravitas of being transnational in *habitus*.

8

Artwork

Investigating Urdu's calligraphic iconography – combining graphic and painterly elements, this interdisciplinary body (of artwork) interrogates visually, my transnational identity. Analogue and digital patterns in Urdu respond to the South Asian in diaspora, within a decolonial schema. Using this script as a pedagogical tool outlines colonialism's cartographical influence on South-Asian pattern and design. Methodologically, Urdu visual functionality as a religious (versus secular) signifier (or vice versa), is informed by its ideological and ontological transferences as a digital design element – onto found objects and manifested in a *collection of prints*. Words within this installation, (as separate and interactive) are:

1. *Talaash*: To seek, seeking
2. *Azaadi:* Freedom
3. *Khamoshi:* Silence
4. *Laa'iq:* Worthiness, worthy
5. *Tanha'ii:* Loneliness; solitude

Examining textual semiotics by fracturing the letter, materializes an analogous painterly, and digital graphic/vector format. The distortion and cutting up of words and letters (as material exploration), mirrors the cutting up of cultures; putting them back together as patterned script,

reconciles [one's] transnational identity in its current formation - of feeling '*too Pakistani here, too Canadian over there*'. 'Calligraphic abstraction' (Dadi 2016) becomes a commentary for the shifting rhetoric in postmodern / altermodern scholarship (Mignolo 2011), where the colonized body seeking to un-silence itself from prejudices of colonialism, brings about new ways of looking. "The formation of a decolonized audience is seen as inextricably tied to experimentation and praxis, [of] artists who have undertaken modern calligraphic works since 1975" (Dadi 569). This tension depicts in the way traditional Arabic/Urdu script renders in a digital/fractal format.

The exploration of IndoPak subcontinental pattern, in relation to 'the transnational spaces of things' - highlights the importance of the decorative in Islamic art history, in relation to the Arabic/Urdu script (Masip 2019). As such, it is almost impossible to separate these two elements within an Eastern/Islamic art canon as they complement each other in perfect symbiosis. The *nastaliq* script, cursive and "curvilinear" (Babaie, Courtauld 2020) invites observation of negative space(s) formed by this script, that creates geometric patterns of its own: essential to be scrutinized.

In essence, [script and] things, in their transnational spaces, are agents for decolonial epistemologies, in the way they occupy space within geographical territories. "Things enact culture in motion" (Ashmore, Crang 660). One argues, these objects, if taken back to Pakistan "by decolonizing Western epistemology and by building decolonial epistemologies" (Mignolo 2011 Decolonizing Epistemology), conjecture new meanings: if analyzed through a Western / decolonial framework. On the other hand, repatriation of these objects in turn incites new dialogue on decolonial aesthetics where an *arts and craft* way(s) of making that begs to be (re)recognized within a Western canon (re)emerges (Mignolo 2011, Decolonial Aesthetics).

> *In its usual manifestation, the calligraphic inscription, which has its origins in Arabic, touches on plurality and universality. The ancient art form, often associated with the strict Islamic visual conventions, or even the semiotic point of view full of Quranic textual signs (…) the usual semantic and conventions (…) are totally shaken up.* (Karoui 2014,106)

Of the [found] objects, textual patterns become symbolic of the Urdu language itself, spinning as a *pahyyah*, coming full circle. The language once subjugated by its colonizers, then propagated as Pakistan's national language [at the time of Partition] (Express Tribune 2013), now presents as distorted / abstracted, making way for Indigenous vernacular (of the IndoPak subcontinent), to once again bubble up.

Figure v. *Matka*

8.1

Found Object Narratives: *Matka*

The *2 matkas* were purchased at a makeshift street-side plant nursery. In a feat to acquire these pieces, I set out with my mother, and our driver (who does not speak English, is not educated, and '*has been with the family' for years'*).[52] It was afternoon on a hot December day (2019). We drove around for 20 minutes, without any luck of finding a *matka* – as every street-side vendor did not carry this definitive object. Proceeding to get stuck in traffic we made our way back to my grandfather's, past the elementary school rush of tightly packed, air conditioner-less vans, full of schoolchildren in their white *hijabs*[53] and matching conservative uniforms.

On approaching the front-gate, feeling defeated, we decided to drive past my grandfather's large house, further down the lane, for one last look. Situated on a side-street of one of *Karachi's* main bustling roads, (*Karsaaz, K.D.A*), a forage of greenery buffered our street, from the congested main road. Atop carts sat large arrays of *matkas* stacked on top of each other, amidst a plethora of plants. My mother and I got down from the car. Instinctively I draped a large *duputta*[54] around my body and over my head, tiptoeing over sidewalk-dirt, to get a closer look at the clay-pots. Ordinarily, I would sit in the car with my mother and have the driver do the pots' bidding. The *poor-boy* seller estimated each pot at *Rupees* 150 (approximately 1 Canadian dollar). Remaining quiet, I let my mother do the talking; usually my *Urdu-Canadian* accent as

[52] In Pakistan, domestic workers are common and often considered to be 'like family' (as some form personal bonds with their employers over generations). Thus, instances occur when boundaries of classist constructs are blurred.

[53] *hijab:* head scarf

[54] *duputta: traditional* head covering

well as shaky grasp on the dialect, drew unwanted attention - something I was doubly avoiding, by covering myself with the *duputta*. Selecting a few, we gave the boy more money than he had expected. Glancing at my feet I grimaced at the stinky *paan*[55]-stained dirt I was forced to step on, with my fancy *chappals.*[56] Almost instantly I realized my position of privilege and felt a sense of sadness mixed with awe – for what separated me from this *matka*-seller, now connected us both – by my acquisition of this object.

These *matkas* embody within them narratives of their procurement, essential to the spaces they occupy within transnational discourse. For this installation, I present one plain and one painted *matka*, side by side. '*Laaiq' (pronounced laa-ick),* the Urdu word painted in repetition and abstraction, onto the surface of the clay pot, means worthy or worthiness. "Things mediate, circulate" (Ashmore, Crang 658). To this statement I repurposed the *matka* from a functional object to a painted artefact, a "sacred object" (Pollock, Reken, Pollock 252)[57]. My decision to paint on the *matka's* facade reflects a desire subvert the functionality of this object and enshrine its visage, by beautifying it with decorative pattern and abstract Urdu calligraphy. In doing so, I consciously refer to Dadi's *'calligraphic abstraction'* (2020). One could argue, in its subjectivity, the array of colours (reflective of the IndoPak subcontinent's multitude of hues), are an imposition on the viewer – demanding attention to the object's history, purpose and perceived meanings. Within its overt visual hijack, the colours are too much and the words too obscured.

[55] Betel leaf stuffed with sugary syrups and fennel seeds. *Paan* is widely eaten in Pakistan and India, and often spat out, leaving orange marks in the dirt.

[56] Slippers

[57] According to Reken, "sacred objects" are critical to Third Culture Kids in maintaining a sense of balance and connectivity with their host culture. Implied meanings are often ascribed to ordinary objects during transition, from one culture to the next (252, 2017).

Material exploration of painting and lettering on this surface is self-reflexive (Archer 2007),[58] in that, application of colour is connotative of the vibrant library of swatches [IndoPak] subcontinental textile and design industries use. In the process of painting, these colours are intuitive and immediate - informed by a "decolonial aesthetic" (Mignolo 2011, *DA*).[59]

On deeper reflection, this narrative symbolizes, going far in search of something nearby. It pertains to notions of transnational, *Third Culture Kid* identity, of not belonging to one place whilst concurrently belonging to both (Pollock, Reken Pollock, 397).[60] The difficult route, being stuck in traffic, covered (by a *duputta*) in the heat, paying pennies for an object (that travelled far from the villages to the bustling city), and conversing with the poor boy, who, in selling this object, has little reverence for its particular cultural connotations (as to him it is a utensil), all intensify this object's tenor. Worthiness in this case becomes the worthiness of women to break out of stereotypical roles of patriarchy whilst retaining the femininity of cultural prowess, (in honouring customs). Worthiness points to the classist differences in Pakistan. It attests to the worthiness of its people (and of the place this object originated), as well as my own sense of self-worth (in accepting my worldview and lived experiences as unique, and allowing a sense of belonging to, as opposed to alienation from, a place or culture).

[58] Archer's positionality leaves one catechizing the reflexive process of artmaking, in turn microscoping the reflexive praxis of an artist's identity through the positionality of transnational identity/culture.

[59] Mignolo points to "decolonial aesthetics" as a way to "liberate" artistic sensibilities of the Global South trapped within the *aisthesis* of Western artistic practices. "Decolonial aesthetics, in particular, and decoloniality in general have joined the liberation of sensing and sensibilities trapped by modernity and its darker side: coloniality" (2011).

[60] TCKs frequently builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture may be assimilated into a TCK's life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of a similar background. (Reken, Pollock, Pollock 397).

As part of this installation, the unpainted *matka* stands dignified and serene on its own. It symbolizes the traditional craft of *matka*-making in Pakistan's remote villages (*Clay Pots in Pakistan*, 2019). In its standalone element, the preservation of this craft, echoes the revival of traditional crafts in Pakistan (Iqbal 2019); customarily, the village woman in a colourful *duputta* is often seen walking around with a *matka* balanced over her head. Providing a sense of comfort and connection to 'home',[61] this object synchronously pays homage to traditions often obscured in today's globalized / altermodern era.

Figure vi: *Matka streetside, Karachi 2020.*

[61] My parents' home in Karachi Pakistan where I grew up.

8.2

Lakri ka Pahyya

It was my last day in Karachi during the December break (2019). I sat at a fancy bistro with my parents in the affluent part of the city, having Tomato soup for lunch. On our way home, the driver took an offbeat route and we ended up at a *basti*.[62] As we drove through the narrow one-way greying street, full of jam-packed shops, I quickly covered my Western clothes, and my entire head, save my eyes, with a black *duputta (used for the car)*. Reports of muggings in traffic were rampant. An oncoming rickshaw halted our movement; conspicuous, we were now stuck in this enclave.

Figure vii: *On the way to the Market, Karachi*

[62] Slum

A man in a tattered *shalwar-kamiz*[63] and wide smile on his countenance rode by on his bicycle, with a massive garbage-load balancing on his back. On the other side of the *basti* we encountered an antique store and decided to get off the car. I was now completely covered in black. In the store I found two beautifully carved antique *payyahs*, presumptively from a *ghada-gari*[64] The shopkeeper, bewildered I wanted to buy a rotted, broken wheel, noticed my conversation with my mother in English; he immediately jacked up the prices.

These *pahyyas*, (like the *matkas*) contain within their beautifully disheveled appearances, narratives of translocality and material culture. I choose to paint on its surface, "*khamoshi"* (the same word used for the vector print). The utilization of abstracted Urdu letters is the first time I paint in this stylization, making direct reference to 'calligraphic abstraction' (Dadi 2010) by the manner in which the letters flow on the wheel's circumference, overlapping the word's legibility.

> *Rather than indexing specific meanings from a textual source, mutilated calligraphy indexes textuality itself. The deferral of meaning that textuality enacts as a general phenomenon is further doubled by the difficulty in deciphering such calligraphic forms that lean heavily toward abstraction. If the folkloric/figurative mode, which was inevitably tied to nationalist iconography, no longer speaks to us in any tangible sense, the abstract/calligraphic mode pries open the boundaries of the nationalist frame.* (Dadi 2010, 567)

In illustrating Urdu calligraphy in a modernist, abstract fashion on an antique object, I keep in mind artist Shemza, who used calligraphic abstraction to tackle issues of diaspora and

[63] Loose tunic and pant; traditional dress.

[64] Donkey-cart

transmodernity (Dadi 2016, 0:8:48). Using this lens, I interrogate issues of identity in diaspora, and the way I navigate transnational space with a sense of '*freedom'* in Canada (as opposed to being covered in certain areas of Pakistan. Contrarily I argue, it is in being covered at these markets one is able to roam freely within them).

With reference to the *'transnational spaces of things*' (Ashmore Crang 2009), the ornamental carving on the wheel is almost identical to Jones' design, "Figure 5: Indian No. 3, The Grammar of Ornament" as presented by Crang and Ashmore (666). Jones quotes Gottfried Semper's 1852 essay on The Great Exhibition, saying "Oriental products are most at home in a bazar, and there is nothing more characteristic of them… than their easy accommodation to every surrounding" (Ashmore, Crang 667). Whilst I may not entirely disagree with this statement its vilification lies in the subtle racist undertones of the use of words "*bazar*" and "most at home". Professor Dadi on the distillation of contemporary versus Islamic art conjointly remarks,

> *Until recently, the collection and display of Islamic art was largely a Western enterprise (…) Many Islamic art objects did not look like "art" and were originally meant to serve as useful implements. Similar objects could also be bought as crafts and souvenirs in bazaars.* (2016)

The word 'bazaar' in this case is referential and explicatory – although pointing to exact attributes expounded by Semper (in 1852), its latter user is a Pakistani-diasporic art-historian and critic. Therefore, the contexts within which objects are circumvented become vital to their genealogy. *Khamoshi* (silence), painted on this wheel, thus proffers absolution for the stoic colonial connotations that Jones' Grammar ascribes to these patterns and designs (when appropriated by him and taken to England).

In concurrence with the *matka* installation abovementioned, I show these pieces as one painted, and one uninterrupted in (its) essence. Painting on the surface of these objects modifies its meaning. In as much as they stand to be owned, they deserve to be freed of impositions of implied meanings. Tensions foreshadowed by their side-by-side existence, as well as the wheel's rotund form, become a reflexive rhetoric for tensions felt by the colonized / decolonized / translocal, who constantly "continues moving in a radically different direction enabling the re-existence of decolonial aesthetics/aisthesis" (Mignolo 2011, Decolonial Aesthetics). These

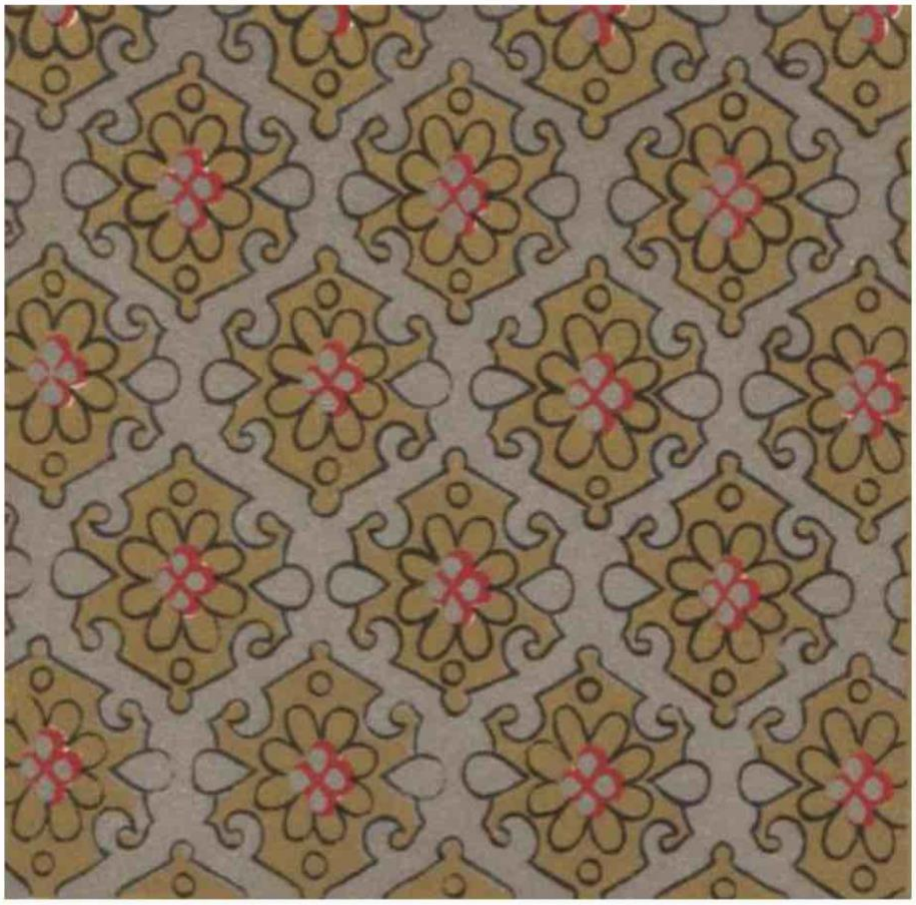

Figure 5. The Grammar of Ornament, 'Indian No. 3' (example 6). Owen Jones.

Figure viii. *Diagram from 'The transnational Spaces of Things' (2009). Copyright Crang Philip and Ashmore Sonia, 2009, pp. 666.*

Figure ix. *Lakri ka Pahyya,* OCAD UNIVERSITY, 2020

8.3

Antique Tiles

These found objects, a collection of antique tiles from Karachi, symbolize the particular and varied spaces of the transnational, sustain lived histories of the IndoPak subcontinent pre-Partition. “Things change, get re-materialized, get translated into other things” (Crang, Ashmore 671). These old tiles belonging to the *Havelis* of Sindh (Jatt 2017; Kamal 2015),[65] by the breaking apart of their original form(s), become signifiers for a culture oppressed, and subsequently freed, only to undergo further oppression; (many Sindhi heritage homes were destroyed during 1947’s bloody Partition) (Jatt 2017). Crang and Ashmore highlight Owen Jones’ appropriation of South Asian design and pattern during colonial rule in British India as, “intended to address the crisis in industrialized Western design” (Crang, Ashmore 670). The contention with Jones’ praxis falls under the categorization of “Indian objects” as performing “colonial cosmopolitanism”, which propagate “the complexity of imperial culture and its relationship to transnational connections” (Crang, Ashmore 670). In reclaiming these objects as “sacred”[66] and nostalgic, I intend to subvert Jones’ colonial hijacking of traditional South Asian designs, and declaration of them as “reproductions devoid of cultural context or meaning” (Crang, Ashmore 664) – by venerating them as cultural signifiers in the gallery and my home.

[65] *Haveli:* Old heritage homes of Sindh, Pakistan.

[66] Of “sacred objects” sociologist Reken says, “often an ATCK’s (Adult Third Culture Kid’s) home is (…) with artifacts gathered from around the world”. (Pollock, Reken, Pollock, 252).

***Figure x**. Antique Tiles Washed, Toronto, January 2020*

8.4

Calligraphic Abstraction: *A Collection of Prints*

Talaash, *aazadi*, *Khamoshi*. This series of prints depicts the movement of the Arabic / Urdu calligraphic script as it morphs in meaning and functionality – throughout the modern, postmodern / postcolonial and contemporary eras (Dadi 2009). I centralize Arabic calligraphic abstraction as the way Urdu script is performed in my practice. “By Arabic calligraphy I also refer to other languages written in that script such as Persian and Urdu” (Dadi 2016, 0:4:31). With reference to Dadi’s disquisition on calligraphic abstraction and his exposition of Ibrahim el Salahi’s pulling apart of the calligraphic form (ibid.) - I created this series to interrogate the Arabic script’s role as utilitarian vernacular in Urdu.

Using an arts-based, research methodological approach - digitally illustrating my handwriting - these words move and rotate slowly, at different axes. At junctures they are completely unrecognizable. As the letterforms begin to shift, accelerated alteration of the script occurs. The characters overlap, conjoin and collide. Illegibility in repetition - calls into question the constant movement of the transnational (Hassan 2020); it seeks to understand its identity (or loss thereof). In its varied patterned and geometric renderings, this body of work creates discourse of traditional versus digital representations of script - highlighting the conversion in history: from classical calligraphy to an abstracted and *calligraffiti* iconography (ibid.). Inspecting the dominion and conflux of colonialism on my aesthetic tastes (as a transnational), I cerebrate my persistent lettering of the Urdu script.

> *Calligraphic experimentation accordingly acknowledges the persistence of the textual past, but under modernity, this is now abstracted, opened to a dialogue with metropolitan artistic languages and therefore more global in scope.* (Dadi 2010, 568)

These words are sovereign agents. *They stand alone*. Subtly cross-dialoguing, they bring awareness to concepts of transmogrifying, evolving and evoking new ways of thinking through making. The viewer is thus invited to reflect on the interstices and negative spaces created by these abstracted letterforms.

Note on the layout: Urdu is read right-to-left, as opposed to English, left-to-right. The word *'tal-aash'* (to seek), is split between the first and last pages of the book's layout, (in big bold letters). The end of the word, the letter "sheen" *or "sh"*: appears at the beginning of the book – with the first three letters, "*ta*", "*l"/aa*" or "*talaa*" – appearing at the end. *This flip speaks to the wallpaper installation (mentioned below)*. In the manner that artist el Seed does not translate his Arabic *calligraffiti* (2019), I too, do not specify English translations to their designs. However, the words are listed chronologically (on the first page), as they transition. *All patterns comprise of Urdu letters (from the words listed)*.

There are 78 designs in the book.

Figure xi. *Calligraphic Abstraction: Collection of Prints, detail of spread. 2021;* For Book: see attached.

8.5

Wallpaper Installation: *Khamoshi*

Historically wallpaper has been used as decoration and status symbol. Different wallpaper motifs in the colonial era, alluded to class and culture (Ashmore and Crang 662).

> *Walls, with the shape of their doors and windows and with the color and pattern of their papering, define the character and function of a room. They also reflect the nature and status of its inhabitants - their taste, wealth, and social position - and influence their mood.* (Wolter 195)

Owne Jones' 1857 Grammar of Ornament did more than travel prints across continents. The transcribing of Indian subcontinental design onto wallpaper (Crang, Ashmore 662), typified imperialist agendas. Displaying arrogant domination over Indian designs, these prints encompassed the aristocrat's personal and commercial agency with(in) "oriental" (ibid. 656) pattern. "At least two of the wallpaper designs by Jones now held in the V & A collections are very similar to motifs illustrated in the *Grammar"* (Crang, Ashmore 662). The induction of South Asian print and design into commercial and economic currency "including wallpaper for British interiors" (ibid. 664), displays a casual disregard for the source of these prints. During recent trips to Pakistan, I marvelled at the intricate craftsmanship of patternmakers, carvers, block-printers, tailors, weavers and pottery-makers. Largely, these Pakistani artisans are of the lower economic rung; exploitation of labour is akin to Jones' reframing Indian design in *The*

Grammar as exceptionally his. To date, the infrastructural nature of IndoPak's subcontinent remains unhinged; and the colonized has now become the colonizer.[67]

This wallpaper installation, although functional, is decorative in nature. In the installation, the word '*khamoshi'* is flipped from left to right, to read "mo-mo-shi / khaa" *in Urdu*. Rather than being purposefully broken, it is subjugated at its natural point of separation, which allows for minor legibility to be retained. The letters in repetition (within the word and pattern itself), point to Jones' crass reproduction of South Asian pattern [into wallpaper]. The word "silence", refracted and spilled, calls for an end to the sequestered suffering of the suffocating colonial thumbprint. "Sensing was colonized" (Mignolo, Te Tuhi, 37:45). By using this word – the opposite of [*screaming out loud*] – "the process of decolonizing art, and aesthetics" (Mignolo Guggenheim 2014) renounces the pejorative "imperial imagination" in its claim over the *Other* – [in this case Jones' influence over South Asian pattern] – and (re)establishes it "as possessing special claims to the attention of the decorative artist, and their superiority, in point of design, over European stuffs" (Crang Ashmore 656).

Iftikhar Dadi, on 'textual abstraction' (2020), quotes prominent modern theorist Adolf Loos' famous remarks: "*modern man's love of ornament was a sign of his criminalcy and degeneracy*" (1:03:38).). This clearly indicates colonial thought in vilipending subjugation of Indian ornamental pattern and design. "We have art which has taken the place of ornament" (Loos 24). Dadi enunciates "it may be noted that Islamic art had been characterised in art historical scholarship as precisely ornamental, decorative and applied" (2020, 1:04:04). This

[67] Large parts of Pakistan and India operate within classist systems (Minto 2011). Pakistan has a large feudal culture (ibid). Most of the delicate and intricate craftsmanship done by [uneducated] villagers – is exploited by elite business owners who do not adequately compensate them for their skills (*Clay Pots in Pakistan Pasrur, 2019*). With the low literacy-rate prevalent, classist divides are enormous (Minto 2011).

categorization diminishes South Asian and [Middle] Eastern cultural agency within the canon and separates it as: “anyone who goes to the *Ninth Symphony* and then sits down and designs a *wallpaper* is either a confidence trickster or a degenerate” (Loos 24). To challenge this pronouncement, the *Victorian faux-moulding* as a decorative white base-border, juxtaposes the ethnic nature of the calligraphic print design. Adding finesse to the installation, it references the period in which colonialism [in British India] sunk its teeth into it.

Figure xii. Khamoshi: *Wallpaper installation at home, 78x24, 107x24 inches**;*** Toronto, ON, 2021

Figure xiii. Khamoshi: *Wallpaper*, 2021

8.6

Calligraphic Floor Tiles

In May of 2019, I attended the Florence Contemporary Residency in Italy as part of OCADU's Summer semester. In Firenze I witnessed the beautiful ornamental carvings and designs of building facades and geometric tiled flooring. These designs were reminiscent of the tiles I had seen back in Pakistan at *Frere Hall in Karachi*, or in Iran, at *Imam Reza's Shrine in Mashhad*. I began to ask questions about the similarities and differences between Islamic art and Renaissance art, and the claim to ownership each proffered over the other. The more I querried, the more unsettled I got. Research led me to Islamic [art] historian Michael Barry's MET lecture titled *Islamic Art and Culture in the Renaissance*:

> *Italian Renaissance Art represented Islam as it came to be crystallized in the minds of Christian Europeans for hundreds of years (…) and of Islamic art, it is exotic. It's not central to the canon. If you study it, you're a specialist, you're interesting, you're exotic, and you bring a breath of fresh air, but you' re not central (…) Therefore Averroes and the Arabic culture of Averroes is central to the European canon itself. With the triumph of Petrarch's ideas, we get the school of Athens in 1507 where Islamic culture becomes a sideline.* (2009, 1:33:50)

Needless to say, the [abovementioned] irked me. I asked myself, 'why should one canon define or (de)legitimize another'?

These tile designs comprise of Urdu letters – traced from my handwriting and illustrated digitally. I started with a template, drawn from scratch, based on traditional Islamic Geometry (Chatz 2019). I then used letters from the words *talaash, azaadi, khamoshi* – to manipulate the geometric template and abstract the calligraphic script by creating a moveable pattern. [These designs are catalogued at the end of the '*Book of Prints'*]. Letters in these patterns are not easily decipherable. *Unless the viewer is informed*, (or has a keen eye), script is indistinguishable. Conversely the nature of the Arabic / Urdu calligraphic script – (*which my Urdu handwriting / illustration is based on*) – is mathematical in nature.

The artwork contains a lot of colour. Though I do not speak to colour [as theoretical], its manifestation is [self]-reflexive of South Asian culture; ubiquitously it occupies an unconscious demonstration toward a decolonial aesthetic. "Calligraphy is the geometry of the Spirit" (Nasr; Sharify-Funk 2018). Digital appropriation of an 'existing Islamic geometric template' (Chatz 2019), altered with text, circumscribes the concept Crang and Ashmore's "circulatory regimes" in relation to transnational agency and praxes (662). Sequential repetition in the print, alludes to repatriation and vice versa.

> *Beyond its calligraphy, the blending of organic and geometric forms is a distinctive feature of Islamic art. Geometry, the symbol and evidence or order in the Universe, appears in straightforward polygonal forms, but as often as not it is hidden in the foliage of a leafy arabesque, a word that openly announces its Arabic origin. Rhythmically repeated patterns remind us of infinity and a world of unity beyond forms. Conveying this message of unity is the ultimate function of Islamic art.* (Dunn: Smith 9)

In the case of these tiles, I argue the designs are delivered in *Urdu and not Arabic*. Based on my usage of Urdu, it is vital to make this distinction. Without this declaration, any

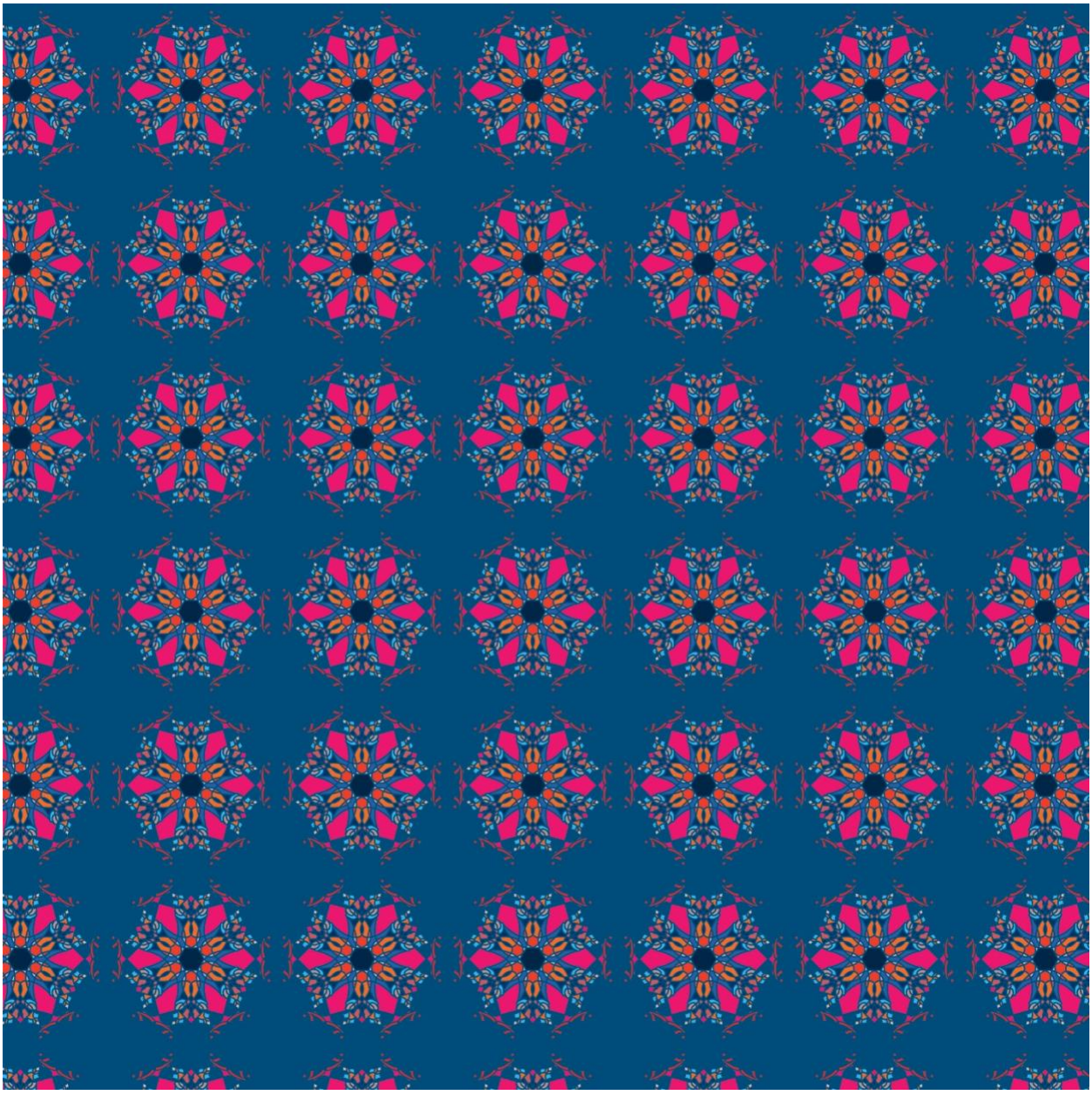

Figure xiv. *No. 77, Sheen: tile design, 2021*

Note *This design is 1 of 78 in the 'Book of Prints'.*

unassuming "uneducated and/or "fundamentalist"[68] – might view this artwork and, under the pretext of blasphemy, take offense (BBC 2019).[69] Created as floor-tiles, these artworks sit on the ground. In Islamic culture it is sacrilegious to place any Quranic scripture on the floor (which is considered dirty). Despite *Urdu not being Arabic*, its scriptural nature (in *Nastaliq* form), links the two together. Here is where the separation of the 'Islamic' from the 'Islamicate' comes into play. Under a contemporary lens, it is argued this artwork belongs to the latter and thus absolves itself from religious connotation. On the other hand, historical precedents [possibly] prevent such a separation. Colonial imperialist regimens embedded within the religious edicts and doctrines [of the religiosity of script] make it impossible for it to be a 'free agent'. Where does that leave the bifurcation within this canon? It leaves it as secular within the Islamicate. Because religious art is sacred, and [out of reverence], sacred art *does not go on the floor*. This contradiction remains inconclusive. On this subject, scholars Dadi, Daftari and Babaie debate (Textual Abstractions One, 2020). In contradiction Dadi claims,

> *Islamic art is not Islamic (…) the term leads us to assume that it will be sacral, and it will be devotional, which is not the case because calligraphy can be used for a book of secular poetry (…) it's not fully art either in the sense that the way Europeans thinking from a European pedigree, in which, in the post-Renaissance context (…) these hierarchies plague the discipline, and my approach is to use them with all these caveats.* (1:27:00)

[68] Whilst harsh labels, the words "uneducated" and "terrorist" are often tossed around in Pakistani elite / educated and diasporic circles with reference to those of a different or lower classist and/or religious affiliation. These phrases are used primarily within contexts of [said] socio-political circles.

[69] Ironically, the British during colonialism, were responsible for imposing this Law in Pakistan, the consequences of which are widespread today. Under this law, many outspoken activists have been killed by fundamentalists and extra-judicially. Its nature is precarious and unchallenged, its consequences severe. (Pakistan's Blasphemy Laws, BBC 2019)

to which academic Farishteth Daftari responds "then why use the term Islamic?" (1:29:25). Contending the bifurcation of the Islamic to the Islamicate – invites decolonial aesthetics to inflect the trajectory of a Western canon as being the preferred lens of aesthesis.

There is a performative aspect to emerge when the tile patterns are disjointed on the floor. This installation intends to emulate the prevalent culture of antique, decorative floor-tiling in Pakistan as a way to pay homage to the revival of the decorative arts (Iqbal 2019), by simultaneously reclaiming its aesthetic value. The objective in making this piece is to enunciate the prevailing tradition of craft (Iqbal 2019) by using decorative pattern. In this installation, 16 square feet of tiles are shown in (re)/arrangement and misalignment. When broken up into single tiles, the entire pattern embodies a shift in trajectory, from fitting in as a neat pattern to creating new narratives of (dis)connectivity / (dis)continuity, symbolized by putting together the design, in a new unplanned sequence (of tiles). "Things enact the everyday as transnational space, complicating the temporalities and spatialities of the here and now, connecting and disconnecting" (Crang, Ashmore 659). Whilst the tiles are numerically, individually labelled (on the back), the unforeseen originating factor of the *performative*, iterative, quality of moving around the pattern, to create accidental design, - demonstrates as a subconscious manifestation of one's '*third culture kid*' identity (Pollock Reken Pollock 2017) of feeling out of place and never "fitting in".

For some of the tiles, I took the letters '*laam, alif'* from the word '*talaash'* – to make a circular geometric pattern. In Arabic, the word "*la*" means "no",[70] however "alif-*laam" (a*

[70] Professor Salah Hassan mentions prominent Egyptian artist's Bahia Shehab's artwork '*A Thousand Times No'* as a piece that "looking at how the *laam alif, la"* is used "in the Arab world when somebody wanted to reject something" (Textual Abstraction Two, 0:42;09).

reverse of laam-alif), is in fact part of a sacred Quranic verse (Chapter 2) (recalibrating its meaning entirely). If '*laam-alif*' were to be mistook for '*alif-laam'*, then the entire nuance of this piece changes. Therefore, '*no'* enacts a "circulatory" movement, pointing the finger at colonialism – and affirming decolonial aesthetics as continuing repartee of *aesthesis*: decoration, ornament and aesthetics – interspersed with calligraphic elements.

> *The geometric patterns in the Islamic World have been used and have evolved with the time, the empire and the region. These patterns don't just show the aesthetics of the craftsmen, but the extraordinary skills and understanding of geometry in Islam as well.* (Reki, Selcuk 2018)

Purposefully abstracted, these designs take on a materialization of their own. Once rendered, a continual pattern and digital sequence begin to form. Beyond the artist (who operates with limited agency, within these parameters), these still images create movement within their rigorous mathematical and aligned arrangements.

(Note: The vinyl tiles, produced from the 'Book of Prints' – include some designs that were later excluded from the book's re-print – whilst others were added in their place.)

Figure xv. *Calligraphic floor tiles, vinyl, 16 square feet, 2021.*

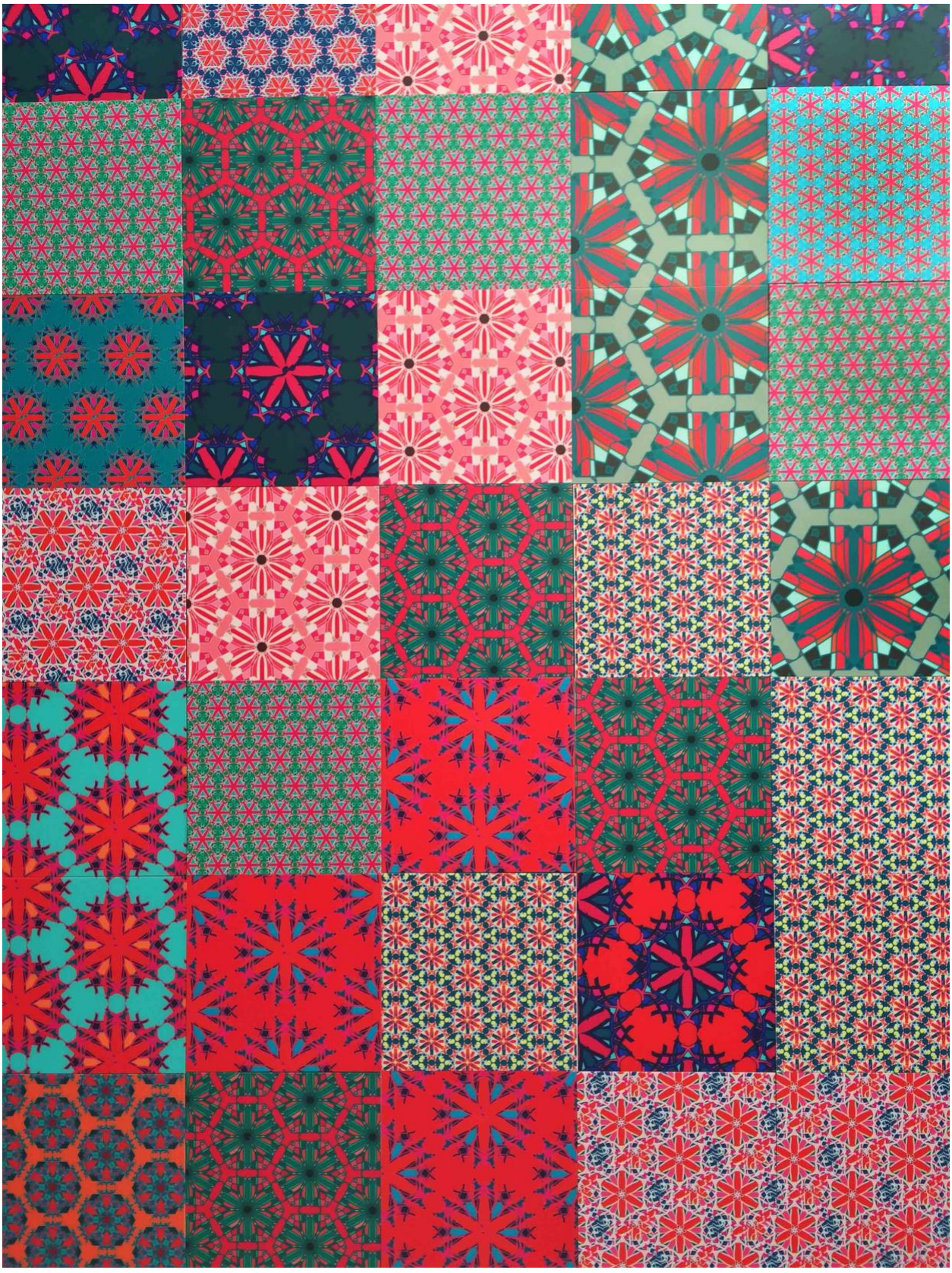

***Figure xvi**. calligraphic floor tiles, vinyl, 16 square feet, 2021*. (All designs in 'Book of Prints' PDF)

8.7

Painted Wooden Floor Tiles

Outdoor wooden-floor decking conjures images of white-picket fences, back patios and picturesque cottage-life: *The Western dream*. This piece consists of 18 square feet of wooden-floor decking. On each square foot is painted an individual design that later becomes part of a larger, abstracted drawing. The separate tiles have Urdu words abstracted, of the letters from the five words, adopted for this inquiry. At times, the individual word is used [as a whole] in a refractory manner. The wooden-tile material was chosen due to situational circumstances (of the *2020-2021 Global Pandemic*), and OCAD University studios' subsequent shut down. Easily accessible to purchase, floor-decking became part of my makeshift *at-home* studio. This concept arose from observing intricate tile designs in *Florence, Italy* as well as collecting antique tiles and found objects in *Karachi, Pakistan* – (along with constructing a prototype of floor tiles for 'independent study' at OCADU). Investigating "transnational spaces" and the effects of colonialism on South Asian pattern, I was eager to create a floor-piece to provide visual delectation (and further the Crang and Ashmore's rhetoric of the transnational [space]) (2009).

The trajectory is two-fold.

The drawing, specifically in *Urdu not Arabic*, could be argued, serves as functional as well as decorative. In Islamic (and concurrently Pakistani) culture, it is highly taboo to put

Arabic letters and words on the floor (due to their Quranic / sacred symbology). This floor-piece furthers the dialect of the bifurcation between the Islamic and Islamicate canons. Walking across the flooring, could be sacrosanct violation. Contrariwise, steps taken, in this space, [into *Other* spaces], carries with it – the energy encompassed by this overwhelmingly vibrant colourful flooring. Although invisible, this [movement] personifies the transnational space. As persons in *habitus*, we carry within us (and without) – lived experiences of crossing borders, adapting and adopting to socio-political epistemological shifts, that shape who we are and how we represent our "host" culture (Reken 2017). – amalgamating with(in) our inherent space(s) – to provide neoteric discourse of learning, equanimity and change. Walter Mignolo during his lecture at the *Solomon R. Guggenheim*, talks about the Westernization of the institution and in particular decolonial projects (2014). Mignolo mentions the Sharjah Biennale and Louvre in Abu Dhabi amongst other artistic enterprises as powerful moves towards "deWesternization" and "delinking" (ibid.).

In response to '*The Transnational Spaces of Things: South Asian Textiles in Britain and The Grammar of Ornament'* by Phillip Crang and Sonia Ashmore, this installation reflects the impact of appropriating South Asian pattern, on transnational identity and [material] culture. Speaking to the period of colonization in British India (ibid; 2009), implementation of South Asian pattern as refined British aesthetics, acts as a reflexive precursor of one's transnational identity and praxis. These wooden tiles sit adjacent to one another, employing a self-reflexive, methodological compass to *thinking through making;* the script interchangeably speaks to the moving, shifting and breaking up of pattern *as text,* and text *as pattern*. Although decorative in nature, its cerebral socio-epistemological underpinning belies its ornamental semblance.

> Modern Islamic art no longer remains purely decorative or ornamental. Artists deny pure decoration through various strategies. Figurative painters in dialogue with miniature painting develop stylistic markers that foreground their idiosyncratic styles. Abstract paintings develop forms that are fractured, nonrepetitive, or deliquescent. Calligraphers do not write traditional calligraphic scripts but imbue them with negativity and abstraction.
>
> (Dadi 2016, 74)

The wooden tiles additionally pay homage to the mosaics, patterns and designs that emerge from the IndoPak Subcontinent pre-Partition (Iqbal 2019). Patterns from the old "*havelis*"[71] such as those found on "*hala tiles*" (Kamal 2015) are imprinted onto the wooden flooring, over which I draw, and paint abstracted calligraphic designs. Eastern design imprinted on the wooden tile's façade (by inscription of Urdu words), juxtaposes the modern Western aesthetic (in the material choice of wooden decking); the detaching of Urdu letters on its surface, reflects this tension.

Through organic rendering of Urdu words, I create conversation between the intertextuality of aesthetics / aesthesis. The words *tanhai* (solitude / loneliness / isolation) and *talaash* (to seek), sit on the wooden flooring, castigating each other – both using the phonetic "*te*". Disjoining, the stretching of letterforms, implies a nudge towards examination of the transnational's framework. Mignolo says,

[71] Traditional townhouse.

> *The geo and body politic of knowledge is very important (…) Modernity invites you to talk about the content, not about the enunciation… about what's being said not about the saying and for us, the saying is crucial.* (*Te Tuhi*, 0: 31:27)

According to this theory, Eastern classifications of art and / or design gain cultural authority thorough the homogenization and appropriation of Subcontinental pattern in Western culture. Priority is given to colonial tastes over Indigenous, South Asian and Latin American epistemologies and aesthetics. Colourful abstract painterly forms of acrylic on canvas, based on decorative elements of the found-object tiles confront the Urdu words: *azaadi*, *khamoshi* and *laaiq*, to dialogue with each other, and further the narrative around transnational spaces and decolonial aesthetics, in one's arts practice. "Identity is not what you are, identity, is – 'you have been identified' (…) what you have been made" (Mignolo, Te Tuhi, 0:31:57). In reference to "coloniality of knowledge and coloniality of Being" (ibid.), the laborious method of *tracing* these designs becomes a mirror for "methodologically, tracing the movements of things" (Crang Ashmore 660), whereby "a method for mapping transnational cultural politics" becomes visible (ibid.).

Reflexively, the wider socio-politico constructs of using Urdu as an elitist language (amongst the Pakistani elites), *intraactively* (Barad 2012) subverts as a decorative element, the script that calls into question its imperialist position, (conferred on by its colonizers) (Rahman 2000). In its preservation, these [appropriated] tiles evoke antiquity - alluding to a united IndoPak subcontinent [pre-Partition]. Patterns, reminiscent of connectivity between the East and West: are what I connected with during visits to sacred historical sites such as *San Miniato al Monte* in Florence and the *[Holy] Shrines of Iran and Iraq*. Splendid architectural tiling and motifs at these sites, preserve a sense of place, guarding a beauty which often goes adrift in the

contemporary altermodern terrene. The East mixed up with the West, these objects are my identity personified. A bit of both, out of place - tucked away in the crevices of one life, constantly searching – for a place to cohere, *(and to belong again).*

Figure xvii. *Wooden Floor Tiles, Detail of Floor, 2021*

8.8

Dhikr Ink Scrolls

Practice-based participatory research led me to react to the cogitative-state of being in "*dhikr*" by drawing Urdu on paper-scrolls. Listening to Abida Parveen's Sufi Qawwali,[72] YouTube *dhikr* recordings (*Zikir La Ilaha IlAllah 2015*) and chanting online during a Zoom *dhikr* session (2020), introduced me to Sufism's gnostical facet.

Dhikr's oration is contrasted by the physical delineation of script [on the scroll]. Singular words in *Urdu not Arabic,* depict the tension and repetition of transnational movement. "Transnational cultural traffic is organised through specific ordering regimes (in this case the 'art world' or specific sections of it) and riven with the politics of cultural translation and value" (Crang, Ashmore 660). Chanting *dhikr* leads to the fracturing and joining of letters in spontaneous and participatory fashion. Listening to the Sufi chant, *La Ilalaha illallah:* (There is no God but Allah) and simultaneously painting '*tanhaii*' in Urdu, witnesses my loneliness and watches it transform to solitude – or vice versa. In Urdu, the word '*tanhaii'* can mean either.

> *The central doctrine of Sufism is that of Divine Unity: La Ilaha illa 'Llah' (…) Through devotion to and selfless remembrance of God, dhikr Allah (…) a Sufi existentially realizes the Truth.* (Dunn, Mascetti, Nicholson 15).

[72] Pakistan Sufi singer Abida Parveen is widely acclaimed in her lyrical renditions of Sufi folklore. (Eltham 2020)

The sounds of *dhikr* are poignant, forceful and vocal. As I listen, my strokes change. An energy takes over my body (to divulge these mark-makings), bringing me to a place where I empty mind and body of material contention. "Artists also bring new concepts and values in their works, derived not only from transnational modernism and avantgardist practices but also from recodings of the Islamic past" (Dadi 2016, 74). Inextricably, contemporary representation of Urdu calligraphic script *as calligraffiti* or *calligraphic abstraction* is tied to its historical religious vernacular. Coming full circle in my inquiry, I [self] reflexively seek to strip myself of identity labels, to subsequently align with [my] Spirit within. By performing *script as dhikr*, I connect to my Be-*ing*. As a *Seeker*, I inquire: am I able to absolve myself of conferred meanings of identity or, do I invariably, [self]reflexively, align with etymological and archaic, classical and strict substrates of the Arabic / Urdu script – by invoking its chirography within this imperative?

Scroll 2

Of this scroll, a select portion was painted whilst listening to Abida Parveen's Sufi *Qawwali* (devotional song) (Parveen 2013). This sectional is nested within the large Urdu letters of the word *khamoshi* (that appears *once* on the scroll). *Khamoshi's* dimensions are wide and constrained; it commands presence and towers over other repeated words that occupy the flimsy paper. The rest of the scroll was written to the recitation / response of Naqshbandi Sufi *dhikr (followed on YouTube)* (Zikr 2015). Illustrating the word '*laaiq'* in smaller, quick calligraphic strokes – I used a classic bamboo pen (carved in Pakistan, under the strict tutelage of local *calligraphy master,* Mahfouz) (2020).

The inconsistencies of drawing calligraphic script [in an appropriate manner], are bystanders to interchanging states of impatience and calm, as I precariously write Urdu text in

methodological and traditional consuetude. Scrawls in monochromatic sepia and burnt sienna tones of India ink, render thin pointed letters by a Western calligraphy pen; the thickly carved bamboo pen (whose letters are bold and emphatic) juxtaposes this delicate lettering.

The methodology of *dhikr*, outputs a script that, in comparison to the clean graphic digital *tile and wallpaper art*, is almost ugly in nature. Words appear refracted and restricted in some sections; in others, they are free flowing. The expanse of incongruous movement compared to the strict geometric nature of the *tile-and-wallpaper art* emphasises the transnational's "analytic priorities" in its "scalar imagination" of "careful and subtle spatialisation" (Crang and Ashmore 661, 658) in the way the letters overlap, join and separate at intervals.

The act of parsing dhikr, *is,* in a sense, liberation from imposed identities – through litany of the Divine's name. According to Islamic tradition, "repetition from the tongue moves into the heart [and] this is why we do *dhikr*, because of actualization" of the soul (Razawi 9, 0:45.22). Contrarily, it can be argued, the very act of absolving identification of the Human form (the self) – to connect with the Spirit (within), through *dhikr* – paradoxically enacts an '*identity'* of "spiritual".

> *Remembrance of God, dhikr, is generally divided into two branches: recollection with the tongue (dhikr jali), and recollection in the heart (dhikr kafi). Despite the fact that the spoken dhikr jali, most often performed collectively, plays a significant role, dhikr kafi is regarded as the superior way (Schimmel 1975: 171) (…) The problem of whether dhikr should be private and silent or collective and spoken, has been a matter of debate within different orders.* (Gees 56)

Participation in this methodological standpoint (*of not wanting to adapt or adopt identity*), inevitably conferres upon oneself such pronouncements – by self or others. In the same way, utilizing Urdu script in *Nastaliq* form, brings with it transliterations of words, paint onto paper, socio-politico evocations, religious and historical implications that accompany the script, and its weighty etymology – existing within the spaces of its decorative lettering. It is impossible then, to separate [its] derivative background(s) and reduce the script to a simple visual aesthetic.

> *Worth underscoring the fact that Nastaliq - this kind of a curvilinear form (…) and its rhythms, (…) [of] the poetic language and the musicality [of Persian poetry], is very much served well with Nastaliq.* (Sussan Babaie, Textual Abstraction One, 1:41:08)

Fragmented, the letters '*laam* and *alif*' of the word '*laa-iq'* (worthiness) – become "*la*" (meaning no, in Arabic). "*La"* in meditation – (with)in a trance, enacts a defence mechanism where the colonized body vehemently reclaims agency from "the crooked rhetoric that naturalizes 'modernity' as a universal global process" (Mignolo 2009, 304) and frees itself from "the constant reproduction of *coloniality*" (ibid.). "*La*" ('*laam alif'*), also the first letters, in '*la ilalha illa' - 'Allah') i.e.* ['no God but – Allah'], placed next to "not worthy" (*'la'* / *'laa'iq'*) – whilst listening to "*no God but*" (as universal *dhikr* is repetition of *'la ila ha illa allah'*) – become a phonetic transference that echoes the traumatic stutters of the colonized body.

Ultimately, the intensity of *dhikr* (and frustration with liturgical invocation) led me to switch to Abida Parveen's *Qawwali*. "For an objective structural or cultural property to exercise its causal powers, such powers have to be activated by agents" (Archer 12), in which sense, Abida's vocals serve a sense of comfort. They provide a shared intimacy with a culture I belong to and conversely feel alienated from.

Dhikr requires commitment and respect. In this process [of *dhikr*], I endure the sometimes-painful transcendental transition that comes with jolting in and out of cogitation. Methodologically, the process of covering up letters in rough and smooth, fast and slow penning, at various intervals, (depending on the *dhikr's* tempo) presents a reflexive parlay between border epistemology (Mignolo 2011) and amalgamating shifting cultural priorities (Crang Ashmore 658). In turn performing both *calligraphic abstraction* and *dhikr,* is, in its [self] reflexivity, evocative of "delinking" (Mignolo 2011) from "postcolonial criticism" (Mignolo 2009, 306). Incomplete and incorrect letters serve as failures to the traditional [calligraphic] art form. Creating in confinement [of limited space at home- *due to the Pandemic*] – reverberates the confinement of witnessing (and recovering from), transnational trauma, and the effects of colonial and imperialist social attitudes and agendas.

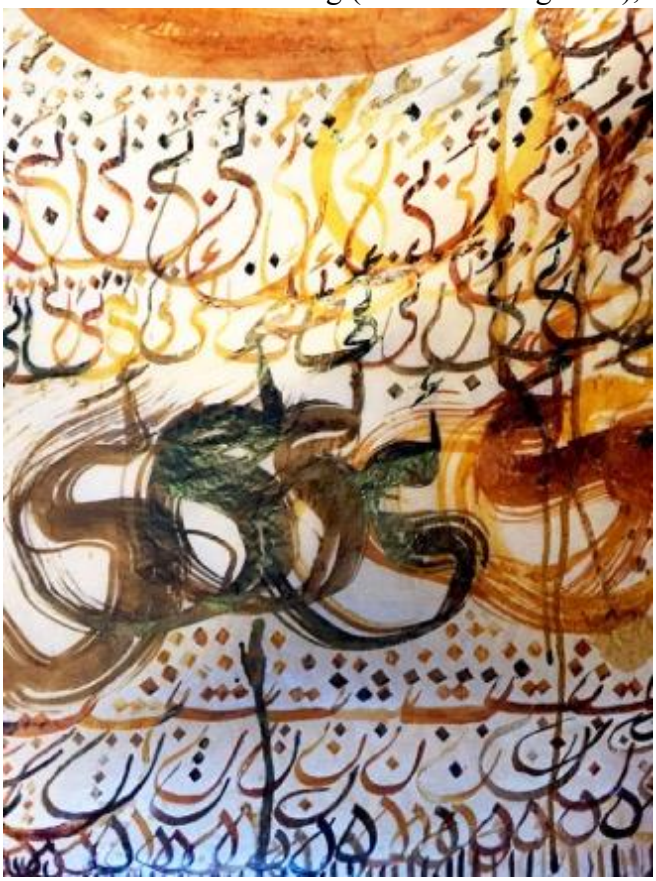

Figure xviii. *Scroll 1: Dhikr in script*, detail

Figure xix. *Scroll 2 Laa'iq*.top-view, 2021

***Figure xx**. Scroll 2 Laa'iq*. rolled up, 2021

9

Exhibition

Due to the ongoing global *Pandemic of 2020-2021* and OCAD University's subsequent shutdown, the intended *Thesis Exhibition* space: (Graduate Gallery, OCAD University), was relocated to my Toronto home apartment. Creating during 'lockdown' has been rigorously contemplative. Urdu – in its visual fixity allows me to have firm ground; a solid connection to and positive focus on, my "third home" (Pollock Reken Pollock 2017). Without ability to travel, cross borders or change locales – questions of anchorage emerge. What would it mean for the *transnational / translocal* if circulation was impeded and/or affixed? Would this alter or enhance the meanings of these found objects so precariously placed within my home? Were they never to emerge on plinths in galleries, would their value decrease in the eyes of *others*? This exhibition is an extension of the "sacred space" (Reken 252; Klotz 14) these objects encompass in their transnational agency. In this sphere I meditate and create, confronting these (un)/welcome labels of socio-epistemological identity and race.

10

Outcomes

Decolonial aesthetics is a homecoming towards traditional ways of making. It breaks from altermodernity whilst still participating in it. Performing *dhikr* in the way *calligraffiti* repudiates a master's authorization, enables calligraphic abstraction as a metaphor for postcolonial / decolonial frameworks. Through Linda Smith's '*decolonizing methodologies',* reclamation towards Indigenous / Other ways of learning, effectuates "epistemic delinking" (Mignolo 2011) from institutional / hegemonic pedagogy - breaking from sentiments as those alluded to by Loos (1908) and Jones (Crang/Ashomore 2009) in their respective imperialist stances.

Disseverance from being a religious barometer, Arabic/Urdu lettering genuflects and shapeshifts from preferred connotations to imposed ones (of being a propagandist tool) – advertently establishing itself as a transnational agent. What started out as personal inquiry to confront and absolve (by *dhikr*), hefty labels: *transnational / third-culture kid / poc* – (which generate as much pride and responsibility, as they do remnants of collective pain conferred upon the *Other*) – I find myself circling back to questions of sovereignty and ownership where [Urdu] script is concerned:

> *Art and literary criticism facilitated forms of Arabism and pan-Islamism in the visual arts, (…) [the] specific nature of the Arabic language, which is the phenomena of diglossia, which is specific to Arabic, namely the coexistence of two forms of languages, the standardisation high version known as modern standard Arabic which is used across the Arab world in education, mass media and the press, and the various vernaculars specific to the regions and countries.*

> *Modern standard Arabic further facilitated the diffusion of artistic and literary ideas across north Africa and the Middle East. That's why it's important to understand that this movement is not perse nationalism but transnational*.
>
> (Salah Hassan, Textual Abstractions Two, 0: 14:22)

Partaking in cultural exchange as a result of *dhikr*, I once again become entangled in the yoyo debate of 'religious vs. secular'. Personal struggles of moving, shifting (and integrating social conventions) – reflect this contention; they ask to be challenged within my practice. In order to reach a state of oneness, unity, "pluriversality" (Mignolo, Escobar 2009) and tranquility - these mystical / metaphysical and material explorations, invariable invoke by praxis, religious etymology of the script. [Self]-reflexive inquiry (re)births confrontation of lived experiences with steep [Islamic] cultural history and tradition.

Vast literature on Arabic mysticism and calligraphy, interlinks their historical and ontological esotericism. The two edicts congeal. The Divine word (and Divine calligraphic letters) that exists in *The Quran* – (such as "*Kaaf Ha Ya*" for example) (Chapter 19), are sovereign, immoveable and unchanged. On the other hand, the 'Islamicate' [in art] – (*a term problematic in itself, as its coinage ties to a Westerner, no less, called Hodgson*) (1974) – abdicates religious conjecture. To separate into the Islamicate imaginary, is to borrow historical precedents from Islamic art, and at the same time, neglect and negate them.

Contention in the '*religious versus secular'* deliberation, accentuates the fact that the Islamicate, (one might argue) – falls under the categorization of Bourriaud's '*altermodern aesthetics*'. Due to calligraphy's prime stripping down of aesthetics: as a contemporary, modern or postmodern agent (without overt religious curiology), confirms it. It would then make sense to

place Sufi *dhikr* and its correlated calligraphic art / abstraction, within the category of the "Islamic" - due the [calligraphic] script's anagogic characteristics.

Saunier's three analytics and priorities of the transnational (Crang Ashmore 661), correlate with three types of *dhikr:* Bashir's exposition of "silent and vocal" (2013), with (one's coinage of) '*self-reflexive dhikr'*. Mignolo's "*ego/ theo/ geo body politics of knowledge*" (2009) in their temporal socio-epistemic classifications reflect these conjunctions – resulting in the Islamicate. Situational, it is transnational agency's reflexive outcome. There is then perhaps, a third category to emerge. One that allows the Islamicate to exist within the Islamic arts corpus, without bleaching its blueprint, but holding space for it (whilst questioning its legitimacy in today's globalized buffet). Urdu does not use diacritical markings as Arabic. This minor yet significant detail separates one of the most fascinating and poetic dialects from the other. This redaction is the site at which the transnational situates – at the intersection of calligraphic abstraction and *dhikr* [in script].

The dichotomy I wrangle within myself is apparent. Some of my artwork subsists as decorative and precise; some abrupt, dislocated and sporadic. This circumscribes the space of the transnational. Antique found objects in their "scalar imagination" and state of non/duality, echo Sufi *dhikr* in its "contemplating the forms and meanings of Arabic letters" (Sharify-Funk 2018) concaving the "enabled perception of deeper cosmological and metaphysical truths" (ibid.) within them. Methodologically through a Western lens, this praxis becomes [self]-reflexive (Archer 2007) and *intraactive* (Barad 2012). Decolonial Aesthetics reclaims that which has been vilified within the kaleidoscope of the Western canon, although, with(in) the 'Islamicate' – its boundaries are blurred. My own relationship with Urdu and feelings of insecurity and humiliation (in speaking it) – are mirrored within this diction. Constant feelings of non-inclusion – become the

site at which transnational agency eventuates. Where I am allowed to exist – imperfect, and contentious.

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Appendix A: Additional Materials

Additional digital files found on the Open Research Repository:

*‘**Artworks*: Thesis Images’. This file includes additional documentation of the thesis artworks, and relevant process images.

File Name: Taqi_Samia_A_2021_Artworks

File Type: PDF

Date: *May 10, 2021*

Appendix B: Additional Materials

Additional digital files found on the Open Research Repository:

‘***Calligraphic Abstraction*: Book of Prints**’. This file includes the ‘*book of prints’* thesis project. It consists of 78 vector print, wallpaper and tile designs.

File Name: Taqi_Samia_B_2021_Book_of_Prints

File Type: PDF

Date: *May 10, 2021*