

Imagining Borders

Khadija Baker

Artist's Statement

"I was fearful of my father rebuilding our home. I remembered when I saw my father's cousin face covered with blood. A hidden bomb in the sand killed him while he was rebuilding his home¹. The bombs were planted across the borders to stop Kurdish rebels from crossing it. I had part of my family in each side of the border the Syrian and the Turkish one. However, we were still meeting in what is called (Goresbma=meeting) for special event about once a year. Many families, like us, were allowed to stop on both sides of the border in an official point to meet for special cultural events and soldiers were always around them."

I always saw the border in Northern Syria in the Kurdish region where I was born as a tool to divide and stop the fluency of daily activities. I have always had uncomfortable feelings about home; these feelings were related to the borders that surrounded our "home" in Syria. After my immigration to Canada, I looked for new concepts of map/border creation and asked what is exactly the map, the real one? Having a part of my family still in Turkey while I am living in Canada with my Canadian-born children, the question of meeting without crossing borders became a more urgent part of my thinking.

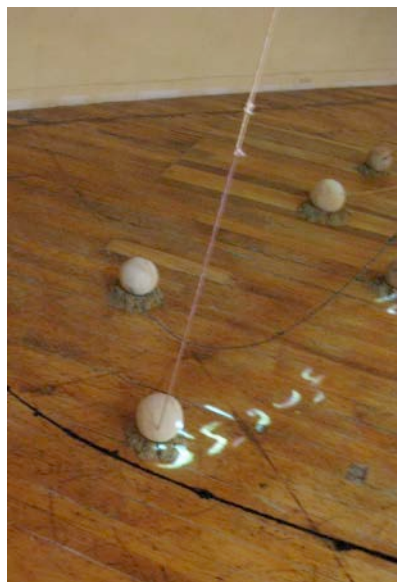
Khadija Baker is a Montreal-based, multi-disciplinary artist of Kurdish-Syrian descent. Her installations investigate social and political themes centered on the uncertainty of home as it relates to persecution, identity, displacement, and memory. As a witness to traumatic events, unsettled feelings of home are a part of her experience. Her multi-disciplinary installations (textile, sculpture, audio/video) involve participative storytelling and performance to create active spaces of empathy and greater understanding. Her most recent work explores the social aspects of violence in the Arab world and specifically how it affects women and children. You can see examples of her work at khadijabaker.com

¹ In our little town Amude in northern Syria we used to have flooding during the rain season and melting snow. The water comes from the Zagross Mountains almost every spring; the water force brings few planted bombs while passing borderlines. These bombs explode when people would collect sand from that river to use for construction or when children would play there after it dry. This happens after the ends of flooding season. The children playing in the dry river will get killed when these bombs exploded, some lucky ones might lose hands or feet not their lives.

I developed various ways to reflect on the re-creation of what we can literally and conceptually call a map in my artwork. Typically, geographic, political, or cultural borders define maps. In my artwork, the border is a developing, changing form that can reflect our connection and comfortable daily lives and can also respond to human needs. Each project enforces other possibilities of making conceptual borders, which in its turn applies the idea of the creation of borders mostly enforced by political power.

For *Behind Walls—Maps*, 2008-2011, I use the evacuation of Kurds from countries like Syria, the removal of their citizenship, and the suppression of their history as a point of departure. I interviewed witnesses and collected stories in the process of creating and reflecting on the concepts official maps and maps in daily life. I am interested in seeing how these processes of exile, loss, and erasure affect the identity, memory and history of (Kurdish) individuals and communities. I am also interested in how countries create official histories while unwanted memories of the marginalized are erased or suppressed to serve a new political agenda. One way this has occurred in Syria, where I was born, has been the official renaming of Kurdish towns in Arabic by the government. For older people who used to know these places, they have had to change a part of their own history and memory of place. On the other hand, younger generations are only familiar with the new names identified on the state-sanctioned maps. I evoke how the original names of the Kurdish cities are being eliminated only to exist in the recesses of peoples' memories. I also want to represent the map as essentially an arbitrary, artificial notion that does not necessarily correspond to people's day-to-realities.

Behind Walls—Maps is a multi-media installation that brings together my cultural background in fibres, sculpture, and video. I created a map-like structure made from a net of crisscrossing strings about 2 meters from the ground, allowing viewers to walk around and through the sculpture. crisscrossing strings about 2 meters from the ground, allowing viewers to walk around and through the sculpture. The strings of the net were attached to small weighted clay spheres inscribed with the names of the cities. This structure was lit to create criss-crossing shadows of the "map" on the gallery floor. In addition, there was a video projection onto the floor in which the new Arabic names fade in and out. *Behind Walls—Maps* included an audio component that featured the voices of diasporic Kurds speaking in Kurdish, English, and French. This work shows the artificial realities of maps and the vitality of people's memories and posits the idea that it is difficult to erase people's memories of home entirely.



Behind Walls - Maps, 2008, M.A.I art gallery, Montreal

In the performance *My Little Voice Can't Lie*, 2009, I continue to explore the themes of mapping and memory by inviting viewers/participants to hear recorded texts created from stories of displaced women (including my own story), by listening to speakers embedded at the ends of my braided hair. The sound track is looped, and to listen to the stories, viewers/participants need to press the ends of my hair to their ears, which shrinks the borders between people by adding the sensory experiences of touching, seeing, hearing, and physical proximity.

This experiment in participation creates traces of collected memories and generates witnesses to the past and the living present through stories. In another sense, I allow the story to become part of the participants' memories. They too will own the story, or, when they do not relate directly to it, they will become witnesses. *My Little Voice Can't Lie* allowed me to further investigate the relationships between my work, my female body and public/individual spaces and borders by performing in various public spaces including schools, libraries, on the street and on the ferry. My performance changed according to each participant's response to me; I allowed participants to cross my individual borders as well as the cultural border of the Middle Eastern female body and conventions around its exposure in public.



The multi-disciplinary web project *Sing Our Dreams*, 2014, uses participatory storytelling, animation and drawings (using human hair), audio and video to explore the social aspects of violence in the Arab world and specifically how it affects women and children. In this work, I explore stories of displacement and loss and strive to create connection with viewers/participants as witnesses to the lived experience of violence and survival.

The project includes stories told by and interviews with women and children from Syria who live at Kawergosk, a Syrian refugee camp in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq, near Erbil city. The project includes a local community-building component in the form of parents in Montreal singing lullabies about

memory and loss as a way of taking symbolic action against violence and uniting parents in Montreal with mothers in the Middle East. The lullabies and stories created a map as a way of passing on history and remembering connections with lost ones. The work aims to enlarge the borders of individuals, showing how they are part of a larger story that includes the cycle of violence. A focus on history and the past leads to learning and understanding the links between art and culture, the production of knowledge, and the potential for social change and reform. Michel Foucault states that “Knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of ‘the truth’ but has the power to make itself true” (27). He goes on to say, that power “reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives” (30). Together, these works create maps that show us alternative ways to connect, to communicate, and to create active spaces of empathy and greater understanding.



Still from animation, Lisa's song



Caroline, Participant from Montreal



Video still of a family from the refugee campe in Iraq.

Work Cited

Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge*. The Harvester Press, Brighton, 1980. Print.



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