When I first met Sama Alshaibi in 2001, she wasn’t the internationally recognised artist that she is today. She had just moved to Denver, Colorado with her poet-husband and young son, and was working as a commercial photographer to make ends meet while her husband attended the same doctoral programme in English in which I was enrolled. She was debating whether she was “good enough” to apply to the Master of Fine Arts programme at the University of Colorado-Boulder.

The past eleven years of her career as an artist has been a testament to why she is exceptional in terms of her aesthetic vision, technical ability, ambition and drive, and political commitment. Alshaibi’s prolifically exhibited visual artwork speaks to the difficulties of living with a complex identity in a world that privileges borders, containment, and restrictions on mobility— one that denotes otherness and multiplicity as threat. Her photography, short videos, and multimedia installations also remind us about historical bonds that flouted conventional boundaries. In her later work, we see intimations of worlds established not by rulers and the networks of power they sought to establish, but by waves of longing, desire, adventure, curiosity, need, and hope. We remember that we share a deeper topography of memory, tying us to a history far longer than that of our recent migrations, displacements and limitations dictated by fear.

In Sama Alshaibi’s early visual work, as well as in her numerous lectures, blog posts and academic writing, the language of exile is prominent. Her personal history as a naturalized United States citizen of Iraqi-Palestinian descent means that her relationship with diaspora, multiplicity, distrust of forced nationalism and easy constructions of patriotism are intimately woven into her work. Throughout Alshaibi’s career as an artist, she focuses our attention on the artificiality of borders— barriers meant to eliminate porousness to prevent knowledge, aesthetics, and bodies passing through. Her work inevitably articulates the limitations on mobility and freedom with which a complex identity such as hers saddles one, and why cultivating a shifting identity is an essential part of negotiating a space for survival in war-ravaged, politically unstable locations such as contemporary Occupied Palestine and Iraq.

Her identity— Iraqi, Palestinian, American, woman, technophile and artist— shifts with passport, costume, and the level of authority or submission she...
displayed to borderkeepers: their reactions reveal the blatant discriminations so ingrained in systems necessary for maintaining empires, intent as they are on hoarding power and quarantining resources for a privileged few. Through engagements intended to reveal fallacies behind the integrity of borders, she composed personal maps - visualises that such locations are designed to encourage. By employing her multiplicious identities, which often confuse and confound those who police national borders, she infiltrates those threatening spaces to give lie to the argument that borders are sanctified spaces. Her work reveals that seemingly impenetrable lines of demarcation are both porous and negotiable if at all genopit we realise that the most significant borders are actually high-drains theatres - stages on which nations perform exercises of sovereignty policing the borders that constitute self and other.

Her more recent work also alludes to the near-impossibility maintaining a stable social self for 'illegal' bodies and immigrants who are classed as 'threatening' by post 9/11/11 racial profiling systems in the US. In several projects, she engages the state using non-violent resistance, particularly through the production of video/photography/ electronic narratives and through subverting Empire's control of information technology, to transcode physical limitations imposed by political circumstances. These works suggest the way in which the stateless immigrant the itinerant refugee and the excluded other can actually utilise and capitalise on their threatening multiplicious identities, rather than be ashamed of it, suppress it, or permit the powerful to control their bodies. Through the political-aesthetic exercises recorded in her video and photography, Alshaibi reveals the artificiality of history, destabilising the knowledge and visual structures that support what most hold in the geopolitical 'West bank' below to be our political foundations.

Alshaibi whose mother is Palestinian and father is Iraqi, obtained US citizenship in 2001 since Israel controls all of Palestine's borders and denies Palestinians the right of return. It was only as a US citizen that she was permitted to enter the birthplace of her mother and maternal grandparents. Alshaibi’s journey back to Palestine, the first of which was in 2004, was exiled, an effort to revive a homeland that lay, ceremonially, been, literally, attempts to breathe life back into an identity from which she has been long „unhoused” means that one's memory of it remains mummified, unable to transform as life and experiences add to one's memory of place. Her early representations of Palestine speak of her dislocation and desire for reconnection: it is a location that is not a location, a contested space in which power and resistance are being negotiated and performed daily, but a position from which one never proceeds beyond an interminable internment. The apartheid state in which occupied Palestine exists is revealed by the inhabitants' inability to have neither the right of entry nor exit: to be Palestinian means being confined in a barrier island from which one can remain upon the access that others have; but one where others cannot observe one's predicament.

Video projects that articulate Alshaibi’s explorations of borders, security, and the impact of exclusion and exile on identity include ‘I.D.’ (video, 2006), ‘My Apartheid Vacation’ (video, 2007), and ‘In This Garden’ (photography, 2006), and from And Other Interruptions’ (photography, 2007-2008, including Divided Land: Photographs of Contested Land, 2006-2008). She also uses photographs from the series ‘In This Garden’ (photography, 2006), and from And Other Interruptions (photography, 2007-2008) to explore the discord and disruption created by barrier walls, war, and the resultant irregenerational losses. Each of these works illustrate the possible impossibilities presented by highly patrolled sites of security and checkpoints, such as those that ordinary Palestinians must negotiate everyday through confronting borders meant only to permit arbitrary groups of privileged persons to penetrate. She suggests that the power we give such barriers and the armies employed to maintain and enforce separations are equally insidious. While her work illustrates that walls are meant to separate and cut off entry, they also signify the possibility, ironically, of what lies beyond, and the desire for the possibility of entry. For instance, her video ‘I.D.’ is coloured by a meditation on lack of access to water and land, and how Israeli barrier walls effectively cut off Palestinians’ relationship with national and personal identity. But there is more to both this video work: it is also about how this barrier erodes Palestinians' identity is something that is only acknowledged at gunpoint. But they
and whose lives will be damned to continued oppression. Part and parcel and the law that allowed one past a border in October may be changed to rules of engagement: a rule imposed today may not be the rule tomorrow, to combat these threatening others, First-World nations constantly alter the and politically as can privileged, Western, Enlightenment subjects. In order powerlessness: in her work as an artist. Yet, in other work, she can do no more than recognise Alshaibi seems to suggest that there is a way out - even if it is only through concrete, with a glass window of sky, and three white birds billowing in the clouds beyond. Desirable formidable restrictions on mobility and freedom, Alshaibi wants to suggest that there is a way out - even if it is only through her work as an artist. Yet, in other work, she can do no more than recognise the enormity of disdain for those regarded as the other, aided by erratic policies: irregular sets of rules, and arbitrary punitive measures. Just as realised, though Alshaibi’s meticulous observations, that if boundaries designated by powerful nations, and their (illegally) guarded identities prove to be porous - or if individuals actively resist borders limiting their mobility or defends their right for equality - such disquiet bodies will be disciplined through a variety of punitive measures, including sequestration in barrier islands far from the general population's review, in immigration detention centres, in extra-judicial prisons in third-party countries, and torture islands like Guantanamo, where the identity of the prisoner erased and replaced by narratives that speak to the needs of empire.

As Alshaibi moved towards depicting the impact of the War on Terror on the people of Iraq, she found that there were no easy ways to construct images of death, violence, war and occupation she says that for artists representing war is always a difficult and sensitive process prone to didacticism or over-sentimentality; there is a myriad of ways to get it wrong. Before she embarked on depicting the impact of war, she spent much of her available research time reading conflicting reports and analyses, interviewing refugees, survivors and political prisoners, travelling to parts of the Middle East where she could experience, in person, the suffering and humiliation first hand, and meditating on how best she could initiate a conversation about these issues via her art. She is careful to avoid “sensationalism or exploit the suffering people who could not or did not have the resources to leave zones of conflict. She reasons that primarily using her own body when depicting subjugation and suffering helped communicate to audiences that the views she expresses are her own; in addition, depicting experiences using her body signals that she has subjected herself first hand - even if temporarily - to the discomfort and suffering that she attempts to depict in her art, and helps mediate some of the ethical concerns of depicting the pain of others.

Women bear the brunt of war, but are rarely counted as casualties in recognition of their invisible suffering, war, occupation and forced migration take form as a female protagonist in Alshaibi’s photography and video work. Although she frequently uses her own body, she rarely represents herself directly; instead, she “employ(s) a methodology found in post-Nekba narratives that speak to the needs of empire. Women bear the brunt of war, but are rarely counted as casualties in recognition of their invisible suffering, war, occupation and forced migration take form as a female protagonist in Alshaibi’s photography and video work. Although she frequently uses her own body, she rarely represents herself directly; instead, she “employ(s) a methodology found in post-Nekba narratives that speak to the needs of empire. Women bear the brunt of war, but are rarely counted as casualties in recognition of their invisible suffering, war, occupation and forced migration take form as a female protagonist in Alshaibi’s photography and video work. Although she frequently uses her own body, she rarely represents herself directly; instead, she “employ(s) a methodology found in post-Nekba narratives that speak to the needs of empire. Women bear the brunt of war, but are rarely counted as casualties in recognition of their invisible suffering, war, occupation and forced migration take form as a female protagonist in Alshaibi’s photography and video work. Although she frequently uses her own body, she rarely represents herself directly; instead, she “employ(s) a methodology found in post-Nekba narratives that speak to the needs of empire. Women bear the brunt of war, but are rarely counted as casualties in recognition of their invisible suffering, war, occupation and forced migration take form as a female protagonist in Alshaibi’s photography and video work. Although she frequently uses her own body, she rarely represents herself directly; instead, she “employ(s) a methodology found in post-Nekba narratives that speak to the needs of empire. Women bear the brunt of war, but are rarely counted as casualties in recognition of their invisible suffering, war, occupation and forced migration take form as a female protagonist in Alshaibi’s photography and video work. Although she frequently uses her own body, she rarely represents herself directly; instead, she “employ(s) a methodology found in post-Nekba narratives that speak to the needs of empire. Women bear the brunt of war, but are rarely counted as casualties in recognition of their invisible suffering, war, occupation and forced migration take form as a female protagonist in Alshaibi’s photography and video work. Although she frequently uses her own body, she rarely represents herself directly; instead, she “employ(s) a methodology found in post-Nekba narratives that speak to the needs of empire. Women bear the brunt of war, but are rarely counted as casualties in recognition of their invisible suffering, war, occupation and forced migration take form as a female protagonist in Alshaibi’s photography and video work. Although she frequently uses her own body, she rarely represents herself directly; instead, she “employ(s) a methodology found in...
Her work during this period is also intimately connected to her on-going experiences of being as a Muslim and Arab woman who lives and works in the US during the height of the Patriot Act, as well as her reactions to the experiences of insecurity as a Muslim and Arab woman who lives and works or have an uneasy relationship with her body.

She physically alters visible portions of her body and face through the use of special effects cosmetics. The audience is uncomfortably aware that those parts of the protagonist’s body covered by the consoling black folds of the hijab—meant to provide dignity, protection, and aid the woman within maintain her sacred relationship with Creator—may be even more hormonally transformed. A tattoo, a scarification, traditional or modern, changes the body’s belonging to the once proud cradle of civilization and marks it for destruction. The artist is artfully subverted to signal a more grotesque reality within present conditions: the visual marker of a once proud moment in contemporary civilization are subverted to signal a more grotesque reality within present conditions. The visual marker of a once proud moment in contemporary civilization are subverted to signal a more grotesque reality within present conditions: the visual marker of a once proud moment in contemporary civilization are subverted to signal a more grotesque reality within present conditions.

Alshaibi illustrates how the War of Terror has violently inscribed land and bodies alike, forcing people to make often-unbearable choices within spaces of conflict. She physically alters visible portions of her body and face through the use of special effects cosmetics. The audience is uncomfortably aware that those parts of the protagonist’s body covered by the consoling black folds of the hijab—meant to provide dignity, protection, and aid the woman within maintain her sacred relationship with Creator—may be even more hormonally transformed. A tattoo, a scarification, traditional or modern, changes the body’s belonging to the once proud cradle of civilization and marks it for destruction. The artist is artfully subverted to signal a more grotesque reality within present conditions: the visual marker of a once proud moment in contemporary civilization are subverted to signal a more grotesque reality within present conditions.

Her newer work reflects that learning process though still preoccupied with Iraq and Palestine, she became less interested in assigning particular national concerns. In his prose-poem Absent Presence (2006), the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish identifies absence as the core of the Palestinian experience: exile, and escapist imagination.

We are absent. And absent.

Darwish’s thoughts about the material and immaterial remnants that make themselves manifest subsequent to losing one’s homeland, is apparent in two significant collaborations in which Alshaibi participated at this particular stage of her career: much like other Palestinian video artists, Alshaibi continued travels to the Middle East and North Africa over many years to continue her understanding of the underlying issues permeating locations of conflict. Her newer work reflects that learning process though still preoccupied with Iraq and Palestine, she became less interested in assigning particular national concerns.

The focus of Alshaibi’s work during 2009-12 shows a significant shift. Her continued travels to the Middle East and North Africa over many years matured her understanding of the underlying issues permeating locations of conflict. Her newer work reflects that learning process though still preoccupied with Iraq and Palestine, she became less interested in assigning specific country to her work, and no longer qualified projects in terms of particular national concerns.
Bothford Mmen/Arab) are not between Israeli and Palestinian, American and Arab, or Jewish and Christian. Instead, the struggle is between visibility and disappearance. End of September and Bothford Mmen/Arab both investigate how people negotiate spaces of survival in the aftermath of war or in locations of conflict and attempt to live with the memory of all that they lost. The performers in both projects embody the dialectic of presence and absence: reproducing the effect of that central conflict on the body. They attempt to feel their way beyond absence, trapped as they are within the box of memory that houses them. Both works reflect Alshaibi’s resistance to straightforward nationalised readings of her work. They are commentaries on the nature of absence: distance and presence not only in the Iraqi or Palestinian context but testament to how deeply family relations are affected by the strain of forced separations and how great tensions might become as evoked bodies collide with new contexts.

In London, 2010 - Alshaibi’s longstanding interest in power dynamics between nation state and its citizenry, the undercurrents that shift control, domination and subjugation, and the central relationship between access to resources and upsurges in violence. Although we see Alshaibi’s body in Both Napeep Capable Hands and The Pessimists, her face is notably absent, leaving the identity of the performer anonymous. Not having an identifiable face means that it is difficult for audiences to assign an ethnic label to the protagonist. More importantly, viewers will find that they transfigure themselves on to the body of the performer. This comes to an understanding of the conflicts being presented through an embodied experience, rather than a vicarious one. The three video projects depict toposided power relationships between dominating nations and the people who inhabit subjugated lands. Illustrating how the anxieties that result from living in such precarious conditions ultimately feature their most intimate human experiences of self and of each other. Familiar children’s games portrayed in the videos of The Pessimists depict negotiations of power between binary opposites oppressor and oppressed, victim and victimizer. Yet The Pessimists also intimates a far more complex dynamic: we see that vision and the acceptance of violent actions by both perpetrator and victim are learned behaviours and that seemingly harmless childhood games can easily be catapulted into far more dangerous and high stakes engagements.

The Thowra consists of large-scale gel-imprinted photographs of US missiles – the omnipresent spectacle of the military war machine. Similar in form to minerals, the elegant lengths of these steel machines perform a strange commentary on the delicate line between bodily presence/absence – their presence perpetually absent, while yet their remorse, sleekly-gaping presence is a reminder of the potential to eliminate life. In the photographs that compose Napeep Capable Hands, close up images of Alshaibi’s hands play off metaphysical symbols of resources essential to sustaining life. The images here also allude to chemical warfare, ever present fear captivates and flight – all of which is associated with struggles over dwindling access to land, water, and livelihoods. These are concepts familiar from her earlier work that specifically address Iraq and Palestine, but because anonymous landscapes are the backdrop for staging these photographs, they now speak to a wider set of concerns relevant to all humanity. We realise that soon we will all be on the frontlines of twenty-first century battles: the present wars over resources in the Middle East are after all reflections of what everyone on the planet will face over the next hundred years.

In the video art projects Thowra (video, photography, 2013) and Flight (video, 2013), Alshaibi attempts to depict the jarring complications of living in spectacular times, particularly in the context of 2012’s popular uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East: to those long used to living under absolute domination; the promised fantasy of freedom becomes an almost-reality, but it may remain an illusion, and even that illusion comes at an unbearable cost. In Thowra the heroine-figure wraps fallen birds in red cloth and hangs them on trees in a burnt forest, commemorating the martyrs of the Arab uprisings. The woman who lives to commemorate, remember, and mourn stands as a reminder of sacrifice and strength in numbers: though her loved ones can no longer fly, and though she can only give them a ceremonial resting place, she still carries on, with hope for new buds to emerge from these stilled trees. In Flight we see a disrupted and scattered community feathers spill over a collapsing sand hill, float aimlessly over waters and fly directionless through the sky, leaving viewers with a prevailing impression of exiles, though we are not privy to why and what caused their dispersal. We also see that such communities, though disrupted, often return to one another’s presence again, a heroine-saviour figure enters the scene, plucking the feathers from the sky one by one, gathering them into her arms. The community appears to be made whole again, albeit in a different location, distant from their origins. However, we also remember the difficulties faced by those exiled communities – not all feathers come together and the charms of new places do not replace the opping loss of the old for many generations to come.

In 2013, Alshaibi produced one of her most complex solo exhibitions, Thowra, at Alserkal’s Shabibi Gallery, Dubai, a multi-media project that showcases her ability to use a broad range of materials and concepts, and speaks to a pivotal moment of Alshaibi’s artistic career. Included in this conceptual piece are performative photographs, video projection on photographic canvas, videos embedded in custom boxes, and a central sculpture consisting of two thrones reminiscent of ancient electrocution chairs. The audience was invited to sit on these thrones and listen to audioscapes, ever mindful of the presence and possibility of death. In each component, Alshaibi takes on different personas in order to channel complex concepts, pushing past expectations of what a woman artist from the Middle East should be expressing. In Thowra, Alshaibi takes on the role of a cosmic super-heroine, boxing the dark forces of various empires that have occupied the Middle East and North Africa over centuries. Alshaibi’s petite, gel muscular and powerful frame clad in red, black, green and white while the pan Arab nationalist colors of their various flags boxes the dark forces of various empires that have occupied the Middle East and North Africa over centuries. The Ruler is an audioscape and sculptural throne like chairs that the audience is invited to sit on. The audio consists of a booming male

1. video still from Dhikr (#1), from Silsila’, 2013, video art/installation, courtesy of Ayyam Gallery
2. video still from Dhikr (#2), from Silsila’, 2013, video art/installation, courtesy of Ayyam Gallery
voice and a female voice the male voice we hear are excerpts of speeches from the Middle East, while the female voice vocalises Alshaibi's status updates on social media networks and Twitter feed over the first year of Arab uprisings.

Other works that are part of this project depict more private relationships of power. The Lover - a staged act in photographs that reflects on the roles to which a husband and wife attempt to conform and struggle against - is shown in timed increments; the audience gets to see how the couple's roles and relationship to each other change over an extended period - from courtship of the bride to when both man and woman eventually settle into a compromising and compromised relationship. In the video The Brother, the entrenchments of masculinity and youthful freedom are shown as a reckless spinning race car, juxtaposed with a female aerial dancer - the companion 'sister' - entangled in black silk. This we know for both siblings represented, is a small moment of spectacular equilibrium in lives that will soon spin out of control. While the 'brother' spins the car in 'tornis' - a symbolic, re-enactment of a repetitive, self-damaging life-trajectory - the 'sister' in the frame below climbs a suffocating drape of black silk, at times spinning concurrently with the 'brother'. There are moments in which the black silk gets entangled; her climb is impeded by the very material that provides her the means of upward mobility and access to heady heights and just as she reaches the 'ceiling', where she realises she cannot progress further - the 'brother' skips out of the safety of his seat, and hangs precariously out of the open door of the wildly spinning car. It is a spectacular display of each paying homage to the thrill and allure of tempting death. By the time he leaps back into the car only to continue his spinning he disappears in exhaust smoke and dust. His 'sister' finally entangles herself and whitens in uncontrolled spirals. Their lives, we see, are entangled in coils created by external mechanisms: both have limited amounts of agency, and yet, it is the machinery that helps transport them that also prevents their freedom and stifles their mobility.

In us the Son, ninety-nine video streams in a single-channel video articulates the border and beauty that constitute the relationship between mother and son. It is a reference to the ninety-nine male names of Allah, and the painful burden of having to produce male heirs boys are revered as Gods, and yet, our earthly reverence of their masculinity produces incapable tyrants who cannot do without a strong, feminine presence nor tolerate it. In Alshaibi names her installation Silsila - 'chain' or 'link' signifying - as part of this journey. The great curvature of a modified Maldivian dhoni's 'ceiling' - where she realises she cannot progress further. The silhouette of a brother steps out of the safety of his seat, and hangs precariously out of the open door of the wildly spinning car. It is a spectacular display of each paying homage to the thrill and allure of tempting death. By the time he leaps back into the car only to continue his spinning he disappears in exhaust smoke and dust. His 'sister' finally entangles herself and whitens in uncontrolled spirals. Their lives, we see, are entangled in coils created by external mechanisms: both have limited amounts of agency, and yet, it is the machinery that helps transport them that also prevents their freedom and stifles their mobility.

The project as a whole depicts the political and social frameworks that uphold masculinity using the archetypes of Empire. Nation and family structures - relationships between dictator and subject, between a woman and her father, husband, brother, and son. It also alludes to Alshaibi's personal encounters with more metaphorical social borders, and the resurgence of tensions between men and women as gender roles shift along with changes in the domestic economy and access to education, work outside the home, and financial resources. Alshaibi allows us to see that women and artists have spaces in which they can counter these powerful voices - through technology, through art, through honouring their intellect and strength.

Sama Alshaibi embarked on a personal project from 2010 to 2013, filming in the deserts of the Middle East and North Africa. Although at the time, she was not quite sure how these videos would be formulated to communicate a coherent idea. Her project on deserts - combined with her fascination with the ocean as a site of impossible possibility - came to fruition this year, 2013, when she was invited to participate at the 55 th Venice Biennale.

At the Maldives Pavilion, Alshaibi shifted her focus to the possibilities for constructing a life outside of border restrictions, a freedom inspired by the epic travels of the 16th century explorer Ibn Bahtuta. Each part of her multimedia installation, St Silva, alludes to the powerful historic linkages connecting the Islamic world via oceanic and desert routes. The elements in the video work is housed in smooth black boxes mounted on the walls of the room, and the lightboxes positioned on the floor are the future-present of this part of the journey. The historical and spiritual linkages between deserts and endangered water sources of North Africa and the Middle East and the water-abundant rim of the Indian Ocean world. Each of the jet-black plexi boxes hung on the walls house video montages, taken on her travels through these regions - films, rituals, respectively - that only one person can view at a time. The viewer will see her or his own eyes, and video that appear to be floating. The footage in each plexi box comes from her desert journeys in North Africa as well as visits to crystal salt lakes, rivers, oceans, seas, and water canals in the area. The figure in the videos (performed by Alshaibi) camera moves through desert and waterways, creating an ephemeral path - an open invitation - for those who wish to follow. There is no sound produced by the video but the music - composed by the sound artist Filistine - with whom
1. Thowra #1, from 'Thowra (Revolution)', 2011, Video and Photography, Pigment Print on Glossy Rag, edition of 5, photographs courtesy of Ayyam Gallery
2. Thowra #6, from 'Thowra (Revolution)', 2011, Video and Photography, Pigment Print on Glossy Rag, edition of 5, photographs courtesy of Ayyam Gallery
3. Thowra #5, from 'Thowra (Revolution)', 2011, Video and Photography, Pigment Print on Glossy Rag, edition of 5, photographs courtesy of Ayyam Gallery

1. video still from Noor, from 'Silsila', 2013, video art/installation, courtesy of Ayyam Gallery
2. Sketch 14, from 'Negatives Capable Hands', 2010, Pigment Print on Cotton Rag, edition of 6, courtesy of Ayyam Gallery
3. vs. The Brother, from 'vs. Him', 2011, video art in custom framed box, courtesy of private collections and the artist
Alshaibi collaborated - is part of the room, accompanying the viewer through each visual journey. Alshaibi explains that these viewing portals "act like tombs or tunnels: they are akin to the holy Ka'aba in that they are personal spaces for self-reflection." During these intimate communions, one level still transported to a state of meditation.

In Alshaibi’s work, the desert and the ocean are the protagonists - they are the constants in the moving narrative, crossing conceptual and geographic boundaries between threat and dreaming in abundance: Alshaibi’s focus is inevitably on the impermanence of each barrier, as well as the ways in which people find ways to circumnavigate those impermanences. Although the landscapes of the desert and ocean always appears to be changing, Alshaibi notes that they are in fact, simply "recycling on themselves." Ultimately, both desert and ocean are marked by unchangeability, their ability to awe human efforts signals how difficult it is to make substantial change in the face of a powerful entity. To film part of the footage, Alshaibi once travelled seven days in the summer desert; she realised that it "forced me to think of fear as an asset because I had to pay attention in order to live and a force to overcome too that I could gear up the willpower to continue to work in such situations!" Ocean and desert peoples have centuries of memory about the unpredictability that comes from living within the bosom of a powerful entity, such as the danger inherent in inhospitable spaces is what attracts Alshaibi. For her, surviving and working within these landscapes inspires her to be mindful of breath and life, to remain renewed of powerful natural entities beyond human control for the desert and the ocean contain portals that welcome the explorer: they percolate a sort of vigilant living ever mindful of the power of the powerful entity that surrounds one’s body. She does in consensus of the permission granted for entry of the molecules of dry air and salt-sea parting in the shape of her body mobile as her movements. But her journeys are ever conscious of the warming bell rung by desert and ocean, reminding us that they are the power in charge of our survival that the space permitted us is precarious permission can be vetted.

Beneath the spine of the stylized keel of the dhoni, there are three custom-made wooden boxes lined up next to each other. Two are lightboxes - one is an etching tracing Ibn Battuta’s second route. The routes are abstracted outlines, void of land or water boundaries, cities or national borders. Because those landscapes are now vanished, we only have projected fantasies through which we can meditate on those passages. The juxtaposition of the video and those landscapes are now vanished, we only have projected fantasies through which we can meditate on those passages. The juxtaposition of the video and those landscapes are now vanished, we only have projected fantasies through which we can meditate on those passages. The juxtaposition of the video and those landscapes are now vanished, we only have projected fantasies through which we can meditate on those passages. The juxtaposition of the video and those landscapes are now vanished, we only have projected fantasies through which we can meditate on those passages. The juxtaposition of the video and those landscapes are now vanished, we only have projected fantasies through which we can meditate on those passages. The juxtaposition of the video and those landscapes are now vanished, we only have projected fantasies through which we can meditate on those passages. The juxtaposition of the video and those landscapes are now vanished, we only have projected fantasies through which we can meditate on those passages. The juxtaposition of the video and those landscapes are now vanished, we only have projected fantasies through which we can meditate on those passages. The juxtaposition of the video and those landscapes are now vanished, we only have projected fantasies through which we can meditate on those passages. The juxtaposition of the video and those landscapes are now vanished, we only have projected fantasies through which we can meditate on those passages. The juxtaposition of the video and those landscapes are now vanished, we only have projected fantasies through which we can meditate on those passages. The juxtaposition of the video and those landscapes are now vanished, we only have projected fantasies through which we can meditate on those passages. The juxtaposition of the video and those landscapes are now vanished, we only have projected fantasies through which we can meditate on those passages. The juxtaposition of the video and those landscapes are now vanished, we only have projected fantasies through which we can meditate on those passages.

Driven by impending disappearance of the island nation, the Pavilion’s curators chose to think of nation as a network of ideas, aesthetics, and dreaming of possibilities far more viable than vying for short-term power. Their theme, Portable Nation: implies uncertainty in the geographic and political future of the nation state as sea levels rise and threaten to vanish the archipelago of islands by 2080. As such, they chose artists whose work is more interested in exploring relationships built on collaborative networks.

I real Sama over a decade ago, during a blistering hot summer in Denver, Colorado. I invited her to my flat, and made pani walalu - bangles of honey - to welcome a sister into my home. When she arrived, I was squeezing the rainy dough into hot coconut oil through a small circular nozzle attached to a French pastry tube by diasporic innovation on tradition. Sama arrived in time to have a look at the concentric circles, puffing up golden as they rose to the top of the oil. I dipped each bangle into cardamom-infused sugar syrup and we ate them hot. When she tasted her first pani walalu, she knew exactly what it was: “Oh, zalabiyah. That’s what you made.”

What Sama and I had immediately was an easy alliance that comes with the knowledge of migration displacement and otherwise. She a recently naturalised American of Iraqi-Palestinian origins; I very much a foreigner living on the edge of legality in the U.S. on my dubious Sri Lankan passport (one that still permits me little access through any border). I saw in her a fellow traveller who understood the aesthetics of longing: of realigning self with ideal possibilities, of fashioning allegiances beyond expediencies, geographic boundaries and political borders. We both laughed knowingly, about the impossibility of answering the ubiquitous question that greeted us every day in places like Colorado. “Where are you from?” Sama can tell you that there was never one answer for that question. An inquiry about origins is often innocent, but it is also a question asked of the passersby other at security checkpoints, by border-keepers. It demands an easy origin, a pinpoint: a reference through which the inquirer can easily package the applicant all the border. The discomfort that it produces in both of us, and the impossibility of answering that question, as well as the frustration of always playing the translator, the historian, the patient educator led us to find different ways to respond.

It was the source of Sama’s art, and of my writing. We don’t really know who first fried concentric circles of runny dough in oil, then dipped them hot into honey, but we know that the trade routes first documented by Ibn Battuta transported them from port to port. Pani
Nakedness is one of the primary ways in which we mark the savagery of the other. And Balthula’s journey, which expanded the borders of his ‘s’ and ours — understanding about how to be in the world — were not always able to open portals of understanding.

While the mythical and historic significance of Balthula’s journey through inhospitable landscapes are a reminder of the fragility of human ideals of struggle and our ever-present journey towards death, the chains of conversations establishing linkages — between ancient travelers and modern seeker, between host and traveller, between the ever-changing thread of skin that plays at the edge of water and sea — are kept alive. Sama Alshaibi’s work has now journeyed here: her work meditates on the historical traditions that continue to link peoples across land and sea in this region. Through alluding to Ibn Balthula’s great leaps of faith across desert and ocean, she reminds us about the heightened sense of connection — with creator, self, others — that comes when one becomes mindful. She takes her inspiration from the Sufi poet Asadi Ali, who reminded us to recognise our common identity in the face of annihilation and disappearance: ‘the grains of my sand rush in asking/begging You/Islam to keep my descendants and nation uniled’.

**ABOUT THE WRITER**

M. Neelika Jayawardane is an Associate Professor of English at SUNY-Cayuga. She was born in Sri Lanka, grew up in a mining town in Copperbelt Province, Zambia, and completed her education in the United States. Her PhD is in English, with a focus in Creative Writing from the University of Denver, Colorado. All SUNY-Cayuga, she teaches transnational memoirs and fiction, film and visual art connected to the immigrant and postcolonial experience, including contemporary Southern African and South Asian work. Her academic publications focus on the nexus between South African literature, photography, and the transnational/transhistorical implications of colonialism and apartheid on the body. Her most recent work includes an essay on apartheid-era photography which will be published in the International Center for Photography in Manhattan for “Art South Africa and Europe’s ‘Other Cape’”.

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